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# **Improvement in Quality of Life Indices: Role of Women's Literacy in Rural Punjab, Pakistan**

*Iffat Farah*

'In every society literacy is a necessary skill in itself and one of the foundations of other life skills. There are millions, the majority of whom are women, who lack opportunity to learn or who have insufficient skills to be able to assert this right. The challenge is to enable them to do so'. (*The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, Hamburg*)

Literacy is generally believed to have positive impact on development, especially for women, leading to improvement in development indices in areas such as health, fertility rates, children's education, economic progress, autonomy and empowerment. Illiteracy is considered a barrier to development of persons and nations (Wagner 2000). These beliefs form the basis of most literacy programmes initiated in developing countries by governments, NGOs, and international agencies.

Since the UNESCO declaration of Education for All, there has been considerable investment and initiative by the government, international development agencies, and national NGOs to improve access for women to basic education in Pakistan. While most of these efforts have been targeted at the primary level of education for young girls through formal and non-formal systems, a less consistent investment has been made in adult literacy programmes for females. Some NGOs have developed programmes for adult literacy and education, however very little documented information is available about these and even less is available about the consequences of participating in these programmes. An exploration of factors that explain the consequences

could help policy makers, funding agencies and programme developers learn from the experiences and use these lessons for more informed decision making and programme development. The study reported in this paper was done in order to obtain an idea of the effects of a literacy and awareness-raising programme for women. This paper briefly describes the Bunyad literacy programme as well as the research methodology used to do the impact assessment.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Bunyad Women's Literacy Programme**

In 1999, Bunyad developed a programme in the Hafizabad district of Punjab to provide basic literacy skills and awareness in order to enhance women's access to information, their awareness of rights, and their capacity to engage in economic activities.

To implement its programmes in the district, Bunyad encouraged a group of local active young men and women to organise themselves to form a Basic Education Resource Training Initiative at the level of the *Markaz* or the district centre. This group established several Community Literacy Centres at the village level and associated sub centres called the *Sanjh* Learning Centres at the *mohalla* or sub village level. An initial survey of several villages was carried out to collect information about the socio-economic and educational status of the population, mobility patterns, women's activities and daily schedules, and facilities available. Centres were opened in villages where there are a large number of illiterate women between the ages of 15 to 45 years interested in becoming literate. Local young women with secondary school education (10 years of schooling) were selected as teachers for the *Sanjh* Centres and given a short (four days) initial training. This training introduced the concept and structure of the literacy centres, the basics of adult teaching methodology, and the teaching learning materials. Basic information on specific income generation activities was also introduced.

Women were invited to come to the *Sanjh* centres for two to three hours. However in the villages visited, teachers said that they would often go to women's home to teach.

### *The teaching learning materials*

A primer is used to introduce the Urdu alphabet and roman numbers from 1 to 100. Students are expected to identify the sound symbol/letter relationships and decode and encode words. The primer is called the *Qurani Qaida* (Qurani primer) with the view that this will be more readily acceptable to the community. This belief seems to be justified, since teachers of the programme report that women were keen to join the programme when told that it would help them learn the Quran and religious material.

Through the reader called *Roshan Rahain: Practical Education for Sisters* women were able to read and write and also become informed about the themes of awareness and confidence. Each lesson provides a short text followed by tasks related to comprehension, writing, vocabulary and solving numerical problems. Most lessons deal with topics such as income generation skills, community organisation, environment and health. The lessons includes a story usually about a woman who was poor and abused and who is advised and helped by a more knowledgeable woman to take things in her own hands, and engage in an economically productive activity. The stories are followed by information about the income generation activity, be it information on raising goats, diseases of farm animals, poultry keeping, healthy diet, and the curse of dowry. The learners are also taught the *namaz* (prayers said in Arabic) and its meaning.

The objectives of the reader are to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills relevant to rural women's needs, raise awareness about women's rights, and provide information on Islamic laws and values regarding women. The programme also raises awareness about the significance of economic independence, raising the status of women in the family and society and selected income generation activities relevant to the rural setting.

## **Research Methodology**

The objective of this study was to find out if any changes have come about at an individual or village level as a result of the literacy programme. To meet this objective two villages were compared: one, where a literacy programme had been conducted; the other, where no literacy programme had been conducted. The two villages were similar to each other in terms of a number of socio-economic indicators. No other intervention had been made in either of the two villages.

A third village was also included in the comparison. This village had a female literacy programme two years ago, conducted by the same organisation, and a micro credit scheme had been introduced for the participants of the programme. It was expected that women who participated in the programme would differ from those from the village where no programme had been conducted. A second expectation was that there would be differences in the impact of the programme that included a provision of micro credit, from that which did not have it.

Some of the specific questions posed in the study included: What are the objectives and content of the literacy programme? How different are women's knowledge, attitude, behaviour and activities regarding family and society, culture, economy, education, in the village where women have become literate through the literacy programme compared with the village where there has been no programme? To what extent does literacy status and participation in the

programme explain these differences? What are the effects of this on their life and relationships?

### *Selection of villages*

Demographic, social and economic indicators were collected for the villages where female adult literacy programmes were conducted, as well for a control village where women were not exposed to any literacy programmes.

The three villages are similar in terms of distance from the closest town or large village, as well as in religious and linguistic profiles. They also share similarities with regard to the population engaged in farming, the ratio of landowners to tenant farmers, agricultural produce, and the facilities available (both have electricity but no telephone or health facilities).

### *Selection of women in each village*

In each of the villages 20 percent of the women representing a variation in terms of age and marital status were selected. Women who had participated in the literacy programme were selected. In the village without a literacy programme, 20 percent of the total population of illiterate women between 16-40 years of age were selected. The majority of the women were from families where fathers could not read or write and none of the mothers were literate. However, a majority of the siblings and children were literate.

## **Impact Assessment**

Women were compared on the basis of the effect literacy had on aspects such as their personal development, social and family life, attitude towards children's education, health knowledge, political participation, use of literacy and the perceptions about the programme they attended.

### *Personal development*

The programme seems to have succeeded in teaching literacy skills to most participants. Each interviewee was asked if she could read and write and was requested to read a simple paragraph and write a short sentence. All interviewees from the two villages with literacy programmes said they could read, and 47 percent claimed that they could write however when tested, ability to do so varied considerably. While some women could read a few sentences, others could read the entire paragraph. Some women wrote a sentence quite quickly while others struggled with it and some could only write their name.

The ability and skills with which they entered the programme were also different. While some women were school dropouts, others had never been to school. The difference in the prior experience of learning along with other unexplored factors such as motivation to participate, duration of attendance in the programme and regularity of use literacy could explain the variation in the ability.

On the other hand, 31 percent of women from the village with no exposure to a literacy programme claimed that they could read in Urdu, while only 18 percent also claimed that they could write in Urdu. Some women had learned to read as a result of reading the Quran; others had been to school for a year or two and had dropped out. A large number of women from all three villages said that they could read the Quran.

The most significant difference between women, in the villages that received literacy programmes and the village without any exposure to a literacy programme was in terms of their self-image. All women from the former group who had attended the programme regardless of literacy level and frequency of use, considered themselves different from illiterate women in that they were more confident, more able to interact with outsiders, could differentiate between good and bad, and were wiser. All women interviewed in the latter village thought that literate women are better than illiterate women. The interviewers reported a clear difference in the style of responding to interview questions. The former spoke more confidently and fluently. However, those women who attended the programmes for only a month or two appeared less confident and did not consider themselves very different from literate women.

Participation in the programme does seem to have had a positive influence on women's confidence. However, it is not necessarily the literacy skill, but probably the opportunity to interact with others socially in the literacy group as well as the messages given in the programme about a literate woman being confident (all stories give this message) that has contributed to how they think of themselves.

### *Health awareness and practice*

Women who participated in the literacy programme seemed to pay more attention to their personal appearance, children's cleanliness, and home environment. However, other factors such as poverty and number of children also appeared to be compelling explanations for the disorder in the surroundings and the neglect of personal appearance in all villages.

Within each village, there were some variations in terms of personal appearances; however, there was no significant difference between the health status of children between the two groups of villages. The acquisition of literacy and participation in the programme per se does not seem to affect the health of the children.

Literacy does not necessarily lead to better health knowledge. Other sources of information are available and may be a more powerful source than literacy programmes. Women from all three villages identified many ways in which they could help prevent their children from becoming sick. While women in villages with literacy programmes may have picked up these health messages from the programme, there are certainly other sources of information available, as demonstrated in the village with no literacy programme.

### *Family and social life*

Literacy does not bring about any change in the nature of women's activities or to the restrictions to their mobility. There may be some changes in the way they conduct their daily activities but this study was unable to explore them. A majority of the women in all three villages report spending most of their time in household chores such as cooking and cleaning. Women from all three villages also engaged in non-household related labour, either working on farms or in family business. A higher number of women in the village without a literacy programme reports that they work for the family business of *ban* or dry grass plating. Women may also get their daily exposure to written text from television since they do not report regularly engaging in any tasks requiring literacy. Women from all three villages reported spending time offering prayers and reading the Quran, however only 2 out of 96 women mentioned occasionally attending religious gatherings such as the *milad*.

A majority of the women in all three villages spend most of their time at home, and do not go unaccompanied to another village or town. There seems to be no difference between the mobility pattern of women from villages where the programme was conducted and the village where it was not. Other in-depth studies of literacy in rural areas have shown that women's mobility is determined by factors such as age, marital status and social class rather than literacy status (Farah 1992 and Zubair 2001).

Participation in the literacy programme also does not seem to affect participation in decision making in the family, such as marriages, children's education and income generation activities. Though there is some indication that participation in income generation activities enhances women's role in the family. At the same time, however, the low participation of women in major decision making in the village with the literacy programme suggests that becoming literate does not necessarily change one's status in the family.

### *Attitudes towards children's education*

There is some difference between women from villages with literacy programmes and those from the village with no exposure to literacy in terms of

attitudes towards children's education. More women from the former have higher expectations for their children's education and no one expected their sons to stop schooling at the primary level. The differences were not however uniform in terms of expectations for attainment of higher education. The expectation of women for their daughters' basic and secondary education is also higher amongst women from villages with literacy programmes.

The above suggests that participation in the programme leading to becoming literate may have had an impact on the higher expectations for children's education.

### *Attitude towards marriage and family*

There is some indication that women who have attended the literacy programme wanted later marriages for both boys and girls. The majority of women from all three villages thought that the appropriate marriageable age for boys was between 20 and 25 years.

The most significant difference between the villages is the attitude towards the age for girls' marriage. Most women from villages with literacy programmes (50 and 68 percent respectively) as compared with the village with no literacy programme (38 percent) thought that girls should marry between the ages of 20 and 25 years. Over half of the women from the village with no exposure to literacy believed girls should be married before the age of 18.

Women from all three villages gave a variety of reasons for their preferred age for marriage ranging from 'Islam advised early marriage' to 'early marriage would lead to more children' and 'mature girls can look after their family'.

A large majority of the women from all three villages thought that women should have fewer children (between 2-4). Thus participation in the programme does not seem to necessarily be the reason for the attitude towards family size. Additional evidence of this is that only two women from the entire sample had used or intended to use family planning facilities. It must be noted, though, that only half of those interviewed were married. In addition there were no significant difference between the number of children for each women across the three villages, with few deviations.

### *Participation in income generation*

A larger number of women from the village with micro-credit facilities (78 percent) engage in income generation activities as compared to the other two villages where no micro-credit facilities exist. This is not surprising since almost all families in the village with micro-credit facilities have a family business of *baan* grass planting, and most women there contribute to the family work and do not have separate earnings. However, five women in the sample initiated their

own business after participating in the literacy programme and obtaining credit from the programme or from family.

It is interesting to note that while the programme seems to have encouraged these women to initiate a business, they do not seem to use literacy skills in their work. Only one woman reports keeping written records, while the others mostly keep oral record of expenses. Also only one woman reports using literacy and numeracy skills in her business.

Participation in the literacy programme when accompanied by micro credit seems to encourage women to initiate independent business. However, women do not necessarily see the need for literacy in their income generation, or use it.

### *Use of literacy in everyday life*

Women who had acquired literacy reported using it in every day life. They indicated reading letters, bills, medicine bottles, magazine, newspaper, storybooks, religious books and television commercials. However, fewer women write in daily life. Some women indicate that they maintain a written account of household expenses, others mention that they write letters, yet others only write their names when needed. Literacy also helps them to help their younger primary school siblings and children with reading and writing. Most women cited the example of helping their children in writing Urdu letters.

It is evident that a majority of the women do use some literacy skills for their own personal needs and to help others. However, very few use it regularly or as part of income generation activities.

### *Women's own perceptions*

Women from both groups of villages joined the programme for different reasons. Some of the women joined because they had the desire to learn to read and write, and others did so when they saw other women joining or were mobilised by the teachers. When asked what they liked in the programme most women mentioned the stories in the books. All except 2 women said that they learned a number of things from the programme including reading and writing, various skills and *namaz*.

## **Conclusions**

Literacy seems to have a positive effect on some, but not all aspects of women's life. It has a positive effect on personal development and on aspects such as self-image, confidence, personal appearance, home environment, and expectations for children's education; however it does not significantly affect

other indicators such as health status of children, health knowledge, income generation, decision-making and political attitude.

One of the objectives of the programme was to empower women to become economically independent and improve quality of life. However, even though literacy is combined with information on income generation it does not make the majority of the women economically independent. Lack of resources for initiating income generation activities is cited as the most important reason by the programme facilitators; yet even where credit was available only a few women start their own businesses. In fact women have been engaged in traditional and family income generation activities such as brick making, embroidery work, and grass plating even prior to acquiring literacy. They do not necessarily see a close relationship between income generation and literacy. The relationship therefore needs to be made more explicit if literacy programmes are to be used to promote income generation. It may be more appropriate to provide literacy programmes as part of an income generation programme, rather than income generation as part of a literacy programme.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bunyad is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) established in early 1990s to undertake initiatives for community development in the province of Punjab. It acts as an umbrella organisation to support local NGOs and CBOs desirous of working in the areas of education, health, income generation, and physical disabilities in rural villages and urban slums. Bunyad has made significant and sustained efforts in female education by supporting local communities to open and manage non-formal schools for girls as well as adult literacy and awareness programmes for women.

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