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The political benefits of adult literacy

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The Political Benefits of Adult Literacy

By Nelly P. Stromquist

1. Introduction

This concise review of the research literature centers on one dimension of adult literacy: its political impacts. The connection between literacy and political engagement is predicated on the assumption that as individuals become more exposed to information about their environment, especially the public institutions and government, they will be more prepared to intervene to make such bodies more responsive to their needs. There is the expectation also that as individuals are engaged in political decisions about the myriad aspects of their lives, an intimate connection emerges between literacy and democracy. Few people could deny that entering formal relations with state and other modern institutions today requires print communications. Therefore, attention to literacy—defined as individual access to reading and writing—is an inescapable proposition.

The connection between literacy and political outcomes, however, is more complex than it seems at first face. The measurement of literacy, for instance, should not be limited to the skills of those who have just completed literacy programs because, if the presumed benefits of literacy are the ability to read complex material and express a variety of ideas in writing, then we are really interested not in initial literacy but in its development over time. And this invariably calls for access to and participation in formal schooling. Second, literacy programs are quite diverse in content, intensity, duration, and objectives. Some literacy programs, such as work literacy, focus on providing narrow skills suitable to particular job demands. Other literacy programs, such as family literacy, center on mothers as key agents to promote the teaching of literacy to their children. Yet other literacy programs focus explicitly on the development of citizenship and autonomous attitudes in adult learners. These programs are usually based on the consciousness-raising and dialogical approaches pioneered by Paulo Freire. Third, it is well known that political development at the individual level calls for persistent social exchanges and the accumulation of relevant experience over time. Consequently, it would be erroneous to measure the impact of literacy, or any other educational program,

immediately following program participation. Fourth, what we mean by the *political* varies, depending on the conceptualization of citizenship we employ. In many countries today there is a movement away from simple electoral politics to considering the capacity to participate in everyday engagement in community-level activities and decision-making. For many disadvantaged groups, this means not only gaining the pertinent information and having the desire to engage in political action, but also having the cultural and physical space to make political action real.

2. Defining Political Indicators

There is agreement that macro and micro levels of political action exist. At the individual level, several attitudes and behaviors are commonly recognized as political in nature: engagement in voting, seeking information about candidates or issues, participating in discussion of political issues, and affiliating with a political party or social movement (Torney-Purta and Richardson, 2004). These activities create varying degrees of tensions for participants, as voting or seeking political information, for instance, offer less potential for conflict than affiliation with a social movement. Instruments that simply measure the presence or absence of a given behavior may miss the different natures of some indicators.

Emphasizing macro indicators, UNDP (2002) proposes what it calls subjective measures (the degree of civil liberties, political and human rights, press freedom, voice and accountability, political stability, lack of violence, law and order, rules of law, government effectiveness and absence of corruption) and objective measures (year of last election, voter turnout, year women got the vote, share of seats of women in parliament, trade union membership, and ratification of rights instruments). Data on human rights abuse and other restrictions to freedom are not recorded with great precision. Consequently, most political indicators are gathered at the individual level and along the lines of UNDP's objective measures. Further, indicators considering such dimensions as social cohesion, social inclusion, social capital and human development, and sustainability, are relatively recent (Harkness, 2004).

The World Bank (n.d.) identifies several indicators to assess the governance at the national level. These indicators approximate macro indicators of political well-being and

include: quality of government service, level of corruption, accountability, political freedom, rule-based governance, and extent of judicial unpredictability. To date, there are no studies examining the relationship between literacy and these desirable macro-level political outcomes.

3. Data Sources

This review of the research literature covers studies conducted in both industrialized and developing countries. It relies primarily on large-scale studies meeting the criteria of high quality research: clear measurement of literacy and its political outcomes, detailed information about data collection and analysis, and valid conclusions. The review covers an extensive period of time, ranging from the Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP) in the late 1960s to research conducted by private and academic researchers in 2004. The study also incorporates evaluations of national projects in industrialized countries such as the U.S. and Canada; further, it presents studies that appeared in pertinent journals (including the *Adult Basic Education* and *Adult Education Quarterly* journals, which were examined from 1980 to 2005). Methodologically, the studies can be divided into quantitative and qualitative approaches; we review them within these rubrics.

3. 1. Quantitative research studies

Compared to qualitative studies, quantitative studies in literacy are relatively few though recent nationwide evaluations consider them the methodology of choice. The EWLP was a major effort to develop an effective approach to overcome literacy. The specific objective was to test and demonstrate the economic and social returns on literacy; as such, it deserves special mention. Some 15 EWLP national projects took place between 1967 and 1971, 11 of which were included in the final report publication. Different national projects examined different impacts and used diverse methodologies. One of the earliest quantitative studies was conducted in India under the auspices of EWLP. While the literacy program was conducted in some 100 Indian districts, assessment of impact was conducted only in two: Jaipur and Lucknow. Of particular interest is the Jaipur study, which compared individual changes between 1967 and 1974,

using a post-facto design with experimental and control groups (the actual size of the groups was not identified). The measures of political outcomes centered on four types of political participation: in cooperatives, youth clubs, political parties, and village councils. The Jaipur study found an association between literacy participation and all the types of participation in the study, but concluded that this association reflected only “a tendency” since the results did not reach statistical significance (EWLP, 1976).

Research on literacy learners in the United States have examined changes over a reasonable period of time. The study of four adult basic education (ABE) programs by Greenleigh Associates (1968), one of the earliest nationwide evaluations of its kind, found that literacy participants reported an increase in community participation. A later study by Becker et al. (1976) was based on a follow-up of participants after one to two years after completing their programs. It found that 84 percent of the former learners reported no change in their voter registration status; also 84 of the participants reported no change in community participation. Of those who did become registered to vote, only 5 percent said they had done so because of participation in the adult and basic education program. Of those who reported engagement in community participation, about 49 percent attributed change to literacy program participation.

Political behaviors tend to be distinct from political attitudes. Research by Boggs et al. (1979), based on follow-up data three years after program completion and a sample of 1200 ABE students in the United States with valid telephone address, resulted in 351 valid responses. This study found that although former ABE students scored higher than non-participants on being registered to vote and manifested higher levels of self-confidence over time, there were no significant differences with respect to having voted in the two electoral periods (1972 and 1976) covered in the study.

Two of the few quantitative studies of literacy impacts in developing countries were conducted by Carron et al. (1989) in Kenya and Kagitcibasi et al. (2005) in Turkey. The Kenyan study used a sample of 371 literacy graduates and 66 illiterates as a comparison group in five different rural locations in the country. Literacy graduates did better in a wide variety of behavioral and attitudinal indicators that included participation in elections and local associations. The Turkish study used an urban sample of 95 women in an assessment carried out immediately after program participation and a subset of 50

women in a follow-up after one year of program participation. It used various instruments, including a social participation scale (which measured behaviors on voting and participation in community organizations) and a self-efficacy scale (which measured the women's engagement in public sphere activities). Kagitcibasi et al. found that literacy program participants did better than non-participants in the social participation scale and that over time gains in self-efficacy increased considerably while gains in social participation increased only slightly.

Notable for the quality of the instruments and measurements and the sample size are the studies by Burchfield et al. in Nepal and Bolivia (2002a and 2002b), assessing a wide array of impacts linked to integrated literacy programs. These programs were defined as those that offered literacy training within efforts to improve women's social and economic development. These studies, primarily of a quantitative nature, compared women in literacy programs with non-participants and assessed the social and economic impacts over two years. Several indicators focused on political dimensions and give us a reliable look into changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding the political world. Below we describe them in detail.

The Burchfield et al. study of Nepali women (2002a) measured literacy through a skills test comprising 49 items and a quasi-experimental/control research design that comprised 773 women participating in literacy programs and 188 non-participants. The questions were functional in nature and were based on authentic measurement as they relied on real objects, pictures, and posters found in Nepali villages. The study obtained base data at the initiation of the first year and then measured literacy effects after one and two years of program participation. The analysis distinguished among the program participants by three levels of participation intensity in the literacy program (low, medium, and high). Table 1 summarizes the study findings regarding the political impacts of literacy after two years of literacy program participation, showing the specific items along the dimensions of political and community participation.

The data show that by the end of the second year of program participation, more women in the literacy programs (across *all levels* of engagement in the literacy program) than those not in literacy programs demonstrated political knowledge and thought they could serve as political representatives. More women literates also participated in

community groups and were aware of women's and girls' experiences with trafficking and domestic violence. In all cases, except one (voter registration), the more intense the participation in the literacy program, the larger the proportion of women reporting political changes. Although the study did not analyze whether the differences between experimental and comparison groups were statistically significant (the study centered only on changes over time within each of the groups—an important but not the crucial outcome), the differences between literacy participants and those not exposed to the programs present substantive and consistent differences in favor of the newly literate women.

Table 1. Political and Community Participation Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices—Responses in Percentages, Women in Nepal

Participants	Literacy Participants			Non-
	Low	Medium	High	
Political Awareness and Participation:				
Knows national policy on electing women representatives		81.7	84.1	95.4
78.4				
Knows minimum voting age		24.4	31.1	40.8
14.4				
Knows name of member of parliament in their area	24.0	41.6	52.6	18.6
Knows name of village development committee	83.6	84.8	94.4	77.8
Has registered to vote	96.6	94.6	94.4	93.8
Thinks is possible for her to become a local political representative		24.4	30.8	35.2
12.9				
Is interested in becoming a political representative		21.0	17.8	19.9
10.8				
Community Participation:				
Is member of a community group		32.8	40.0	56.1
16.0				
Participates in community development activities		12.4	15.9	21.4
12.4				
Has heard of girls' trafficking		4.6	8.3	9.2
6.7				
Has heard of domestic violence		41.2	45.1	46.9
40.7				
Participating women. N=773				
Non-Participating women. N=188				

Source: Burchfield et al., 2002a.

The Burchfield et al. study in Bolivia (2002b) used a similar research design, although the measurement of literacy was different as it consisted of a combination of self-reported skills and several measures of writing and reading skills, and the literacy program participants were treated as a single set. While the Nepali study examined literacy provided by state agencies, the Bolivian study focused on literacy programs offered by nongovernmental organizations. Table 2 presents the Bolivian findings after two years of literacy program participation.

Table 2. Political and Community Participation Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices—Responses in Percentages, Women in Bolivia

Participants	Literacy Program Participants	Non-
Political Participation:		
Belongs to a community organization 27.2	58.5	
Voted for local organization's leader	88.6	63.9
Ever participated in community or group activities	58.7	43.3
Awareness of Legal Protections for Women and Children:		
Knows there are laws against violence 67.0	80.2	
Knows there are laws against discrimination	45.5	32.1
Knows of laws protecting women and children in the workplace	39.5	30.8
Knows of law mandating equal participation of women in municipal plans and incorporating women's needs in such plans	63.3	61.6
Participating Women. N=716		
Non-participating Women. N=224		

Source: Burchfield et al., 2002b.

In both the cases of political participation and awareness of legal rights, a significantly higher proportion of women who participated in literacy programs than those who did not evinced after two years community participation and voting behaviors as well as knowledge of women-related legislation. That these gains materialized in actual political participation is surprising given the fact that women's obstacles to a fuller citizenship, such as time constraints, are not necessarily removed through the possession of literacy skills. What this suggests is that, as women obtain literacy skills, their ability to negotiate relations in the private sphere of the household to their advantage also increases.

The Nepali study by Burchfield (2002a) found that while newly literate women participated more in community groups, the reasons for *not* participating in community groups were similar for women in both the experimental and control groups. The primary reason, and consistently so, was lack of time. Another significant reason was the lack of community groups in the area. A third reason was "lack of interest." This set of reasons clearly reflects the persistence of the sexual division of labor, regardless of educational level. It also suggests that a vicious circle may develop around non-literate communities, as the limited development of social networks (i.e., the absence of community groups) may prevent new literates from exercising participating behaviors. The Nepali data also indicated that the greater political changes over all occurred among women with higher levels of literacy class participation, even though (as the researchers' noted) the content of the literacy programs on the violation of women's rights in Nepal was not a central part of the curriculum.

3.2. Qualitative research studies

Given the scarcity of systematic research using either quantitative approaches (with multivariate analysis and controlled variables) or experimental designs (with pre- and post-literacy training measurements), most of the evidence on the political consequences of literacy derives from qualitative studies in which participants self-report the extent to which they have benefited from the programs. Rather than considering qualitative studies inferior, Bingman (2000) argues for the importance of qualitative studies to understand meaning in people's lives. Qualitative studies are said to be more

sensitive than quantitative studies: In qualitative studies, learners report that literacy gains were important to their lives. In quantitative studies, gains measured in standardized tests tend to be small and in some cases, absent. Learning to write a simple note to one's children may have significant impacts on life and yet these may not register on most standardized tests (Beder, 1999, citing Heath, 1983). Ethnographic studies have helped significantly to locate literacy meanings and practices in the lives of people and thus produced valuable insights as to the actual functions of print literacy. The foci of qualitative studies, however, have been less on narrow impacts of literacy and much more on the uses and practice of literacy, literacy interaction in families, literacy demands of work, and experiences of adults as literacy students¹.

Egbo (2000) compared non-literate women to literate women (possessing varying levels of reading proficiency and thus formal education) in Nigeria. The study, focusing on 36 rural women through individual and focus group interviews, found that non-literate women felt their illiteracy had a negative impact on their self-esteem and that it prevented them from full participation in community meetings because others assumed they were not very knowledgeable. In contrast, literate women reported being confident enough to participate in community meetings, considered they knew their rights better than the non-literate women, and felt more confident to make autonomous decisions. A study by Archer and Cottingham (1996) found that women in literacy circles in Bhola Island in Bangladesh improved their confidence and sense of self-efficacy for action within the household but not sufficiently to become involved in any civic organization².

Freire-based literacy programs have been attempted in a variety of settings, from megacities such as Sao Paulo to small rural areas in El Salvador to towns in Mississippi in the mid-60s. Very few such studies have probed the political impacts of such literacy programs. The implementation of critical literacy, based on Freirean approaches that call for sustained and participatory dialogue and examination of one's social and political environment, has not proven easy (Stromquist, 1992; Purcell-Gates and Waterman, 2000). However, in the hands of a well-trained facilitator, it can lead to positive political

¹ See Robinson-Pant's overview for further discussion on how qualitative studies have been used in these papers, and the constraints faced by writers in using ethnographic data to assess 'benefits'.

² The question of self-esteem and increased confidence is also discussed by Farah (in relation to 'values', p 4), Patel (under section on 'literacy for individual and collective empowerment') and Robinson-Pant ('the empowerment effect', p 10).

results. An 18-month ethnographic study of rural women literacy participants in El Salvador, found that the neoliterates claimed a voice in community meetings and that several of them were able to engage in sophisticated sociopolitical analysis (Purcell-Gates and Waterman, 2000). A facilitator's account of the role of literacy in the promotion of voting behaviors in Mississippi states that the increased ability to read and write resulted in the voter registration of over 16,000 Afro-Americans and that 17,000 others attempt to register unsuccessfully given the political climate of the U.S. in the mid-60s (Rachal, 2000). Massive literacy programs, such as those in Cuba in 1961 and Nicaragua in 1980, have been conducted successfully for the purposes of political mobilization and incorporation of previously marginalized citizens into the new polity. In both efforts, literacy programs were embedded in other social and economic reforms³.

4. Self-esteem

Self-esteem, or one's assessment of one's worth, can be considered a personal condition that precedes social and political action. An individual's heightened sense of confidence can lead to incipient forms of political behavior; it functions as an invisible armor that prepares people to undertake behaviors that may introduce risks but also intended results. Accessing to public sphere decision-making appears to require personal attributes that permit the individual to develop feelings that one can influence one's environment—this implies a combination of sense of personal efficacy (which is developed through experience with political institutions) and self-esteem in the psychological sense⁴.

A national evaluation of literacy programs under the Adult Education Act in the United States found that 85 percent of literacy learners reported an improvement in their self-concept (Young et al., 1980, cited in Beder, 1994). Another national evaluation conducted over a decade later found that 65 percent of the literacy learners “felt better about themselves” after a three-year follow-up (Young et al., 1994, cited in Beder, 1994).

³ As Robinson-Pant notes in her paper on social benefits (section on ‘literacy plus?’) there is much evidence that literacy should be linked to other supportive measures and development inputs in order to sustain social or political change.

⁴ The psychological aspects of self-esteem in relation to literacy are analysed in Patel's paper.

Bingman (2000), who conducted case studies of 10 persons in adult literacy programs in the U.S. found that literacy learners tended to participate mostly in local forms of organization and reported greater self-esteem than they had before, responding “feeling better about myself” and “feeling like I’m somebody.” In Bingman’s view the “new opportunities or abilities to give voice to their convictions” afforded by the literacy programs were in part responsible for the participants reporting such changes as “I can talk better” and “I am not afraid to talk to others.”

Literacy participants’ increase in self-esteem has been reported in several international studies, including ethnographic studies of changes in women literacy learners in Brazil (Stromquist, 1997) and Nigeria (Egbo, 2000), as well as the Commonwealth of Learning Project employing literacy materials incorporating the use of computers in India, which followed learners over three years (Farrell, 2004). While methodologically, it may be suspected that respondents tend to convey socially desirable responses, this evidence of change in self-esteem should not be underestimated. The conscious expression of the participants’ experience usually emerges from the learners themselves with no particular prompting and rather reflects their own subjectivity.

The nation-wide study in the U.S. by Greenleigh Associates (1968) cited above also found that the longer the participation in the literacy program, the greater the gains in self-image overall. Although enhancing learners’ self-image and self-esteem are seldom stated goals of literacy programs, improved self-image is a common variable in outcome and impact studies.

A review of the literature conducted by Beder (1999) investigated the outcomes and impacts of adult education literacy programs in the U.S. as reported in the research literature from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. Beder’s work has made significant contributions to the understanding of common conceptual, design, and methodological problems inherent in the reviewed studies. Beder identified 115 outcome and impact studies (he defined as outcomes “changes in learners that occur as a result of their participation in adult education” and as impacts those “changes that occur in the family, community, and larger society as a consequence of participation”) (1999, p. 4). Of the pool of 115 studies, Beder selected 23 as “the most credible.” Gains in self-confidence were reported in 8 of 10 studies that examined this concept. Gains were inconclusive in

the other two studies, primarily because of the way the researchers reported their findings. Self-esteem gains were based on self-report, except for one case using an instrument. According to Beder (p. 69), self-confidence gains were reported as frequently as gains in reading (9 out of 9 studies), math (9 out of 10 studies), and writing (8 out of 9 studies) (p. 69). Beder concluded, “Of the evidence presented in the study, the evidence that adult literacy produces gains in positive self-image is the strongest” (p. 78).

As several researchers have remarked (Archer and Cottingham, 1996; Beder, 1999; Young, 1994, cited in Beder, 1994), self-esteem is a consistent outcome of literacy programs. What makes the self-confidence gains particularly surprising is that they are not explicit objectives of most literacy programs.

Self-competence, or the feeling that one can have autonomous agency, is linked to political participation and even to rudimentary forms of education such as graduating from an adult literacy program. Yet, it should be noted that there is no linear relationship between literacy and political participation. Different societies produce different levels of agency given variations in their social structures, the strength of religious beliefs, their gendered norms, ethnic conflict, and political institutions.

5. On the Development of Citizenship

In modern societies, literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, to active and passive participation in local, national, and global social life, and to the development and establishment of a sense of personal competence and autonomy.

Since literacy is fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in local and global social community, schools spend a certain amount of time on the provision of civic education. For a greater understanding of the political impacts of literacy on adults, it is pertinent to know what we have learned about the acquisition of political values and attitudes among younger populations.

As Torney-Purta and Richardson (2004) remark, the school is expected to provide content instruction about democracy, political history, voting, and government structures. In contrast, not all literacy programs seek to have political impacts and do not provide a uniform set of political information. In international studies of civic education in

schools, knowledge of political institutions and processes has been found to be a predictor of political participation (Torney-Purta et al., 2000). Consequently, research on the political impact of literacy must recognize that neither the objectives nor the content of specific literacy programs may have sought political outcomes. Illiterates typically have very limited political awareness given their lack of access to detailed and systematic information about their immediate and distant environment. The evidence for this is indirect, coming from cross-national studies that have examined the correlation between levels of education and political engagement (Almond and Verba, 1963) and education and modernity, which includes the sense of one's ability to control the environment (Inkeles, 1983). Although the connection between levels of education and political participation is not linear, it has been demonstrated that as individuals acquire greater knowledge and information, they also demonstrate a greater propensity to participate in various political practices.

It should be noted, however, that if literacy programs have no civic education content, it is not reasonable to expect participants on their own suddenly to acquire knowledge of democratic institutions and processes or skills in interpreting political information. It must also be remembered that literacy programs have been used not only to provide critical skills and thus a responsible citizenship but also to enable social control and political repression by authoritarian governments (Graff, 1987). The latter objective has been reached through use of materials that convey messages that glorify the regime and foster compliance rather than divergent views⁵.

Only recently has cross-national research on the impact of education on political behaviors been conducted. The most important study on this subject focused on democracy and citizenship: the IEA Civic Education Study, conducted in 1999 with 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries and in 2000 with 50,000 upper secondary students (17-19 year olds) in 16 countries (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Because of its magnitude and the meticulous nature of its research instruments and analyses, this study cannot be ignored. While the sample population was youths rather than adults, and the study centered on formal education rather than literacy, several of the IEA findings can

⁵ This could be compared to Farah's point (1b) about the tension between cultural values: she refers to the possibility that literacy could be seen to support traditional cultural values in certain contexts, in contrast to promoting 'modern' cultural practices.

be appropriately expanded to adults in literacy programs if we consider the emphasis on knowledge as a link to political action. Two findings with particular relevance to literacy are that (1) the more students were informed about democratic institutions, the more likely they were to plan on voting as adults, and (2) democratic practices in the classroom, fostering an open climate for deliberation of political issues, were the most effective means to promote civic knowledge and engagement among students.

A subset of the above IEA study (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2004), focused on four member states of the Organization of the American States (Chile, Colombia, Portugal, and the U.S.) and comprised 15,000 students. This analysis found that students with more years of formal schooling and more life experiences, namely the 17 year-old students, performed better than the 14-year-old students on the test of civic knowledge—a finding that supports the notion that political knowledge is accumulated over time. In all four countries and in both age groups, school factors such as an open classroom climate for discussion, confidence in school participation, and learning to solve community problems were related to students' expectations that they would participate in political and social movement activities as adults. In both age groups, one of the most significant predictors of intention to participate in civic activities when adults was the frequency with which the students read the newspaper (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2004). These findings suggest the cumulative nature of political knowledge, as frequent exposure to political accounts seem to develop an interest in such matters. They also highlight the need for encountering spaces where discussion with others and pertinent political content is addressed, and the crucial importance of reading habits and reading material that keeps a pulse with ongoing activities. To the extent that literacy programs for adults also replicate these conditions, it can be surmised that literacy programs will make a contribution to the establishment of civic attitudes and knowledge.

6. Gender and Citizenship

Important as literacy is as a resource for incorporation into society and established institutions, many countries still do not produce literacy statistics disaggregated by sex for the age group which has been targeted for literacy by the Millennium Development

Goals. Of the 171 countries providing literacy statistics, 77 have data on the ratio of literate females to males of ages 15-24. These countries represent 40 percent of the countries in the world, although they comprise 84 percent of the world's population (Harkness, 2004). Nonetheless, this means that literacy data central to current global policies are missing on 16 percent of the world's inhabitants.

The inclusion of women as citizens emerges as a crucial political issue. Citizenship for women, however, needs a broader definition so that it includes women's rights and is sensitive to conditions women face in everyday life. Since women's citizenship is aimed at social change, moving toward equality between men and women, it becomes essential to construct a notion of citizenship that not only includes electoral politics, politics of the public offices, and political campaigns but also the power and powerlessness in the private/domestic sphere that many women inhabit, some of them exclusively. Moreover, an amplified version of citizenship should recognize the centrality of social well-being beyond political participation and representation⁶.

A substantial body of evidence derived from many countries reveals that one of the most serious obstacles to political participation by women is their lack of time to engage in the public sphere, a consequence of the sexual division of labor that places women in charge of homes and families. The large-scale Torney-Purta et al. study (2001) found little difference between the civic knowledge scores of male and female students, which supports the contention that—in addition to other sociocultural factors—it is the scarcity of time rather than knowledge what accounts for the more limited participation of educated women in political activities. And, if we consider that women make the majority of adult illiterates, then we have a powerful confluence of lack of time and limited knowledge as major obstacles to political participation.

An explicit linkage between women and literacy for citizenship will require explicit attention to *content* and *context*. Content that addresses women's inequalities and their potential to redress them as well to conceive a new social reality will be necessary to literacy programs that seek political impact. A context that enables women to participate in settings free of fear and control, in which women can address issues now

⁶ This wider concept of citizenship is also explored in the paper on social benefits in relation to gender equality.

contested such as their sexuality and their reproductive rights, economic differences, and cultural subordination, will most likely make a significant contribution to the development of self-esteem. Settings in which women can relax while exploring through dialogue and information issues of their private and public world will likely require women-only literacy programs (Carmack, 1991). Such programs can be designed and implemented through reliance on women-led nongovernmental organizations, many of which have demonstrated the capacity to deliver successful literacy programs. Not every women-focused program, however, promotes emancipatory ideas. For instance, family literacy programs, based on intergenerational literacy transmission, tend to subordinate the importance of citizenship for women and confine them to traditional roles and relationship within the family or society (Luttrell, 1996).

7. Conclusions

The empirical evidence, even though there is no great abundance of research studies measuring impact on political participation, indicates that participation in literacy programs is associated with greater interest in national and community activities. Because of the expected linkages between literacy and subsequent further education, there is growing consensus among researchers and policy makers that traditional literacy training and basic skills training should be brought together (OECD, 1982) and that it would be more appropriate to think in terms of adult basic education rather than merely literacy (Lauglo, 2001). These perspectives recognize that literacy skills are more likely to become part of the individual's everyday practice if they are embedded in lives that exist beyond economic survival.

Since self-esteem is the strongest and most common outcome of literacy programs, perhaps it is time that policy makers and program designers incorporate self-esteem as a legitimate objective. This would facilitate the design of interventions that enhance self-esteem through effective selection of content and design of literacy classes. For women, in particular, these programs would create a safe space for collective discussion and friendships outside the confines of the home. Literacy programs contribute to the emergence of political attitudes and knowledge among women by

providing a space that allows women to occupy the public sphere without their husband's jealousy or suspicion⁷.

Many more studies need to be conducted on the subject of literacy, a topic that is not considered a priority in educational research. Following the observations made by Beder (1994), such studies should examine both the outcomes and the impacts of literacy. They should recognize the particular objectives of the literacy programs under investigation as well as the fact that political impacts and outcomes require a particular maturation time, which in turn will depend on specific national contexts. The studies by Burchfield (2002a and 2002b), by far the most carefully designed study of literacy impacts reviewed in this paper, show an impressive and consistent pattern of behaviors congruent with the development of citizenship practices. Other studies reviewed here further suggest that greater political changes are made through longer engagement in literacy programs.

⁷ The value of 'women-only' spaces is supported by Robinson-Pant's discussion (in the section 'Literacy plus?'), though she also emphasizes that men should be included in educational programmes if issues of gender inequality are to be addressed, particularly in the area of sexual health and family planning.

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