Gender disparity in the acquisition of literacy in sub-Saharan Africa: the case of Malawi

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Introduction

While there are differences in the way nations define literacy and the degree of accuracy in measuring it, it is generally agreed worldwide that the large number of illiterate people is worrisome. The problem is more acute in developing countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (Ballara 1992; Ramdas 1990; Egbo 2000; UNESCO Information Service 2002, 2007; Centre for Language Studies 2000; EMIS 2000; Malawi Ministry of Education 2001, 2002). While the empowering role of literacy and its significance for development at the individual, community and national level is recognised world wide, most recent UNESCO Institute Statistics show that there are still 774 million illiterate adults world-wide out of whom 64% are women (http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?URL_ID=6401&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201 updated 08/10/2009). In addition, there are 75 million out of school children world-wide whose rights and needs remain unfulfilled. The data further shows that the lowest literacy rates are still in Africa and Asia. Comparatively, on current trends in terms of literacy growth, the institute observes that there has been a sharp increase in the number of adults who have acquired literacy in these regions, particularly among women in Africa. But progress is excruciatingly slow. One adult in every five remains illiterate and meeting the goal set by the world education forum in Dakar in 2000 to halve adult illiteracy by 2015 will be an uphill battle. There are still around 30 countries that are unlikely to achieve any more than 30% improvement over their 2000 literacy rates. Most of these countries, which include Malawi, are in Africa and Asia. Without major extraordinary additional efforts to fight illiteracy, these countries will account for 92% of the world's illiterate population by 2015.

Population growth, incomplete coverage of the primary schooling cycle for children of school going age as well as the gender gap between men and women in accessing education and acquiring literacy skills are pushing illiteracy figures

up. For the majority of people in developing countries, primary schooling is the only formal education they get and, therefore, the only chief avenue of literacy acquisition (Williams 1998). Once this chance is missed, gaining access to literacy at a later stage becomes difficult.

Millennium Development goal number three calls for gender equality and the empowerment of women. One aspect of this equality is literacy among women and men. But as shown above, estimated world proportions of illiteracy are still high among women. The report indicates that in most Sub-Saharan countries, the literacy rate for females is below that of men. Fewer countries in the region have achieved near parity rates in literacy. In Malawi latest literacy statistics show that nationally, 20.9% more men than women can read. According to the National Statistics census report for 1998, literacy rate for men stood at 74.9% while that of women was at 54% (http://www.nso.malawi.net/data on line/general/Atlas/Atlas pdf/atlas h education1 lowres.pdf-25/02/2010). Looking at these proportions, it is apparent that there is gender disparity in the acquisition of literacy. In this paper I discuss some of the factors that have accelerated this disparity in developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, and Malawi in particular. I also discuss current interventions aimed at promoting literacy among girls in a bid to curb illiteracy among women at the national level as well as other possible interventions that could be initiated to help motivate more women to gain access to literacy through on going national adult literacy programmes. I hasten to state from the onset that although lack of interest among women has to some extent contributed to this situation in Sub-Saharan Africa, factors beyond their control play a major role.

Historical factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of women

As stated above, formal education, especially primary schooling is the chief avenue through which the majority of people in developing countries acquire literacy. Historically, one of the major obstacles to the acquisition of literacy among women lies in the education system itself. It is a well-known fact that the advent of western literacy in Africa is largely attributed to the spread of Christianity and colonial domination in the region. Both the colonialists and the missionaries considered education as an essential tool in achieving their agendas, namely sustenance of their regimes and propagation of Christian doctrines.

However, women and men were not given equal access to education:

> Unfortunately education systems introduced by the colonialists tended to accentuate various forms of gender related discrimination and were modelled on male-only institute of higher learning that had developed in medieval Europe (Egbo 2000:1)

Western culture, which came along with western education, also carried rigid gender ideologies, which aided and supported exclusionary social practices against women. Social, political and economic power could only belong to men. In medieval Europe, women were discriminated against in education (Ramdas, 1990). It was believed that a woman's social life as well as morality could be endangered if she became too educated. With such ideologies, African men were thus almost exclusively the sole beneficiaries of western education. The colonial rationale for favouring the education of men than women was that they needed men to work in subordinate positions in administration as support and clerical staff. Unfortunately, this infusion of Euro-centric ideologies into the African society led to the devaluation of women and their status. Echoing Smock (1981:254), Egbo (2000:3) notes that:

> The development of western education within the framework of the Victorian mentality and a dependent economy, consistently led to the exclusion of women from the education system… The European conception of females… [as] a helpless homebound creature, inclined administrations to favour the admission of boys to the limited places available.

It is not surprising therefore that today Sub-Saharan women remain excluded from gaining equal access to western literacy. This is not, however, to say that gender discrimination did not exist during pre-colonial Africa. To present such a picture would be naive. Social stratification on the basis of gender is not a new phenomenon among African societies. It existed even during the pre-colonial era. The colonial administrators, however, failed to recognise that African women were active both in commerce and public spheres. Women quite often held complementary socio- political positions to men in their communities. Perhaps if the colonialists had encouraged the women's roles in both commerce and governance at the community level, their status could have been boosted not devalued, as has been the case. The privileging of western education to men has had therefore, a negative effect on women. Far from redeeming them from gender related oppression, colonial rule, its education and rigid gender ideologies have

contributed to curtailing some of the traditional rights and statuses that were attributed to African women. By entertaining gender discrimination in the provision of education, the Westerners, inculcated an alttitude among Africans that education was exclusively for men. This alttitude became rooted in the minds of many people including the women themselves and slowly became part and parcel of African cultural values and beliefs. Today, in many African communities, Malawi inclusive, some people consider educating the girl child to be a waste of resources. I will elaborate on this later.

Beyond the negative consequences of Western literacy, women's problems in the colonial era were further exacerbated by the introduction of western style capitalist economies, which emphasised the monetisation of goods and services as well as the focus on individual pursuits and accumulation of wealth. This system shifted the pre-colonial African view of the family as a collective primary unit of production. Emphasis was now on wage labour outside the household. The introduction of a cash-based economy disadvantaged women even more. Colonial administrators encouraged men to engage in cash crop production, an area that had previously been controlled by women (Boserup 1970; Staudt 1989; Koopman 1995; Ochwada 1997; Egbo 2000). By excluding women from education opportunities, wage labour, politics, and governance, colonialism increased and consolidated the gender based social disparity that existed leaving the women unable to cope with the emergent world changes to which their society was becoming an integral part.

However, the wave of independence movements which swept the Sub-Saharan region in the 1950s resulted in shifts in policies by post-colonial governments. Expansion of education to cover marginalized groups like women was seen as the key to acceleration of socio-economic development as well as a solution to their social difficulties. However, despite the numerous campaigns, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2007) literacy assessment projections for 2015 show that women in Sub-Saharan Africa remain one of the least educated groups in the world.

Contemporary factors

Poverty is often cited as one of the major contributing factors to illiteracy among women in developing countries (Ballara 1992). UNESCO (1991) further identifies social customs as one of the primary reasons for gender disparity in

education in developing countries. As indicated earlier, many Sub-Saharan communities are structured along patriarchal lines. Men wield a lot of power and authority. Male dominance even if it is to the detriment of the woman, is acknowledged and accepted unquestioningly by the woman. Due to psychological indoctrination, such practices are internalised as the norm. In recent years though, with the influence of women activists and other organisations who are campaigning for and sensitising fellow women on the need for them to take an upper hand in liberating themselves from oppressive practices, women both in rural and urban areas have started to question male dominance and other cultural practices which render them powerless to make decisions on issues that affect their lives. However, this change in attitude is progressing very slowly. It is not surprising therefore, that with the acute poor conditions they live in, when resources to educate children are minimal and parents have to choose who to send to school, the boy child always stands a better chance than the girl child. Parents would rather invest in the boy's education than the girl child. Investing in the girl child's education is seen as a waste of resources. In many Malawian communities the girl child is seen as an additional source of household labour (Tizora 1995). What is even more disturbing is that women themselves perpetuate and reinforce such beliefs. Women employ rigid gender roles in the way they distribute household chores to the boy and girl child. The gender roles they learnt from their parents are reproduced unquestioningly in the way they raise their children. Often times the girl child is co-opted to assist the mother with household work like fetching water and firewood, processing food, looking after younger siblings as well as other socio-economic activities, which are deemed essential for the survival of the family while the boy child is left free to do as he pleases. As a result, school attendance is irregular on the part of the girl child and she has very little time to do school related activities at home. Frequent absenteeism eventually leads to failure or dropout (Centre for Language Studies 2000). Such a girl then grows up into an illiterate woman if there are no opportunities for adult literacy programmes.

It is often argued that there is a correlation between parental level of education and children's access to education (Kasarda et al 1989; Herz et al 1991; and Ballara,1992). However, studies by (Kachiwanda 2009) and Centre for Language Studies (2000) in Malawi, Egbo (2000) and Adeyemo (1984) in Nigeria, show that parents, educated or not, seem to believe that education is the key factor in

increasing life chances. Non-literate parents are especially motivated to educate their children because they do not want their children to end up in their shoes, which they attribute to lack of education. However, observations in many Sub-Saharan Africa communities show that non-literate parents' aspirations and what actually happens in the home do not seem to match. There is some tension between the desire to educate their children and conditions that constrain women to act on those desires. As stated above, financial difficulties compel women to seek additional labour from children especially, girls. Hence disrupting girls from school related activities. The girl child is often the victim of the needed labour because as stated earlier, her education is not valued. Men although highly regarded as heads of the family institution, fail to provide for the needs of the family. In many societies, a man also has a responsibility to provide financial or material assistance to his parents, brothers, sisters or even to his married sisters in matrilineal societies. For some men this responsibility, outweighs that of their wives and children (Potash 1995). Although a wife may complain about inadequate support from her husband, provision of assistance to his parents is considered legitimate. Sometimes marriage patterns like those of the Akan of Ghana also make it hard for the husband to appreciate the problems that the wife and children face and the need for his support as the head of the family. Among the Akan, co-residence of spouses is believed to be difficult. Each prefers to remain with his or her matrilineal kinsmen. The wife simply sends meals to her husband every day and the husband visits her once in a while (Potash 1995). The situation is even worse in polygamous societies like among the Yao, Tumbuka, Sena and Ngoni of Malawi, Luo of Kenya, Yoruba of Nigeria, Swahili of Tanzania and Ewe of Ghana where the man is allowed to marry more than one woman even if he fails to fend for the needs of the first wife and her children. In such circumstances, the African woman struggles to fend for the needs of her children.

Among the Tumbuka of Malawi, some parents see a girl's education as a wasteful undertaking for parents. They believe that benefits accrued from such an investment would be reaped by someone else when the girl child is married. Culturally, when a girl gets married she no longer takes a strong natal relationship with her parents or kinsmen. Her allegiance is diverted to the husband's kinsmen. When the husband dies, she lives with her deceased husband's kinsmen and is

sometimes remarried to a relative of the deceased husband.[1] With the prevalence of HIV/AIDS such cultural practices are being discouraged but some people find it hard to let go of the practice.

Furthermore, in the Tumbuka culture, on inheritance of family fortunes, the girl child is not entitled to acquire her parent's wealth even if she is the first born in the family. Instead, when the father dies, the fortune is passed on the boy child. As stated earlier, their argument is that doing so would mean giving up the spoils of her maternal family to be enjoyed by her husband kinsmen upon marriage since that is where she has strong allegiance once married. It follows then that if upon marriage, her husband fails to provide for her family needs, she is left worse off economically compared to her brothers. Consequently, chances of using her female children as extra sources of labour for economic gains would be high.

Early marriages and pregnancies is another obstacle to literacy acquisition among women in Sub-Saharan Africa. Among the Yao, forced marriages are common. Girls marry in their teens or soon after they have been initiated (Mangochi District Profile 1999). Initiation ceremonies are seen as a rite of passage into the adult world where young men and women are expected to start families and assume the responsibilities of family life. Research has shown that absenteeism at school is high among Yao pupils once they have been initiated (Centre for Language Studies 2000; Literacy Across the Curriculum Report 2004). Boys and girls once initiated are treated as though they were adults, inculcating in them an attitude of responsibility to fend for their needs and not to rely on parental support. This leaves the girl child with no option but to succumb to marriage so that the husband can take over the responsibility of fending for her needs. Sometimes the girls themselves see marriage as the best option in life and, therefore see, no reason why they should delay the inevitable. Stigmatisation also contributes to early marriages. Girls who remain unmarried beyond their early twenties are stigmatised, forcing some girls to marry as early as in their teens even though the may not have finished their school education by that time.

On the other hand, marriages are seen as economic liabilities. Some ethnic groups demand payment of dowry from the prospective husband or his kinsmen when daughters get married. The Tumbuka demand several cattle or an equivalent sum

of money when a daughter gets married. Some parents then force their daughters to get married early so that they can get the cattle which are in turn used as dowry when their sons marry[2]. Unfortunately for those enrolled in school, early marriages mean dropping out of school, resulting in a vicious circle of illiteracy among women.

Efforts by individual governments and non-governmental organisations to increase women's literacy levels through adult literacy programmes do not seem to produce the expected results either. Egbo (2000) observes that although non-literate women aspire to become literate, they are convinced that their economic situation would probably not allow it. While it cannot be denied that there are women in some semi-literate cultures, who do not feel the social pressure to acquire literacy skills as is the case in industrialised countries, many illiterate women in developing countries and Malawi in particular are becoming increasingly aware of the potential advantages of literacy for their own socio-economic empowerment and political development. They have the motivation to learn but as Ballara (1992) observes, formidable obstacles still remain. Heavy workloads like farming, children and family care, processing of food, early and frequent pregnancies leave women with no spare time to participate in part time or full time educational activities. While they appreciate that their lack of literacy skills is a social handcap, this is of secondary importance given their socio-economic disempowerment. Chlebowska (1990) and Ramdas (1990) also make similar observations about non-literate women of Niger and India respectively.

According to Maslow's (1970) analysis of human needs, once lower level needs such as food, clothing, security and general survival are met, people begin to seek higher level needs such as a sense of belonging, esteem or self-fulfilment. Most non-literate women in Malawi are constantly engaged in pursuing lower level needs in a bid to survive. Because they are unable to satisfy the essentials for sustaining themselves and their families, literacy becomes a higher level need. What then should be done to improve the conditions of women and increase literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa and Malawi in particular?

Current interventions and other possibilities to increase literacy acquisition among women

There are many social, economic and cultural reasons that justify the need for special actions to make literacy and education for women and girls a top priority for development (Ramdas 1990; Stromquist 1990; Ballara 1992; Afshar 1992; Action Aid 1995; Hay and Stichter 1995; James 1995 and Egbo 2000). The power of literacy as a communication tool for information and knowledge cannot be overemphasised. Acquisition of knowledge is one of the prerequisites to human development. Literacy is needed to have access to the larger existing body of information, which is available in the written form, independent of time and space (Stromquist 1990). With literacy people are able 'to access, reflect upon, critique or act upon other people's ideas in addition to creating their own ideas from such scrutiny' (Egbo 2000:31). Furthermore, with literacy it is possible or in some cases easier to receive information and knowledge beyond the immediate community network (Belanger1994; Dubbeldam 1994). Equitable information societies and thriving democracies cannot therefore be achieved if so many women remain marginalised and without education and literacy (Matsuura 2009). Some people argue that women in Sub-Saharan Africa can survive in their respective communities independent of literacy, as they have done in the past. However, it is the nature and quality of that survival which is of concern particularly given the emergent global trends. Women need information to increase their awareness of oppression (i.e. existence of oppressive patriarchal ideologies and the diffusion of cultural subordination and exploitation). While it is true that gender consciousness raising does not depend on literacy, a greater development of this consciousness requires information which is independent of time and place (Stromquist 1990). Such information is often stored in the written form and can only be accessed if the women have the necessary literacy skills. In a world where cultural values, traditional customs and beliefs continue to oppress and relegate women to positions and conditions of inferiority, disempowerment and hopelessness, women need literacy that would make them critical of the world around them. They need literacy not 'so much to read and understand but to read, understand and control their world' (Stromquist 1990: 107). Critical literacy would for instance enable rural women to recognise and question for example, the sources of their oppression. Literacy programmes must move into consciousness-raising and mobilization. Any literacy programme that does not address the

fundamental cause of women's marginalized conditions will only perpetuate further dominance and camouflage the real issues that relegate women to such conditions (Ramdas, 1990; Stromquist 1990; Ballara 1992 and Egbo 2000). Literacy should empower women so as to alter their marginalized conditions (Chlebowska 1990; Ramdas 1990; Stromquist 1990; Ballara 1992; Bee 1993 and Egbo 2000). As Stromquist (1990: 109) observes:

A policy to modify one or more of the fragmented determinants of women's education and participation will do little to bring about changes for women. The political nature of women's subordination must be identified and illiteracy seen as an additional expression of uneven power relations.

Proposals for equal opportunities between men and women suggest that literacy projects, which include knowledge in fields like agriculture, health, employment, environment and others can play an important role in promoting development and well- being of women's quality of life (Ballara 1992). However, these goals are not ends in themselves. Literacy programmes must balance between what the women seek with what they need. In Malawi, experience has shown that, because of their poverty, women are more interested in income generating activities than literacy and gender consciousness. It is also common to find literacy activities combined with home economics (embroidery, sewing, weaving and cooking). However, literacy programmes must go beyond these activities, which emphasise women's productive and reproductive roles. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, women continue to contribute significantly to the development of their communities (James 1995; Hay and Stichter 1995; Egbo 2000). Yet most of them lack education to improve their conditions and to overcome social barriers and the economic burden they must endure. The content of literacy programmes should therefore address local realities to show how these realities have been distorted and the need for modification (Stromquist 1990). Women also need skills that will allow them to earn more money; address survival needs better and gain autonomy. Literacy programme designers should, therefore, find ways of combining literacy training with survival needs that could help women to overcome social barriers and economic burdens.

Some of the causes of women's illiteracy are embedded in state and economic structures that lead to the subordination of women or at least tacitly endorse it. Solutions to such problems would, therefore, also depend on deliberate state

action. As stated earlier, the majority of illiterate women are economically handicapped. Literacy programmes that emphasise tangible reward systems would therefore be of paramount importance in the sustenance of female learners' interest. Quoting Ramdas (1987), Rogers (2002:7) cites the following observation:

> Literacy by itself had no meaning or relevance for those with whom we worked …Women attended our literacy classes only as long as it took them to find work, anything to help them to augment the family's meagre …income. They blatantly told our teachers to go away or stick to teaching children. Learning how to sign their names or write the alphabet would not help to fill their empty bellies.

Providing adult female learners with the wherewithal to pursue some kind of income generating activities while enrolled in literacy programmes would help sustain their participation. In Malawi there are many money-lending institutions for small-scale income generating activities. Many women are engaged in in-group income generating activities. There is, however, very little or no collaboration at all between these money-lending institutions and government and non-governmental organs that provide adult literacy programmes. Government should take advantage of the existence of these money-lending institutions in its campaign against illiteracy. Incorporating income-generating activities in adult literacy programmes would be killing two birds with one stone. In the process of acquiring literacy, the women would also gain some economic muscle with which to sustain themselves and their families. This would also be one way of integrating the rural women into the main stream of economic development. A similar programme has proved to be a success in Indonesia (Ballara 1992). The challenge for the Malawian literacy programme designers would therefore, be how to integrate literacy training into such livelihood activities.

Increasing funding for primary and secondary education for girls would also be a viable intervention by government. In addition, government might also consider increasing boarding schools for girls especially at the primary level where attendance of girls is highly jeopardised by domestic services at home. Beyond that, to ensure persistent attendance, provision of pocket money bursaries to very poor hardworking school girls is also a step in the right direction. The introduction of the GABLE project in the early 90s was a worth while innovation. Through the

payment of schools fees for girls and its mobilisation campaigns in rural areas, the project promoted girl's access to education and literacy. Negative parental attitudes, cultural practices, beliefs and values towards girls' education in individual communities were ridiculed through drama, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of giving equal opportunities to the girl and boy child. Girls who fell pregnant while in school were sensitised about their rights with regard to education and encouraged to go back to school once their babies became of age. Today, parents and girls are aware that becoming pregnant is not the end of their education. They can still continue with their education after delivery.

The introduction of free primary education in 1994 also meant that the girl child would now have increased access to education and literacy. Deliberate investment in the education of girls is not however, an easy undertaking. As Stromquist (1990) has rightly observed, historically, government policies relating to women's education are '…characterised by substantially more lip service than potential allocation of human and financial resources.' Most programmes designed to improve women's lives are introduced with a bang but often end up being phased out quietly. The Malawi government will require a strong commitment to sustain both the free primary education and the initiatives of the GABLE project. Already, research has shown that while pupil enrolment has gone up with the introduction of free primary education, the quality of education has gone down due to lack of the necessary facilities (Malawi Ministry of Education 2001). The increase in the enrolment of pupils in schools (as a result of the free primary education) did not match with the available resources. There is inadequate number of teachers and teaching and learning materials. To make up for the shortage of teachers, government engaged the services of untrained temporary teachers. This adversely affected the quality of education. Poor teaching methods due to lack of training and inadequate teaching and learning materials, leave pupils with very poor literacy skills.

School systems and the curricula also play a role in disempowering women. Schools, as powerful agents of socialisation, help to perpetuate the marginalized status of women and patriarchal ideologies which contribute significantly to the disempowerment of women through explicit and implicit messages which push girls into subject areas suited to homemaking than job skills. In Malawian schools

girls outnumber boys in home management, food and nutrition subjects than the sciences.

Studies have shown that gender stereotyping starts early in school (Biraimah 1987). Teaching and learning materials as well as the way teachers and learners interact with each other play a role in reinforcing gender based stereotyping. Egbo (2000) proposes the following to change school practices and structures: (i) formal and non-formal education systems that are committed to equal opportunities for girls and boys, (ii) a curriculum that contains materials that are of equal interest to boys and girls while at the same time de-emphasising the focus on perfecting women's homemaking abilities, (iii) stimulating more female interest and enrolment in science subjects, (iv) text books should be grounded in the experiences of both men and women, portraying women in positive terms, focussing less on gender stereotypes and generally interrogating gender inequalities in the learners context.

In Malawi, textbook writers are encouraged to avoid gender stereotyping and to portray women in more challenging jobs that are often portrayed as the men's domain. However, more needs to be done to sensitise parents and communities on the need for them to play an active role in bridging the gender gap between men and women which starts early in childhood through the social roles that parents assign to children. Efforts by the education systems to bridge this gap would be futile if communities are not supportive in enforcing them in their daily family life.

FEMSA[3] which has since phased out in Malawi has also helped to promote the participation and performance of girls in mathematics, science and technology subjects at primary and secondary school levels. The project has also invigorated ministries of education and policy makers in participating countries to make the necessary adjustments to the curriculum, teacher training and examinations to ensure a fuller participation and better achievement in the said subjects. At the school level, girls are organised into clubs where they engage in science related activities like paper recycling, carpentry, seed growing and others. But still a lot more needs to be done to boost girls' interests in the sciences. In most cases, initiatives which start as projects cease to continue when projects phase out. The government of Malawi through the relevant ministries needs to support these initiatives so that their benefits are fully internalised and appreciated.

Formulation of education policies in Malawi remains essentially in the hands of men. Very few women occupy significant decision-making positions. A lot more women with sound education qualifications occupy less significant positions, and are, therefore, unable to initiate meaningful structural changes. This exclusionary practice is as stated earlier, a direct legacy from colonial rule. The importance of consultation with relevant stakeholders in policy matters cannot however, be overemphasised. As Egbo (2000) argues, profound education change is inconceivable without the full participation of women in the formulation of policies that affect them. The views of women should therefore be given due consideration if meaningful structural changes leading to gender parity in education and literacy acquisition are to be achieved.

Far from being passive recipients of government policies which do not address issues that affect them adequately, literate women in Malawi through Women's Rights Organisations such as Women's Voice, Association for Progressive Women, Young Women Leaders and Women and Law are busy campaigning and lobbying the government for the recruitment of women with sound education backgrounds in policy-making positions. The activists are also conducting campaigns against traditional customs and cultural beliefs that impinge on women's advancement in society. Women, particularly those at the grassroots in rural areas are being sensitised to critically assess their traditional customs, cultural values and beliefs to see how some of these have negatively contributed to their oppression. But as said earlier, although parental attitudes towards girls' education are changing, a lot more sensitisation still needs to be done. Women have lived with these customs, values and beliefs for many years. It will be unrealistic to expect them to abandon them very easily. Change is proving to be a slow process but worth the struggle.

Special attention should also be given to the relevance of the content of literacy programmes. Egbo (2000) reports that some of the non-literate participants in her study did not attend literacy classes regularly because what they were learning did not seem to fit with their daily life, leading them to conclude that their attendance was a waste of time. Most rural women in Sub-Saharan Africa spend most of their time working on farms (Egbo 2000; Hay and Stichter, 1995; Ballar 1991; Stamp 1990; Afshar 1992; James 1995). In Malawi, women are the major bulk of subsistence farming but are also engaged in cash crop farming (Malindi 1995). There is need to develop labour and time saving technologies to ease women's

time constraints in light of their vulnerability and the other important roles they play as home providers and child caretakers. It would make economic sense to provide these women with literacy programmes that would maximise greater output through the use of less rudimentary farming tools and techniques. Adult literacy programmes that provide women with knowledge on how to access and use modern farming technology in order to minimise time spent on farms while at the same time maximizing production from a small piece of land would be more attractive.

Most rural communities lack basic infrastructure like better roads, potable water, public transport, etc. As a result rural women, whose work sustains these communities, live and labour under trying conditions. While it cannot be denied that the Malawi Government is doing all it can to develop rural areas with the necessary basic amenities, many rural communities still lack these facilities. There is still urgent need for Government commitment to provide more of these facilities so as to reduce the burden of rural women and the concomitant need for girls' paid and unpaid domestic labour which is a major impediment to school attendance and, therefore, acquisition of literacy. Furthermore, nursing women would be able to engage in educational related activities if child minder centres or even nursery school were established at village level. Such facilities are available in urban locations. The Government has a responsibility to sensitise communities and provide the necessary machinery to help the people to establish such facilities on their own. It is encouraging to note that the Malawi Government through the Ministry of Gender and Community Services has embarked on the establishment of early childhood development centres which in a way also mitigate the burden of looking after children the whole day for mothers. However, very few communities have established such community centres. The responsible ministry needs to do more in this area.

Conclusion

It would be naive to suggest that increased access to literacy and education would single-handedly alleviate Malawian women's social problems. However, as it has been argued in this paper, education and literacy can empower and provide women with the fundamental tools to take control of their destinies. With government commitment to incorporate women's views on issues that affect their lives, access to literacy and education would mean more women in policy-making

positions. Access to education opportunities is imperative for profound social reconstruction. Be it in a developed or developing country, educational credentials are an important assert for occupational or social mobility. This makes it mandatory for Malawi and all other Sub-Saharan African countries to ensure that all underprivileged groups especially women, gain access to education and acquire the necessary functional literacy skills.

Finally to quote Egbo, (2000:188):

> …By exposing Africans to Western literacy, the colonialists inadvertently, through a system they had designed to exploit, initiated their own exit and at the same time offered Africans with the instrument with which to fight for their liberation and independence…,

A similar analogy may well apply to women in Malawi [my emphasis] and elsewhere in the Sub-Saharan Africa at some point in History.

Notes

1. The information contained in this paragraph was obtained through oral interviews by a colleague while conducting a girls' mobilization campaign for the Girls Attainment to Basic Literacy and Education project among the Tumbuka community in the Northern part of Malawi. Remarrying women to their deceased husband's brother is, however, being discouraged these days due to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

2. The source is as in 1 above.

3. FEMSA stands for Female Education in Mathematics, and Sciences in Africa. It is funded by a consortium of agencies led by the Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD). Participating countries in the project include Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal, Uganda, Cameroon, Mali and Burkina Faso. The project has since phased out in Malawi.

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