

Women and Literacy: A Quest for Justice

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the fact that she, her smile, her beauty, and her bikini have nothing at all to do with the cigarette), they begin to discover the difference between education and propaganda. At the same time, they are preparing themselves to discuss and perceive the same deceit in ideological or political propaganda,²⁶ they are arming themselves to "dissociate ideas." In fact, this has always seemed to me to be the way to defend democracy, not a way to subvert it.

One subverts democracy (even though one does this in the name of democracy) by making it irrational; by making it rigid in order "to defend it against totalitarian rigidity"; by making it hateful, when it can only develop in a context of love and respect for persons; by closing it, when it only lives in openness; by nourishing it with fear, when it must be courageous; by making it an instrument of the powerful in the oppression of the weak; by militarizing it against the people; by alienating a nation in the name of democracy.

One defends democracy by leading it to the state Mannheim calls "militant democracy"—a democracy which does not fear the people, which suppresses privilege, which can plan without becoming rigid, which defends itself without hate, which is nourished by a critical spirit rather than irrationality.

At a recent nationwide convention on literacy held in Bangalore, India, the organizers decided that the nearly one thousand delegates should divide up into statewide groups and draw up "time-bound action plans" to combat illiteracy in their own states. A number of the women delegates present decided to organize a separate sub-group to discuss strategies for literacy, keeping in mind the peculiar problems faced by women and girls. After some hours of excellent in-depth discussion, the women's group submitted certain recommendations for the consideration of the nationwide groups that were present. These called for a basic reassessment of ongoing programs on literacy, and stressed the need to reexamine the reality on the ground, particularly as it affected women. The group did not outline any time-bound action plan, but instead emphasized: (a) the need for day-care facilities to enable women to participate more fully in literacy programs; (b) the need for sensitizing and educating men to question traditional deep-rooted values and attitudes towards women; and (c) the need for ensuring that all top-level, decision-making literacy bodies have women in at least 50 percent of their leadership positions. The majority of delegates at the convention reacted to these recommendations with condescension bordering on disapproval. The only concern which was repeatedly stressed was the "inability" of the women's group to address the main issue and come up with a time-bound action plan. Most delegates were of the opinion that this was not the forum in which to debate women's issues.

I decided to preface this article with the above anecdote because it represents, in a very basic sense, the kind of barriers that face those who attempt to focus on the problems of female literacy as distinct from literacy in general. Generally speaking, men dominate positions of power and decision making in many fields of economic, social, and political activity, and the sphere of education and literacy is no exception. Male dominance in literacy policy-making is more than a little ironic, however, since 70 percent of the

WOMEN AND LITERACY—SOME FACTS

Let us look for a start at some of the relevant statistics regarding literacy in general and the facts with regard to women in particular. I have drawn extensively here on the literacy statistics cited by Lind and Johnston (1986) in their article on "Adult Literacy in the Third World." It is important to note, however, that literacy data give only a general picture of the situation in a particular area: (a) because the notion of literacy varies from country to country; (b) because different measurements of literacy are used and they often tend to be very rough; and (c) because the coverage of the data is itself often incomplete.

These qualifications notwithstanding, it would be largely true to say that the number of illiterate people aged fifteen years and upwards continues to increase inexorably in absolute terms. Recent estimates indicate that there were around 760 million illiterates in 1970 and around 889 million in 1985. Unless radical measures are taken, their numbers will be close to 1,000 million by the year 2000. Using the most basic understanding of the word "literate," namely, possessing the ability to read and write, this means that this mass of people will be shut off from access to the written word in a world where reading and writing are becoming increasingly indispensable as means of communication. In percentage terms, the situation is improving, with the world illiteracy rate falling from some 44 percent in 1950 to an estimated 25 percent in 1990 (Bataille, 1976; Unesco, 1980, 1985). The increase in absolute numbers of the illiterate is a result of both population growth as well as incomplete coverage of primary schooling for school-age children. In 1980, 121 million school-age children (six to eleven years) did not attend school (Unesco, 1983). These and others who drop out before achieving complete literacy skills will join the illiterate adult population at fifteen years of age.

The global distribution of literacy patterns is also significant for our study. Predictably, the illiteracy rates are highest in the least-developed countries and among the most underprivileged groups within them. In 1985, India and China alone accounted for 30 and 26 percent, respectively, of all illiterate people in the world. In the twenty-five least-developed countries (those having a per capita income of less than \$100 per annum), the illiteracy rate was over 80 percent in 1970 (Bataille, 1976) and around 68 percent in 1985.

The proportion of women in the world's total illiterate population is growing steadily. In 1970, 58 percent of all illiterates were women. By 1980, this percentage had risen to 60 percent. This upward trend in female illiteracy continues to the present day. Table 1, which shows the distribution of adult illiteracy in the world both by geographical region and sex, indicates the degree of disparity between male and female literacy, and indicates that this disparity is especially marked in developing countries. Statistics on the distribution of literacy in south Asian countries, for example, confirm this picture of acute disparities in the literacy levels of men and women in less-developed countries, with Sri Lanka being a notable exception.

target group of literacy programs consists of girls and women. In other words, 70 percent of the 1,000 million illiterates in the world today are women and girls, some 700 million people. Their voices and real-life problems become an embarrassment and a nuisance, however, when male-dominated, technology-oriented groups present neatly packaged, time-bound plans and projects, which do not grapple with the obstinate and enduring structural difficulties involving attitudes toward women and women's education.

It is with the aim of highlighting this often-neglected area of literacy for women that this article poses, and seeks to answer, two questions. Why is literacy especially a women's issue? Why is literacy for women an issue of justice? The answers to these questions are indeed as complex as the entire area of literacy itself. The links between women, literacy, and justice cannot be understood, in turn, without examining a host of similarly complex, but related, questions. To begin with, what is, or should be, our definition of literacy? Is it merely the three Rs or something beyond these mere mechanical skills? Is there a women's view of literacy? Do we need to understand and redefine literacy from the viewpoint of women? If so, which women are we talking about? To which geographical and cultural areas, social and economic classes, and age groups do such women belong? Finally, if female literacy is indeed linked with justice in a different way from male literacy, what strategies should we choose to further the cause of literacy and justice for women in 1990, International Literacy Year, and in the decade leading to the next century?

This article attempts to establish the relationship between women, literacy, and justice in the contemporary global context. It seeks to examine critically the factors that either facilitate or militate against women's access to both literacy and justice. It outlines some action-oriented ways that might enable and empower women to break the bonds of silence which continue to oppress them. After a brief factual overview of the current global situation regarding women and literacy, I shall discuss both the way in which literacy is commonly defined, and how I think it ought to be defined to be meaningful from the viewpoint of most illiterate people in the world today, especially the women among them. I argue that literacy must be defined to include, but go beyond, the skills of reading and writing. Literacy must be seen as part of the process of empowering underprivileged people. Literacy, I contend, is thus indelibly linked with people's quest for, and attainment of, justice. While the link between literacy and justice applies to both men and women, it assumes particular significance in women's quest for justice in a world where patriarchal oppression of women is widespread and involuntarily unites women across national, religious, and cultural boundaries. After discussing what I believe are the most important factors that make the struggle of illiterate women for justice a common one, I will then turn to the flip side of this commonality, namely, the global heterogeneity of women's problems and, hence, the differentiated strategies for women's literacy and fight for justice that this calls for.

TABLE 1 Number of Illiterates and Illiteracy Rates in 1985 for the Adult Population Aged 15 and Over

	Absolute number of illiterates 15 and over (millions)	Illiteracy rates age 15 and over (%)	
		Both sexes	Women
World total	888.7	27.7	20.5
Developing countries	868.9	38.2	27.9
Developed countries	19.8	2.1	1.7
Least-developed countries	120.8	67.6	56.9
Africa	161.9	54.0	43.3
Latin America	43.6	17.3	15.3
Asia	665.7	36.3	25.6
Oceania	1.6	8.9	7.6
Europe (including USSR)	13.9	2.3	1.6

Source: Unesco 1985.

Indicators of underdevelopment point out that the have-nots in terms of literacy are also worse off in terms of life expectancy, infant mortality, educational provision, communications, nutrition, health, and income; their agricultural and industry are both less developed and less productive. Fisher (1982) points out that "this is only part of the tragic reality, for within these countries with high illiteracy rates . . . the illiterate is even worse off than his compatriots [emphasis added]." One might add that the female illiterate bears the double burden of both the yoke of poverty and the misfortune of being born female. UNICEF's 1989 report *The State of the World's Children* proves comprehensively the link between female illiteracy and all other basic indicators of underdevelopment such as per capita GNP, life expectancy, infant mortality, school enrollment, and nutrition.

Although the statistics for advanced industrialized countries may not be quite so dramatic, the problems faced by women in gaining access to literacy and education are serious enough. *Canadian Women's Studies* (Vol. 9, No. 3/4) points out that the connections between women, poverty, and illiteracy apply likewise to illiterate women in the developed world. For example, only 25 percent of functionally illiterate women are in the paid labour force compared with 50 percent of women as a whole. Half of all female-headed households live below the poverty line. Their illiteracy rate is much higher than the national average. Furthermore, women with poor literacy skills have access to only the lowest paid jobs such as domestic work or sewing. Finally, women with less than Grade 8 education earn, on average, only 59 percent of average male earnings, considerably less than the average woman's earnings, which are themselves only 68 percent of male earnings. So whether in the developing or the developed world, the number of illiterates continues to grow and the worst affected among them are women and girls.

TABLE 2 The Status of Literacy in South Asian Countries

Country	Year	Literacy rate	Male literacy	Female literacy	Urban	Rural
Bangladesh ¹	1986	22	38	6	32	12
India	1981	36.2	46.9	24.8	57	29.5
Nepal	1986	35	52	18	67	33
Pakistan	—	32	48	16	52.8	20
Sri Lanka	1981	86.5	90.5	82.4	93.3	84.5

¹The literacy rate of north Bangladesh is much lower than the other areas. Four districts in the eastern tribal region have the lowest literacy rate.

Source: Document circulated at the ASPBAE Seminar on Literacy, Strategies, and Basic Needs Fulfillment, Kathmandu, March 1989.

LITERACY DEFINITIONS AND LINKS WITH JUSTICE

It might be useful to present the range of definitions of literacy that have been used from time to time. It is also important to note that definitions of literacy have varied vastly, depending on who has set out to define it—Unesco and other international organizations, national governments, civic groups, or dictionary compilers.

Studies like those carried out by Lind and Johnston (1986) point out that at the international level, Unesco's recommendations regarding how literacy and functional literacy should be defined may be grouped into three chronological periods. During the first period, 1945–64, the stress was on fundamental education, the need for community development, and the promotion of nonformal programs for adults and children. These programs were, in turn, supposed to have emphasized functional literacy but excluded numeracy.

During the second period, 1965–74, the concept of functional literacy was further refined to fit more precisely into the framework of linking literacy with economic growth and returns. The contents of literacy programs were, therefore, centered around the requirements of each economic project to be undertaken.

The Declaration of Persepolis in 1975 by heads of states from around the world, discussing the issue of worldwide strategies for education in the future, became a turning point with respect to literacy definitions and strategies (Lind and Johnston, 1986). Following UNDP's and Unesco's 1976 evaluation of the Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP), and inspired by Paulo Freire's radical pedagogical movement of the 1970s, literacy was critically reviewed and redefined. It was henceforth to be conceived of as a "political, human, and cultural process of consciousness-raising and liberation." Basic education for all children and adults was seen to be an essential part of the literacy movement. This third period influenced the design and development of several radically inclined literacy campaigns, a well-known example being the Indian Adult Education Program launched in 1977/78.

Apart from definitions of literacy evolved through high-level international literacy meetings, it was important to understand and define literacy

for myself, as an activist in the worldwide literacy campaign, and as one who sought to understand why, despite several decades of work towards a literate world, justice continued to elude masses of illiterate, underprivileged people. I decided, therefore, to begin by looking at certain basic, dictionary definitions of literacy. Literacy, or "the condition of being literate," is defined on the basis of various interpretations of the adjective "literate." Two main definitions of being literate are relevant for our present discussion. The first is "to be learned," which, in turn, is defined as "having learning," that is, a person with knowledge and who learns. Interestingly, this definition of "literate" makes no link between the state of being learned and the ability to read and write, or having access to and control over the written word.

The second, and more commonly employed definition of "literate" is "able to read and write." This definition clearly spells out that the condition of literacy is one in which a person is able to read and write. This is the definition of literacy that has formed the foundation of most countries' national literacy campaigns. The reasons why political decision-makers have tended to prefer this narrow definition of literacy over the broader one are, in my view, linked to both an economic and a political motive. Ever since the Second World War, concerns of national security and defense capability, and increasing stress on sophisticated technology, have dominated the list of development priorities of many countries, both developed and developing. Human resource development, with literacy as one of its basic constituents, is therefore assigned a relatively low priority. Resources made available for literacy missions are, in most cases, grossly inadequate for making people "literate" in even the restricted sense of being able to read and write. Given this orientation of development priorities away from the need for literacy, it is economically, organizationally, and administratively convenient to most nation-states today to define literacy in any but the most narrow sense of the word.

Perhaps the most important reason why most countries' literacy initiatives have ignored the wider definition of literacy which links it to the question of justice is the potential political threat represented by such a conception of literacy. Both in those countries where people do not in practice enjoy certain rights constitutionally guaranteed to them, and in those where people do not even enjoy these rights on paper, a definition of literacy that intrinsically involves raising people's political consciousness and quest for justice could seriously threaten the leadership's political legitimacy. I would argue, however, that it is precisely this broader definition of literacy which we need if the struggle against mass illiteracy is to be a meaningful one.

Millions of human beings in many parts of the world live their lives in conditions of stark physical and material deprivation. Barely able to eke out a living and fill their stomachs, the only "capital" they have to sell is their labor. And in order to have even one meal a day, they have to put in much more than the normal eight hours of work. The conditions of their existence are such that there is neither the time nor the incentive for learning or education in the accepted, formal, or structured sense of the word. In any case, for

the most part, even schooling at the elementary levels is nonexistent or non-functional. Thus, there is simply no environment of or for literacy. Almost nowhere in their daily lives do they actually find the need for literacy. That is, the ability to read and write, with no buses or trains to catch, no signboards or billboards to read, no letters to write or receive. There is a world which has been limited and circumscribed beyond belief. All talk of literacy as a right or as a tool of justice becomes meaningless unless the process of becoming literate is directly connected with enabling people to organize themselves to combat their immediate problems—lack of shelter, landlessness, oppression, and unemployment. Development must precede, or at least accompany, literacy. In the narrow sense, literacy thus becomes one of the lower priorities. The urgent need to define and broaden our notions of literacy hits us when we stop to consider the words of poor, illiterate, rural people from the Indian state of West Bengal, who ask why they should become literate.

What kind of people are we?

We are poor, very poor
but we are not stupid.

That is why, despite our illiteracy, we
still exist.

But we have to know
why we should become literate.

We joined the literacy classes before,
but after some time, we got wise.
We felt cheated. So we left the classes. . . .

What they taught us was useless.
To sign one's name means nothing.
Or to read a few words means nothing.

We agree to join the classes
if you teach us how not to depend
on others any more.

We should be able to read simple books,
keep our accounts, write a letter, and
read and understand newspapers.

One more thing . . .
Why do our teachers feel so superior?
They behave as if we are ignorant fools,
as if we are little children. . . .

We are not empty pitchers.
We have minds of our own.
We can reason our things,
and, believe it or not,
we also have dignity. . . .

Can literacy help us live
a little better? Starve a little less?
Would it guarantee that the mother

and the daughter won't have to share the same sari between them? Would it fetch us a newly thatched roof over our heads? ...


They say that there are laws to protect and benefit us. We don't know these laws.

We are kept in the dark.

Would literacy help us know these laws?

Would we know the laws that have changed the status of women? And the laws that protect the tribals among us? We want a straight answer.

Then we shall decide whether we should become literate or not. But if we find out that we are being duped again with empty promises, we will stay away from you. ...

These "illiterate," but "wise," men and women have defined literacy clearly and unambiguously in a way which allows for no alternative interpretations. Literacy must  be the capacity to empower them in ways which will meet their fundamental developmental needs. The issue that is being raised by marginalized groups the world over today is not why literacy, but what kind of literacy, when and for whom? I have focused on clarifying the concept of literacy as "power," "wisdom," and "learning" because all too often it is we, the so-called literates, who tend, in our arrogance, to equate illiteracy with ignorance, or, worse, with stupidity. Here again this is especially relevant in the case of women in view of the prevailing tendency to relegate women in general to the noncerebral intellectual sphere *vis-à-vis* men.

LITERACY AND GENDER—SOME ISSUES

Having established the basic premises relevant to our current discussion of literacy—assessing the global picture, the link with development and marginalization, the issue of justice—we need to ask more specifically why there is need for a special and separate focus on the issue of women and literacy. Is their quest for justice any different from that of men? If so, what are the factors that set women apart and demand special attention and action? As we begin an examination of these various factors, it is relevant to point out that there are vast differences as well as certain common factors which have an important bearing on the issue of literacy and justice in the context of women. Class, location, region, political system, each of these variables mean different parameters, frames of reference, and modes of intervention strategies. I intend to begin this section, however, by identifying what many agree is the one significant common factor in this entire discussion, namely, the power relations affecting the gender issue. Experiences at micro- and macro-

levels and the overwhelming mass of data all confirm the severely limited access of girls and women to educational opportunity and to basic literacy. In my view, therefore, central to any discussion on the reasons which keep 70 percent of women illiterate throughout the world is a thorough examination of the structural arrangement that serves to keep women subjugated—namely, patriarchy. It alone unites diverse women in their struggle for justice across the barriers of social and economic class, regional and national disparities.

Gender and Patriarchy: A Brief Overview

It would be broadly true to say that historically most societies have viewed the biological role of the woman, namely, the female ability to procreate and lactate, as her primary role. With the development of settled cultivation patterns in society, the woman began to be isolated in her reproductive and productive role at home. The institutionalization of both private property and marriage, and the male control over both, led inevitably to woman herself being seen as part of the private property of the male. Different cultures and societies through the centuries evolved their own specific codes of conduct and behavior which extended to every single sphere of a woman's life and activities. In effect, this meant that female behavior, mode of dress, freedom of movement, role and responsibility, access and right to learning, participation in public life, indeed every action, was determined by those who wielded power and control—the emerging patriarchs, the men. Women themselves were influenced to varying degrees by those very values which kept them subordinated, and often played an active role in perpetuating both feudal and patriarchal values through the family structure in particular.

Patriarchy—The Western Experience. Throughout Europe, male control over female access to literacy and learning continued in one form or other, visible or subtle, from medieval times to the industrial period. It was a commonly held view that a woman's social life, as well as her morality, could be endangered by "too much learning." Religion, culture, custom, and tradition in turn emphasized and reinforced women's low status and role in society, causing a systematic and insidious internalization of a low self-image, inhibiting any real incentive for learning on the part of women in general.

In modern times, rapid economic development, the spread of industrialization and capitalism in the West, provided the impetus for a better distribution of wealth and resources. This undoubtedly led to improved health, nutrition, increased incentives for learning, and therefore higher levels of literacy as well. In this new world, dissemination of information became a key issue and therefore demanded mastery over the written word, especially through the printed media. The imperatives of production of goods created the need for a vast supply of trained and literate manpower—which literally meant *manpower* because women were mainly excluded from the mainstream of economic productive processes. It is small wonder that the issue of

access to education and literacy became an intrinsic part of women's ongoing struggle for justice.

Patriarchy—An Asian View. In large parts of Asia, Africa, and other areas, too, economic exploitation and underdevelopment are to be found coexisting with deep-rooted feudal and patriarchal value systems which continue to hold sway over millions. Ancient cultures and religious systems in their turn have propagated and reinforced conservative and rigid stances and codes as to the role, function, and status of women in society. It is worth noting that in ancient India religious thinkers and law-givers, from Buddha to Manu the Law-giver, held and articulated very strong views regarding women which were for the most part derogatory. These have been quoted in a range of texts and treatises which continue to influence dominant social trends today.

Buddha (*Sullavaga* X 16) is reputed to have said to his disciple, Ananda: "Women are soon angered, Ananda; women are full of passion, Ananda; women are envious, women are stupid. That is the reason, Ananda, that is the cause why women have no place in public assemblies, do not carry on business, and do not earn their living by way [of] professions."

Again, the "Manusmriti," or the "Code of Manu"—one of the widest-ranging of Hindu legal texts—classified women with the Sudras, considered to be the lowest of the low in the Hindu caste system. These texts also laid down extensive and detailed norms and prescriptions for women which have pervaded thinking even today: "A woman should never be independent, but should remain subservient to, and under the surveillance of, father, husband, and son in turn."

What was true of India in ancient times holds good and is equally applicable in many a developing country today, albeit in specific cultural contexts. Take a look at this proverb from the Middle East: "Just as there is no donkey with horns, there is no woman with brains." Literature, folklore, and religious texts abound with similar beliefs reiterating the basic inferiority of women; and since women were not considered to have thoughts or opinions of any value, very little if any effort was made to educate them. This trend of thought is widespread even today in large areas of the developing world, where young girls are not sent to school, partly because of poverty and responsibilities at home, but partly because of the need to "protect" and keep them away from all harm until they are safely married at the earliest possible age.

It is interesting to note that together with these unambiguously negative attitudes towards women in popular beliefs and folklore, many countries have adopted extraordinarily progressive constitutional provisions where the rights to gender justice and equality have been forcefully protected by law, India being a case in point. Thus we have the paradox of negative and positive images of women being continuously interwoven through history and development at several levels, and which are reflected in present-day media, writing and so on, and lead to very confused public positions in gen-

eral. The reason for this brief digression into the nature of patriarchy and how it works in a range of societies through several ages is to reemphasize the extreme complexity of the issues of literacy and justice as they apply to women. To sum up, women have inherited a history of ongoing struggle against injustice in several forms and at several levels. There is the oppression of deep-rooted attitudes which operate against girls almost from the moment of birth. The sexual division of labor based on biology continues to be a factor, whether overt or covert, and the control of female sexuality and morality still remains a dominant theme. I strongly plead the case that women's quest for justice is synonymous with their struggle against patriarchy, which affects the very existence and survival of women in society under all political and economic systems, spanning both time and geographic boundaries.

LITERACY FOR EMPOWERMENT OR DOMESTICATION?

The question to be addressed is how and whether literacy programs and campaigns may or may not enable and empower women to take their rightful place in society and, by so doing, attain the goals of justice—social, economic, political, and educational. On one level it is being strongly argued by policy-makers that increased female literacy is the key to development, and will ensure better child care, nutrition, smaller families, and promote a better climate for learning. Today, the National Literacy Mission launched by the Government of India in 1988 is one of the most comprehensive campaigns, at least on paper. This document has an entire chapter entitled "The Relevance of Literacy," in which several studies are quoted to show the manner in which literacy affects human resource development. It is significant to look at the major headings under this because they indicate very clearly the dominant ideology which pervades the document:

- "*Children's participation in primary education increases dramatically*," which then goes on to discuss the role of "literate parents" in promoting primary education.
- "*Infant mortality goes down*," where we see tables indicating the link between high infant-mortality rates and illiterate mothers.
- "*Much greater success in child care and immunization*," which looks only at the role of the woman as a mother and how literacy is likely to increase her own receptivity to modern ideas of health care.
- "*Fertility rate declines*," where the major concern is that higher literacy levels might influence couples to adopt family planning measures more readily.
- "*Women's self-confidence and self-image improves*": "Through literacy women become aware of their social and legal rights, learn and improve income generating skills, acquire a voice in the affairs of the family and the community, and move towards equal participation in the processes of development and social change."

Analyzed from the perspective of justice for women, it is clear that this issue is purely a peripheral one, and the primary concerns are of the other side effects of literacy, so to speak, and their impact on the "desirable" national goals. I would therefore posit that the ideological underpinnings of such missions and campaigns are questionable, and by no means consonant with a perspective that seeks empowerment and emancipation for women.

We need only look at what education has meant to the average educated middle-class women in both socialist and capitalist systems, developed and developing societies, to realize that access to education and literacy does not automatically ensure justice. The middle-class woman often bears a double burden, whether as breadwinner or supplementary earner, in addition to bearing the brunt of all the traditional female roles of child-bearing, mothering, nurturing, and so on. Women's groups would contest the simplistic assumption that increased literacy and education have indeed brought these women justice in any meaningful sense of the term.

As for the poor and the marginalized women who work in agriculture and industry, barely receiving minimum wages let alone equal pay, for the most part their social and economic situation has remained unchanged, and in many cases it has worsened because of the negative impact of new technologies which have bypassed them. This generalization applies, whether evaluated in terms of access to education, child care, and health, or freedom from exploitation, be it sexual or economic or social. I would like to present the case study of a woman worker from a rural area in India, bearing in mind that the following story of Chintamma could be true for any woman from any other backward area of any developing country in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. Her case history sums up the kind of issues, the sequence of the debate, which is central to the question of literacy for women. Does literacy preclude development or does literacy follow development? Chintamma is a para-vet working in a small village in a backward and underdeveloped area in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Like millions of her sisters, Chintamma never went to school and she still cannot read or write. When a small nongovernmental organization began to persuade women to come out of their homes and involve themselves in programs of animal care and income generation, Chintamma was among the first to join. She has brought up her five children single-handedly ever since her husband died some years ago, leaving her a widow at the age of thirty-five. She owns a tiny patch of land, keeps a few sheep and goats, and has struggled to eke out a living. But Chintamma has a standing in the village which has no bearing on her economic or educational status, and therefore when she volunteered to join the para-vet training, many others were emboldened to come forward too. Chintamma exudes a confidence and strength that comes from having survived in the toughest possible circumstances. But statistically speaking, Chintamma is one among the approximately 280 million illiterate women of India—a statistic viewed by many with horror, dismay, and even shame. Yet Chintamma knows more about plants, trees and forests, clouds and rain-patterns than most of us "literate" ones. She knows how to heal the sick in her village

where no doctor comes; she knows when to sow and when to harvest; and she is present at the births and deaths of both humans and animals where her knowledge and experience are seen to be invaluable. It is said that Chintamma can interpret the signs in the environment to predict floods and drought—sophisticated meteorological forecasting systems have not yet reached her village!

Today, after four years as a para-vet, she feels that she is ready to learn how to read and write so that she can maintain an account book and keep a diary. She is not yet sure, however, as to the value of sending her children to the village school when they could be helping to augment the family's meager income instead.

In different societies, women have been motivated by a number of different impetuses to move out of traditional roles, to participate in public life, or to avail themselves of literacy.

For Agnes, living in Soweto in South Africa, it was the struggle for racial justice and against the inhumane system of apartheid that acted as a catalyst. Today she is determined that her children will go to school. She will learn to read and write because she sees herself using these skills to help her people in their historic struggle against white domination.

In Nicaragua, on the other hand, the revolution had already set the tone by putting a tremendous value on literacy as a tool for empowerment of every man, woman, and child. Women, however, came slowly to literacy, only after their own involvement and participation in the revolutionary movement began to increase and grow. In *Todos a alfabetizar* Jo Lampert writes:

As they began to gain power in the Revolution and over their own lives, they then felt the need to learn to read and write. They needed to take notes in meetings, to understand the graffiti and posters of the underground, to have a voice in the neighborhood civil defense committees, and sometimes to carry messages to the Front. They recognized that the opportunity to learn was a major part of what they had been fighting for.

Here the idea that literacy was a right (and not a privilege) was more than just mere rhetoric. The literacy crusade was a direct proof of empowerment.

LITERACY—THE IMPACT OF ORAL AND WRITTEN CULTURES

Somewhere in our exploration of the issues affecting women and literacy, we also need to bear in mind that women are affected more strongly and directly by the specificities of their particular cultural contexts. The cultures of ancient societies in Asia and China, in particular, had developed the oral traditions to a fine art. Much of the knowledge of religion and mythology was transmitted accurately through generations by women who had learnt through recitation and memory. Levels of industrialization undoubtedly hastened the importance given to the written word—and this in turn affected

the importance assigned to literacy as a desirable skill. It is true to say that an illiterate Asian village woman today would certainly not share, or even understand, the sense of shame about her illiterate status that her counterpart in North America or Europe might feel!

FUTURE STRATEGIES

In the foregoing discussion covering several aspects of the issue of women and literacy, I have looked at the question from as wide a range of perspectives as possible. The messages from women, whether from the Third World or indeed those marginalized in the First World, with regard to literacy and justice are both simple and direct: "Yes, we want literacy, but on our terms. It must be practical and relevant to our lives and needs."

To sum up, any crusade for literacy, and especially for women's literacy, will have to be considered as an educational as well as a political project. We have seen that the underlying causes for mass illiteracy lie in certain political and economic arrangements in society. The implications of patriarchy as a political ideology militating against women's quest for justice can no longer be ignored or underemphasized.

Translated into concrete strategies, therefore, literacy programs for women must include a drastic revision of content and materials so as to make them consciously "emancipatory" as opposed to propagating a "status quo" approach, as Nelly Stromquist spells out forcefully in her paper on "Empowering Women for Education," presented at the ICAE Conference at Kungälv, Sweden, in 1986.

Women's literacy programs will also need to differentiate between what Maxine Molyneux terms "practical gender interests" and "strategic gender interests." She notes that the former are short term and linked to immediate needs arising from women's current responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the livelihood of their families and children, while the latter address bigger issues such as the sexual division of labor within the home, the removal of institutionalized forms of gender discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. Molyneux observes that even in the case of a socialist state such as Nicaragua, the question of women's emancipation (i.e., the strategic gender interests) tends to be subordinated to a wider strategy of economic development.

Strategies for achieving justice through literacy may have to articulate and lobby for a much wider recognition of issues such as patriarchy and feudalism and other structural arrangements which oppress women and keep them subjugated. To date, largely male-dominated policy-makers have found it convenient to address the easier issues of management and technology of literacy campaigns and to avoid the complex ones of structural analysis.

There would be significant implications even for areas like resource allocation and management if the need for child-care facilities is recognized as being critical to all literacy and learning centers for women.

The implications for trainers and teachers and administrators of literacy projects for women are equally serious. A truly women- and justice-oriented approach would mean a critical appraisal of attitudes, values, content, and form. This still remains submerged in a sea of other, relatively unimportant questions.

Finally, and crucially, women themselves must be convinced that their place in the economic, social, and political life of their society and nation is truly equal to that of every other citizen. This equality must be experienced and not remain as a mere constitutional paper promise.

When literacy can enable every woman and girl to walk fearlessly and confidently, alone and with her head held high, then and only then will she opt for literacy voluntarily. Reading and writing skills would then truly become a weapon with which each woman could be empowered to read and write her world, analyze and understand it, and where necessary transform it. That alone is true justice.