ERADICATING FEMALE POVERTY THROUGH ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING: A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING-PARTNERSHIP MODEL

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Abstract

This paper examines reasons for poverty among women and the failures of educational, government, and private sector organizations alone to address the problem. It suggests that collaborative learning in adult education and training programs provides contextualized job knowledge and changes conditions that perpetuate poverty. It examines partnerships with government and Non-Government Organizations that have reduced poverty and commends models that combine education with social and organizational interventions to produce lasting change.

KEY WORDS: Poverty, women, developing countries, training, adult education, collaborative learning, educational partnerships

INTRODUCTION

Globalized businesses have, on one hand, provided economic and social elevation to many people in developing countries, but have neglected to reduce poverty among the largest segment of the poor: women. This is reflected in the fact that the number of people with incomes of less than U.S. $1 a day increased by 100 million, and the numbers appear to be growing in every region of the world, except in parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific [Speth, 1998]. Income deprivation, however, is only one aspect of poverty. As the World Social Summit in Copenhagen concluded [Ending Poverty and Bringing Peace Through Sustainable Human Development, 1997], more than one indicator needs to be used to reflect the complexities suffered by those in poverty. To augment the income deprivation measure, the leaders developed a composite index of poverty based on data from 78 countries. This measure included three areas of deprivation: (a) deprivation of full life expectancy, which is measured by the percentage of people expected to die before the age of 40; (b) deprivation of knowledge, which is measured by the percentage of adults who are illiterate; and (c) deprivation in living standards, measured as a composite of access to health care, safe drinking water, and percent of malnourished children under five. Speth [1998] maintained that the forms of deprivation point to human rights violations and added that human rights is as important to eradicating global poverty as economic security. This paper adopts the Copenhagen Summit definition of poverty, contending that poverty is a complex concept rooted in social, economic, political, and educational conditions.

EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON WOMEN

Economic and human rights deprivations affect both men and women, but women are impacted in more pernicious ways. Women make up almost 70 percent of the world's poor. Women do 60 percent of the world's paid work but receive only one-tenth of its gross income; wages are only three-fourths of male
workers worldwide. They also perform most of the household and community work, which is largely unpaid. Moreover, they own less than 1 percent of the land, have limited access to educational and financial resources, and have less say than men in decisions affecting their future. They continue to face obstacles accessing education and health care and comprise 60 percent of illiterate adults. Violence, both in the workplace, in domestic contexts, and in armed conflict further reduces women’s equal participation in civic, social, and economic institutions. Hence, women not only earn less than men, but they also have more limited means of changing their conditions. [Ending Poverty and Bringing Peace Through Sustainable Human Development, 1997]. Women also face much gender-stereotypic discrimination as well, such as being prevented by statute from working night shifts and being perceived of needing protection from heavy and dangerous work, low expectations of commitment to long-term employment, and lower levels of basic education [Joekes, 1995].

ROLE OF ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Adult education has been a means for providing not only basic academic skills and job-related competencies, but also for emancipation [Lovett, 1988; Mayo, 1997; Mezirow, 1991]. Based on egalitarian values, adult education attempts to promote participatory democracy through consciousness raising and revolutionary social change [Lichtenstein, 1985]. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [cited in Pavlic, Ruprecht, and Sam-Vargas, 1995] called education, particularly adult education a right. Yet, according to the International Labour Organization’s Global Employment Trends for Women Brief [2007]

...almost 800 million adults have not had the opportunity to learn how to read and write, about two thirds of who are women. In addition, 60 percent of school drop-outs are girls, as they often have to leave school at early ages to help in households or to work. Moreover, there are often cultural restrictions that prevent girls from finishing even basic education, severely limiting their chances to determine their own future. ...Unfortunately basic education does not always translate into better employment opportunities. This is why it is important for women to continue to gain knowledge and skills beyond those acquired during youth. An underlying reason for the discrepancy in decent work opportunities between adult men and women could well be the lack of lifelong learning opportunities for many women. (p. 6)

LIMITATIONS OF ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Other conditions also affect the ability of adult education to release women from poverty. Adult education programs have trained individuals who already have sufficient employment skills. This often translates to providing advanced training to males with advantages of higher technical and professional skills as well as organizational status [Morrison & Juttering, 2005]. Adult education programs targeted at illiterate and impoverished women, moreover, are often limited to family care rather than employability [Malhotra & Mather, 1997]. Further, adult education programs are generic in that they do not include localized topics of interest, cultural and religious values and beliefs, and social class and linguistic content adaptations [Singh, 2000].

ASSUMPTIONS AND CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING TRAINING EFFECTIVENESS

Poverty is a complex condition that involves, as noted, not only insufficient funds for sustaining one’s own life, but also for fully realizing the rights to develop personal and social goals within a free and just community. Poverty is affected by natural as well as national, cultural, social, and religious barriers. Training for women in poverty must address the multiple conditions that impoverish and limit women’s full participation. This implies that training include multiple methods of promoting awareness, vocational skills and abilities, and advocacy.

Selecting training for enabling women to overcome the effects of poverty is based on several effectiveness criteria. First, effective training is based upon a needs analysis that views adults as capable of mastery of intellectual skills as well as varieties of personal and social roles [Knowles, 1978]. Effective training uses adult learning theories, such as involvement in developing learning format and outcomes,
use of life experiences, and collaborative learning [Bruffee, 1999]. Effective training is also tailored toward the particular cultural and social characteristics that comprise the training context [Lovett, 1988; Pai, 1990]. It creates a unique context and methodologies that address particular concerns and needs of participants [Tennant and Pogson, 1995]. Lastly, effective training allows for immediate application to specific contexts with support from training stakeholders and allies [Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2005].

The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women [INSTRAW] reviewed the Beijing Platform for Action Education and Training of Women after 10 years and made recommendations for governments, non-government organizations, and businesses for improving the access, quality, and support for educating women in poverty [Kirk, 2005]. The report noted that public, voluntary, and private organizations need to strengthen commitments to achieving the Beijing goals in seven critical areas:

(a) reducing discrimination to educational access and promoting retention of women through flexible childcare arrangements;
(b) focusing programs on marginalized groups;
(c) closing the gender gap in primary education, especially through education in literacy life skills, and technology;
(d) providing information concerning formal and non-traditional education, particularly vocational and technical training that offer higher paying jobs;
(e) providing an adequate and stable financial commitment to education, especially through bilateral and multilateral partnerships and at least 0.7 percent of the national gross income;
(f) targeting education to the poorest countries with low levels of gender equality in education, but which have demonstrated strong commitments to gender equity; and
(g) promoting lifelong learning, particularly in vocational skills and in reducing bias and violence toward women.

The INSTRAW report also noted several programs that had made important contributions to the Beijing goals. The author used these for guidelines for exploring types of programs that offered promise for using training as a means of eradicating poverty among women. The report identified several organizations which had developed effective programs combining training and education, literacy development, personal and community valuation, advocacy, resource utilization, and integration with economic livelihood. With these guidelines, an extensive literature review of existing programs was conducted and exemplary programs were identified.

IDENTIFICATION OF TRAINING MODELS: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review identified four models of training and intervening among women in poverty. A common model is provided by an international organization dedicated to human rights, peace, economic development, and education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization is perhaps the most extensive, offering not only training, but also research, policy, and advocacy services [The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2008]. A second model is training sponsored by a non-government, usually voluntary sector program, such as the Forum for African Women Educationalists [Forum for African Women Educationalists, 2008; Kirk, 2005] and The Global Human Rights Education Network [HREA, The Global Human Rights Education Network, 2008]. These organizations provide awareness education, policy influence, demonstration projects, and consultation. Country-provided training is a third model, often sponsored by governments, private sector or non-governmental organizations, and voluntary organizations. Often, training for women is part of a more comprehensive set of reform interventions, such as the localization of development through participatory workshops, government action planning, and partnership sponsors in Mauritius [Callikan, 2005]. Ghana’s Ministry of Education developed a Girl’s Educational Unit [GEU] that incorporated education in social capital development and which also developed community awareness and support for parity in education [Kirk, 2005]. Lastly, training may be sponsored by private as well as non-profit organizations but rely mainly on grass-roots efforts for design and development; MADRE, an international human rights group, is an example [Kirk, 2005].
UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization provides educational policy guidance, gender research, and forums. It also publishes training programs, such as the "Inclusion of Gender in Family Education" [Schachter and Zukernick, 2004]. Consisting of six modules, this training program emphasizes the importance of parent and caregiver gender values in raising children ages 0-8 years. The UNESCO published “GENIA: A Toolkit for Promoting Gender Equity in Education” [UNESCO, 2006] for teachers to assist educators and guidance counselors in addressing many of the social problems children and teens confront that affect learning. The “Gender Sensitivity” [Aksornkool, 2002] workshop in 10 sections is specifically developed for women. Intended for policymakers, adult educators, the media, and the public at large, the training program concentrates on personal values, gender roles, and techniques for introducing gender-sensitivity in education.

FAWE

The Forum for African Women Educationalists is a pan-African, non-governmental organization founded in 1992 to promote women and girls’ education in sub-Saharan Africa in line with UNESCO’s Education for All. Headquartered in Kenya, FAWE has chapters in 32 countries. Targeted toward the inclusion of girls, FAWE promotes policy advocacy at grassroots levels, develops research on educational best practices, develops and strengthens educational and business and non-profit partnerships, and seeks educational change in public schools. The organization not only developed a curriculum and teaching materials emphasizing the importance of educating girls in primary and secondary schools, but it also promoted community awareness through establishing localized Centres of Excellence throughout Africa [FAWE, 2008]

HREA

The Human Rights Education Association is an international, non-profit organization that supports training for women as a part of a larger mission to promote human rights. The training is conducted within a context of educating activists, educators, and community-building change agents. Although the organization holds an annual human rights conference, much of its training is conducted through online modules. Women’s rights appear as topics along with prisoners, children, refugees and displaced persons. The “Popular Education for Human Rights 2000,” for instance, is written for adult educators and contains topics relative to personal values (such as fairness and respect for individual dignity), responsibilities for building a civil society, confronting prejudice, and integrating empowerment education [HREA, 2008].

Localized Development in Mauritius

The United Nations Development Fund sponsored a workshop for a partnership of government, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and international donors concerning ways to eradicate poverty among women [Callikan, 2005]. The workshop provided an international view of the problem of female poverty, local socio-economic conditions influencing poverty, and an action plan for achieving goals. Following the workshop, the partnership hosted community-based, participatory workshops to identify specific targets of poverty reduction, used the community-derived recommendations for change as a basis for a formal action plan in the Ministry of Finance, and developed specific goals and milestones for action.

Girls’ Education Unit in Ghana

To provide parity in education through integrating gender sensitivity throughout national curriculum, Ghana’s Ministry of Education developed the Girl’s Education Unit. The curriculum features the cultivation of social capital, the status of women, development of self-confidence, the use of bargaining power, skills in decision-making, techniques for accessing resources, and knowledge of economic and political influences in policy and program development. The GEU has held workshops, conducted research and outreach programs, and has decentralized administration to local and regional areas. Through localized
GEU's, the Ministry of Education can promote community awareness, advocacy, networking, participatory action research, and collection of gender-segregated data [Kirk, 2005].

MADRE

Begun in 1983, MADRE advocates the advancement of women’s rights as human rights [http://www.madre.org]. Forming partnerships with community-based groups as well as private sector and non-governmental donors, MADRE integrates training in human rights with several areas of personal, social, and economic knowledge. In Chiapas, Mexico, for example, MADRE incorporated training in human rights with the collective rights of indigenous people, the reproductive and sexual health of women, political participation, and food security. In Guatemala, MADRE provided computers and taught a workshop in computer literacy along with human rights training [Kirk, 2005].

WACRA DISCUSSION

During the June 2008 meeting of the World Association for Case Method Research and Application at Napier University in Scotland, the author facilitated a workshop to examine the four models of training and education to reduce poverty among women. The author divided the fifteen delegates into three small groups by differences in gender, age, and country. Most of the delegates were faculty members or students from academic institutions in Latin America, Asia, Europe, AND the United States. The author asked delegates to examine the four models, comment on their strengths and weaknesses in relation to poverty reduction, and suggest additional education programs that might comprehensively address the role of education. Delegates were asked to use a Nominal Group Technique [Van de Ven & Delbecq, 1974] in generating as many creative solutions as possible within a 30-minute time period. Each small group selected a recorder and spokesperson, who wrote down common group ideas and themes on flip chart paper and presented them to the larger group. Following the small group presentations, the author collected the flip charts and identified cross-cutting themes. The workshop did not allow sufficient time for the author to provide feedback and further discussion of the generated ideas, however. A summary and discussion of the themes follow.

Delegates generated 37 different ideas regarding training content areas they believed important in helping women out of poverty. Common themes included incorporating family education skills, health education, basic skills training in reading, mathematics, and computer literacy, and more collaboration among governments and non-governmental organizations that links education with poverty reduction. Delegates believed that multiple approaches needed to be taken to reducing poverty among women, including reforms in public education, extending education into the communities where women lived, and in government policies aimed at improving the social, educational, political, and economic status of women. The discussion corroborated published research studies of successful adult education and training programs that have used multiple methods and strategies to address female poverty.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING A MULTI-METHOD EDUCATIONAL MODEL

From a review of literature and discussion of reducing poverty among women, several important implications for training emerge. Broadly speaking, these include three key areas: (a) the need for training to focus on providing more than skills-based education; (b) the need for multi-sector institutions to join in foundational social, economic, and political change; and (c) the need to embed adult education and training topics in public school curricula to promote long-term change in attitudes, values, and practices concerning women’s status.

EDUCATION BEYOND BASIC SKILLS

Because poverty as defined in this paper includes economic dispossession as well as depredations in life expectancy and in knowledge and skills, educators need to incorporate topics that address multiple dimensions. Tailoring a curriculum must also take into account the fact that poverty is related to local conditions as well as deeply-rooted social, economic, political, and religious attitudes and values. What may be a valid curriculum for women in Chile, for example, would not be equally as correct for
Bangladesh or for South Africa. In addition, a curriculum for women needs to promote skills for learning how to learn: how to solve difficult problems or how to foster economic interdependence rather than dependence. A curriculum also should provide health literacy education for oneself as well as others. Moreover, a curriculum needs to contain topics related to knowing one's human rights and how they may be protected.

Developing a tailored curriculum to address multiple facets of poverty among women can be done through an analysis of local, national, and regional values and beliefs that affect women. This might be done through a survey supplemented by participant interviews and observations to obtain a complete estimate. The assessment should compare normative values and attitudes towards women in relation to larger community social values. The research should also feature a way to examine the flexibility of values and attitudes, particularly in traditional societies. For example, in some traditional societies, in which the roles of women are explicit and proscribed in laws and customs, women have been allowed to pursue professional goals and work outside the home. In other societies, such crossing of business and professional lines is legally punishable. In societies having more openness to change, education has more opportunities to address many root causes of poverty. In less open societies, educators may have to work with top-level leaders of various institutions to influence change.

**EDUCATION WITH LEGAL AND POLITICAL POWER**

Change across social, political, and economic sectors requires cultivating long-lasting and widespread support from formal and informal leaders. This often involves tapping networks of power and influence among actors having discretion in allocation and distribution of resources. In developing educational programs that reduce poverty among women, leaders should identify key points in the networks of power and influence. Sources may reside in formal positions, such as Ministers of Education or Secretaries of Treasury, but more often, they emanate from informal leaders who have strong influence in arranging or in blocking resource decisions. Identifying leaders through a social network analysis can promote reform through legislation backed up by resource commitments.

Additionally, adult educators and trainers can facilitate informal change at national, regional, and local levels through engaging various social institutions. Some central points of contact might include family-based activities, schools, religious organizations, and businesses. One influence strategy is appealing to higher purposes in economic empowerment of women. Educators may point to the need to educate the poor, especially women living in poverty, as basic human rights. Being critically aware of human rights violations can spur action, as Freire [1970] demonstrated. Moreover, educators can demonstrate that alleviating female poverty produces economic gains which benefit communities as a whole and extend into future generations. By pointing out economic and social advantages to supporting women's training, educators can promote a multiplier effect. By supporting education of women, who carry a disproportionate share of poverty among nations, community leaders will facilitate increased financial well-being of men and improve the social and economic capacity of children.

**Education for Lasting Improvement**

A common limitation of training is its short-term outlook. Educators frequently assume that a limited number of training programs will attain complex goals. To achieve larger aims of economic and social empowerment of women, topics from workshops need reinforcement and elaboration from public school education. In schools where values, beliefs, and actions take a proactive role in providing girls as well as boys skills for economic contributions, awareness of human rights, health and literacy education, and jobs, local educators can promote social change. Beginning with young students, educators can work towards the reduction of biases as well as promote critical thinking about the social roles of men and women.

Additionally, training can augment skills development through developing a comprehensive program over time. Based on a needs assessment from intended participants and community leaders, trainers may develop a series of in-depth topical workshops. Some sample topics might include economic competencies, human rights awareness, family literacy, health promotion, and employability skills. Further, trainers may elicit support from governments, businesses, and non-government organizations for providing scholarships or reduced attendance fees for women participants. Funds might also be used to
assist with child care expenses and household responsibilities while women are in training programs. By integrating multi-purpose, multi-year educational aims, training can facilitate lifelong learning.

SUMMARY

The use of adult education and training programs has much promise in reducing poverty among women, who account for nearly 70 percent of the world’s indigent. To alleviate poverty, defined as deprivations of life expectancy, knowledge, and living standards, adult education and training can employ learning and change strategies at multiple levels of social, economic, and political levels. The paper has described models of successful adult education and training programs. It has also suggested some obstacles affecting deep-seated change. Among the latter are insufficient funding, lack of economic and political power to support training and education, topical irrelevance (not addressing specific social, economic, political, or religious mores and practices affecting localized conditions), and lack of skills for employment.

Studies of adult education and training that have reduced poverty among women have shown engagement of formal leaders in positions of power as well as informal leaders who exert much influence over program funding decisions nationally and locally. Effective adult education and training programs reduce female poverty, moreover, by working with such leaders to create and enforce human rights legislation. Further, adult education and training leaders help secure long-term effects of change in empowering women by working with local public schools to integrate curricular aims. In particular, curricula that emphasize the positive value of female contributions to social and economic progress have the effect of promoting economic well-being of both males and females and for future generations. Training can fortify aims as well by promoting lifelong learning through multiple-year, multiple-topic workshops.

Delegates to the 2008 WACRA meeting identified similar conditions that affect female poverty and suggested multiple methods for addressing it. The use of collaborative problem solving among educators, community representatives, and business, government, and non-government leaders will alleviate many of the conditions that dis-empower women and increase overall world impoverishment. Facilitating these vital cross-sector discussions and influencing taking follow up action is a critical role that adult education and training can play.

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