



THE CHANGE AGENT

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Social Justice: News,
Issues, and Ideas

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Women & Literacy

by Daphne Greenberg

According to the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey approximately 20% of women in the U.S. have difficulty completing applications, reading labels, or reading to their children. Twenty-three percent of all women aged 25 and over have not gone beyond 11th grade and 28% of women aged 65 and older have not gone beyond eighth grade. Women continue to be grouped in a few low-wage occupations, and lack of education is one of the reasons for this. Access to quality education is essential for women to progress socially, economically, and politically.

The field of education often does not take into account the consequences of gender differences in the classroom, and



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adult literacy is no exception. There are issues unique to female learners. Educators and policymakers need to address them so that women can begin to take advantage of their educational strengths while overcoming their educational weaknesses.

Although men and women share many of the same obstacles when it comes to attending programs (shame, fear, conflicting work schedules, etc.), women often have additional barriers, such as lack of family support and multiple family responsibilities. Sometimes women are just plain too tired to attend classes. It is not uncommon to hear women complain that after child rearing, housekeeping, and work outside the house, they simply do not have time for studying. Many literacy programs do not have child care options and many women cannot leave their children with partners, family members, or friends. Transportation is another obstacle; often even if an attached woman has a car, the partner's transportation needs supercede the woman's needs. Not every area has adequate public transportation, nor is it safe for women in some communities to walk unescorted. Finally, husbands often do not allow wives to go to classes at night or to mixed

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gender classes. As researcher Janet Isserlis has pointed out, many women live with partners who do not want them to become more literate and/or independent, and this impacts their ability to participate in classes. Some women are not allowed to leave home, and therefore cannot attend classes (either due to cultural restrictions on women and/or domestic abuse reasons).

Literacy training begins as an issue for females when they are young. While boys and girls

share many of the same reasons for why they drop out of school, girls have the added issues of marriage, pregnancy, family violence, and abuse. Another reason why girls may drop out of school is that they are

systematically underrepresented in identification for learning disability services. Lack of a diagnosis means lack of needed services, which often

leads to low self-esteem, frustration, and hopelessness—all factors that contribute to dropping out of school.

Many policymakers take an instrumental view of women's education, stressing that increased female literacy skills are correlated with improved child care, nutrition, and health. Higher educated women have been said to provide better prenatal care, produce more full-term babies, provide better postnatal care, and produce higher participation rates in their children's schooling. This type of reasoning has influenced many literacy instructional programs to focus on women only as homemakers, ignoring women who do not have children, de-emphasizing the personal literacy interests of women, and side-stepping the fact that the majority of women must earn a living and therefore need additional types of literacy instruction. Women deserve access to meaningful education because they have a right to it—not as a means toward some other end. To help women achieve this right, policymakers and educators should work to better understand gender differences in the classroom and meet the specific needs of women learners.

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