



Adult Learning: An Alternative Gateway to Women's Improved Participation in Children's Education in Lango Region, Northern Uganda

Judith Abal Akello^{1*}
Evelyn Lutwama-Rukundo²

¹Department of Commerce and Business Management, Faculty of Management Sciences, Lira University, Uganda.

Email: judithakello@yahoo.com

²School of Women and Gender Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda.

Email: lutwamarukundo@gmail.com

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(* Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This research explored the contribution of Functional Adult Literacy training (FAL) and what it did to women's involvement in children's education in Apac District. The main objective of this study was to explore whether and how women participants in Lango Region supported their children's education from the skills acquired from FAL training. A study of 7 participants based on qualitative interpretive framework intended to examine the benefits reaped by FAL-trained women after their positive perception and support to children's education. Using individual in-depth and key informant interviews based on qualitative content analysis, the study indicates that women trained in FAL became active agents of their socio and economic development. The study was influenced by Kabeer's socio-economic perspective and Freire's literacy perspective, both of which emphasize the importance of conscientisation in making marginalized non-literates actors of socio-economic progress. Women who participated in FAL obtained abilities that vividly improved their lives, according to the conclusions, which were based on facts or witnessed evidence inductively derived from the participants. Furthermore, the women gained a better understanding of their role and influence on their children's academic achievement, perseverance, and success as a result of the practical skills. Therefore, this study recommends that key stakeholders like, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, global supporters, (Non-Governmental Organisations) NGOs as well as Civil Society Organisations should prioritise in supporting putting into practice FAL training.

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1. Introduction

According to UNESCO (2015a), access to education is a human right during life time. The debate by the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, Incheon Declaration as well as the Education 2030 Framework for Action agreed that all women, girls, men and boys must acquire basic functional literacy and numeracy skill for individual and communal development. Therefore, the forum unanimously recognised on an equal opportunity and importance of education that, all ages and adults should be supported in literacy skills and to continue learning through many and flexible ways as well as entry points.

Freire (1970) have as a result suggested functional literacy as the means through which the quality of a person's life and ability to make informed decisions about life can be improved. Uganda government introduced functional literacy between 1983 and 1989 under the guidance of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) that played a major role in spearheading, revamping and co-financing FAL training to improve socio-economics lives of adult populace (Okech & Carr-Hill, 2001). The FAL programme that was implemented in 8 districts in 1992 was to be implemented across the country.

Globally, whereas basic skills in reading and writing have been a priority on the programme of development over the previous years, the latest statistics show that in connection with 750 million adult populaces, 473 million (63%) of women still lack basic literacy skills (UIS, 2017).

Gendered literacy trends differ across different countries. Based on the previous UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) estimation report, the literacy rate for Kenya, approximation of 2015, was at 81.1% for men and 75.0% for women, while in Tanzania, the rate was estimated to stand at 75.9% for men and 65.4% for women. In addition, Uganda's literacy rate was projected by UIS at 85.3% for men and 71.3% for women. All the three countries indicate a lower literacy rate for women than for men.

Turning to Uganda, at regional levels, disparities in rates are even broader. However, recent report about literacy rate has only focussed on national level (UBOS, 2016). Nevertheless, based on the previous (UBOS, 2013) report, the literacy rate for Central region excluding Kampala was at 84% for men and 81% for women. While in Eastern region, the rate was reported by Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) to stand at 75% for men and 60% for women. In Western region, UBOS report indicated 77% for men and 65% for women. In Kampala city, the rate revealed 95% men and 90% women. Of all the regions, the report indicated that Northern Uganda where Lango Region is located registered literacy rates of 77% for men and 52% for women.

The above scenarios are not limited to Uganda. Studies show that when there is any reduction in family financial resources, women more than men are most likely to be targeted for exclusion from formal education as a means of cutting costs (Somerset, 2009). Women's discrimination in accessing formal education has adverse repercussions on their literacy rates and subsequently their socio-economic survival. For instance, Stromquist (2016) argue that women with no literacy skills earn low salaries, perform harsh manual tasks for long hours and are expected to take care of more domestic work and child rearing.

Women's non-literacy status inhibits them from meeting most essential needs, realising their rights fully as well as participating in global socio-economic development. Ester Boserup (1970) a distinguished Danish feminist and economist pointedly observes that despite their contribution to agriculture and industries, women miss many development opportunities due to being non-literate. She highlights that the bias against non-literate persons in development policies and processes has greatly disadvantaged and segregated many African women from mainstream benefits. Women's lack of literacy skills in comparison to men have been linked to the high levels of poverty they experience, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Boserup, 1970; UNESCO, 2006).

In the previous 20 years, countrywide and global discussions on high levels of women's non-literacy status and poverty have compelled specialists in development to deliberate on incorporating them into the process of development of countries (Olaleye, 2008). These discussions have showed that a significant development prospective for women is locked-away in the 63% of the non-literate persons worldwide. As a result, to unravel women's potential and decrease on a huge loss of socio-economic opportunities for humanity, Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) would be used as an opening to improve women's socio-economic lives (Stromquist, 2009).

An analysis from UBOS (2017) of some specific socio-economic characteristics on area specific profiles–Apac District indicates less improvement in the socio-economic lives, particularly the women. For example, based on the previous UBOS report on Apac district, non-literacy status for individuals aged 18 years and above stand at 15.2% for men and 38.0% for women. Hence, FAL should be used as an opening to improve on marginalised women's individual progress (Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). This article therefore focuses on the benefits reaped by FAL-trained women after their positive perception and support to children's education.

2. Literature: An Overview

While UNESCO (2006) emphasises on the importance of women's literacy in addressing gender inequality, globally, only 88 adult women are considered literate for every 100 adult men. Although literacy is vital for the populace to participate in society, the goal of halving global non-literacy rates by 2015 has been missed (UNESCO, 2015b). Consequently, men continue to be more literate than women in every country in the world. Significant low Gender Parity Indices (GPIs) in adult literacy has been recorded in South and West Asia (0.66), the Arab States (0.69), and sub-Saharan Africa (0.76).

The key benefits of literacy in society include building a person's confidence and self-esteem; wiping away ignorance, political apathy and encouraging mutual understanding and cooperation among the various strata of society (UNESCO, 2006). Literacy is significant to an individual's socio-economic development. Above all, education or training is recognised on the grounds of continuous learning process and being updated on knowledge and skills. Therefore, when one becomes literate, his or her choices expand.

Literacy has been associated with women's participation in children's education. More importantly, literate women are more likely to serve as financial sponsors, act as a link between school and the community and generally monitor their children's schoolwork since they stay at home most of the time (Njie, 2013). Recent evidence suggests that, based on family attachment, women often take more care about their children compared to men (Aljohani & Alajlan, 2020). Aljohani and Alajlan (2020) argued that, women's adult learning enhances their ability to manage their children and respond to their questions or enquiries. Similarly, previous study by some adult educators indicate that female learners and their children have the opportunity for social

contact and support in the family literacy programmes (Prins et al., 2009). Prins et al. (2009) note that programme personnel believed that the formation of strong, supportive relationships helped women stay in the programme because they develop “*a sense of community*” and “*belong to something*” (pg. 343). In addition, acquired literacy skills is a powerful tool of stimulating parents to participate in literacy training, have the capacity and confidence to guide their children on the importance of education for the success of their future (Oxenham, 2008). It has been documented that women’s enhanced understanding of the importance and success of their children’s education is associated with their literacy skills (Ozoemena, 2013).

Studies on Kenyan adult women have shown that family education background is significant to parental involvement in children’s education (Gatua, 2014). Gatua’s report is indicative that literacy status of particularly the women is a powerful tool to participate in the education of their children, improve their future socio-economic status as well as for women themselves. Previous study conducted in the state of Odisha in India found that literate mothers participated in guiding their children on homework or routine learning at home, while non-literate women did not take part in their children’s education (Panda, 2015). Panda also discovered that while non-literate women played the primary role as a disciplinarian, for example, sitting near a child and ensuring that he or she is reading something, they had less ability to understand the alphabet. In line with Panda, many women aspired to acquire reading and writing skills in order to support the education of their children. The above report shows that non-literate women lack confidence and experiences to support their children’s school work and success through the cycle of education, unlike their educated or literate counterparts who are better positioned to monitor and support their children’s education.

Previous study conducted in Moyo district, North western part of Uganda has indicated that both parents regard their literacy skills as a tool for influencing education cycle of their children as well as for overcoming poverty in their families (Drajeaa & O’Sullivan, 2014). According to Nyamugasira, Angura, and Robinson (2005) similar to the studies reviewed above, actors such as Literacy Adult Basic Education (LABE) in Uganda found close links between the literacy skills of parents and increased parental support to children. The above findings suggest that lack of literacy is linked to reduced parental support to their children.

2.1. Theoretical Groundwork

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are based on Freire’s literacy theory and Kabeer’s agency theory. Freire’s teaching method highlight that adult literacy could contribute to the social transformation of the unjust power structures of societies through, identification of pertinent issues, analysis and coming up with how adult literacy can transform socio-economic lives (Freire, 1970). Kabeer (2005) agency theory is line with Freire’s theory that brings on board a declaration of women’s engagement on transformative development as active not passive agents. Besides, Kabeer (1999) argued that bridging gender gap requires changes that serve women’s strategic gender interests, for example, access to adult learning opportunity. The theoretical underpinnings highlighted above thus explain the significance of FAL to women. In line with Freirean theory, agency theory emphasises individual and collectivism through the notions of “conscientisation” as well as dialogue as tools for making marginalised people, particularly the women agents of social and economic change while participating in children’s education. Understanding the experiences of women’s FAL skills through the lens of agency indicate that their capacity to question as well as challenge the male-controlled structures that reproduce restrictions and discriminations in their lives is based on skills learnt from FAL training (Kabeer, 2005).

3. Methodology

Study Design: This study employed qualitative interpretive process in a case study research design to explore how women’s participation in children’s education is improved through FAL training. Denscombe (2014) contends that interpretivism is concerned with seeing “*social reality as something that is subjectively constructed by people’s thoughts and actions*”. Thus, social researchers must always be part of the social reality being explored and interpreted. Therefore, the potentials of using qualitative interpretive framework in a case study research design was more suitable to explore the experiences of women who had benefited from FAL.

Study Population and Sampling: The research women beneficiaries of FAL programme in Apac district, Lago Region. The discussion on this article focuses on 7 participants purposively selected (5 women participants who started out as non-literates but later joined and trained in FAL and 2 Key Informants) both in the rural and urban setting. The Key Informants comprised Community Development Officer (CDO) from the sub- county level - the overall coordinator of FAL training programme at a sub-county level. In addition, a FAL Programme Instructor or trainer was also purposively selected and interviewed.

Ethical Considerations: There was no ethical issues in this study. The researcher obtained introductory letter and permission to carry out this research which minimised the risk of participants being suspicious and demanding. The research objectives were clearly delineated and articulated to the participants.

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

This study used in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, non-participant observations and documentary reviews to collect data. A face-to-face interview was conducted using open-ended questions from

an interview guide. The in-depth interview with the two Key Informants (CDO and a FAL instructor) took place using one-on-one conversation with an interview guide and observation checklist to avoid being unfocused and to improve on the reliability of the data collected. Triangulation of methodologies allowed me to double-check data gathered using one approach against data collected using another, resulting in a richer set of data in a case study research design.

The qualitative data was coded using qualitative content analysis for Key Informant and in-depth interviews. The researcher generated three key themes or categories from the data which include: perception of children's education, guidance responsibilities and support to children's homework.

4. Findings and Discussion

Women's involvement in their children's education has been discussed in the following three dimensions, namely, perception of children's education, guidance responsibility and support to children's homework.

4.1. Perception of Children's Education

Findings revealed that FAL played a key role to women's awareness on the value of children's education. For example, Apulo, a 42-year-old woman, peasant farmer as well as produce dealer explained that:

... I stopped looking at them as a source of labour for farming or baby-sitting. I have now educated the children through short trainings because of being trained in FAL and this has currently helped in filling the gaps in my family. My educated children for instance, now help me to buy soap, sugar, support siblings and above all, it makes the family to eat well by balancing our diet. This makes me proud of having sent a child to school. Sending a child to school is also like a pension, because she helps to carry some of my burdens and difficulties...

Apulo's statement that "I have now educated my children..." indicates that the skills of reading, writing and numeracy improved the women's change in perception and high esteem to support their children's education. Her voice is in line with [Cun \(2022\)](#) argument that reading and writing with the children were significant family literacy practices that was linked to women's high values and perceptions in education. As a result, family literacy practices could empower their children to have optimistic futures. Her statement is in line with [Freire \(1970\)](#) literacy theory on conscientisation or awareness from the surroundings and the overriding socio-economic structures that oppress women. This implies that sometimes women do not support their children's education out of unawareness and would need some inspiration. On the other hand, it means that mothers perform a big role in the educating their children, especially if their literacy status is enhanced. Her argument that "... this has currently helped in filling gaps in my family" implies that education of children is significant and is likely to contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty in their families in the future. This finding tallies with studies among young adults in Greater Jakarta which argued that "breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty requires first breaking the intergenerational cycle of low education" ([McDonald, Son, Utomo, Utomo, & Hull, 2009](#); [McDonald, Son, Utomo, Utomo, & Hull, 2013](#)).

A key informant, who is a FAL trainer as well as mid-wife in her 43 years shared more benefits of positive perceptions and improved support to the education of girls and boys. She noted that "[w]omen actively paid fees for boys and girls equally. For example, one of the FAL graduate has paid the daughter's fees for Senior One. She has ensured her daughter does not drop-out after Primary Seven in favour of marriage".

A FAL trainer's expressions on equal payment of fees for both boys and girls are indicating that the reading, writing and numeracy skills acquired from FAL enhanced women's prior high regard for their children's education, without discrimination between the boys and girls. The aspect of high regard suggests that women developed a positive perception, which in turn enabled their children, both boys and girls to succeed. This attitude resonates with [Ozoemena \(2013\)](#) argument that women's better understanding of the importance of their children's education is linked with their literacy status. Therefore, FAL-trained women gained awareness on the value of educating their children which [Freire \(1970\)](#) refers to as conscientisation of people through adult training.

Contrasting the beneficiaries' awareness of children's education prior to FAL training, shows how inability to reading, writing and numeracy affected non-literate's women negative perception of education. This point is evidenced in Apulo's exposition:

Prior to FAL training, I marginally participated in the education of my two sons and one daughter. I made them to drop out of school because they had to help me with gardening work. I threatened to chase them away from home if they did not listen to me. They had no choice but to remain at home. I lacked the understanding that I was ruining the future of my children...

Apulo children's education is influenced by their family's perception of the importance of education. A mother's non-literate status and low opinion of the value of education contributes to her children's failure to go through the cycle of formal education. Thus, Apulo was ignorant of the value of formal education. [Panda \(2015\)](#) argues that non-literate women lacked the understanding to support their children through the cycle of education and craved for adult learning to support the education of their children ([Simoncini, Pamphilon, &](#)

Mikhailovich, 2017). In that regard, lack of understanding was a hindrance to development. Apulo's negative agency was manifested when her action caused her children to drop out of school (Kabeer, 1999).

4.2. Guidance Responsibilities

Findings revealed that women had a positive result with their children's education. For instance, Apilli, a 53-year-old woman, a farmer and small trader expressed that, "*FAL acted as an eye-opener. My son who listened to my guidance completed a short vocational education. He is now a builder, and he generates income through construction. At the same time, he supports his siblings*".

While supporting Apilli's voice above, a CDO and a coordinator of FAL programme at a sub-county level, who is 34-years old attributed the trends of women's success to the education guidance which they give to their children. He shared his personal experience below, of women who have benefited from FAL training: "*I completed my studies up to Bachelor's degree because my mother who attended FAL encouraged me to study hard and be successful in future*".

The revelations by Apilli and a Community Development Officer about the mother's guidance and children's completion of education indicates that reading, writing and numeracy skills improved the women's earlier inter-personal relations with their children. Also, they indicate that reading, writing and numeracy skills improved their ability to influence the children's perception of schooling. The accounts show that great achievements in the lives of women are derived from their opportunity of participating in FAL. The benefits of women's FAL training indirectly spills over to their children as seen in the expressions like "*...he is now a builder*" and "*I completed my studies up to Bachelor's degree ...*". The children's success in turn brings hope as depicted in statements like "*he supports his siblings*" and "*be successful in future*". Apilli and a CDO's expressions imply that women's reading, writing and numeracy skills influenced educational outcomes as argued by Gatua (2014) and Oxenham (2008). The participants' experiences above tally with Ozoemena (2013) report that women's better understanding of the importance of their children's education is linked with their acquired literacy skills. This shows that literate mothers are now aware that educated children uplift the family from poverty. Also, it shows that women trained in FAL are now active agents in transforming their socio-economic status. Both of these are in line with the theoretical perspectives in Freire (1970) and Kabeer (2005).

Contrasting the above views, prior to FAL training non-literate women experienced difficulties in guiding and managing the education processes of their children. For instance, Corina a 43-year-old woman, peasant farmer and child protection member explained:

I have a child who refused to attend school. I was powerless and did not know how to handle him because he would yell at me saying that I am also uneducated and that as far as life is concerned, I know nothing. He used to talk to me like this as he walked away.

Despite Corina's non-literate status, her desire was to educate her child. Corina's narration "*I was powerless*" indicate that because she was non-literate, the child did not respect her views, neither did her child see her as a role model. This made Corina feel powerless and unable to influence her child's decisions. This case suggests that non-literate women required reading, writing and numeracy skills to boost their competence in engaging with their children's education. Corina's failure to influence her son into a successful literate state suggests that the cycle can be repeated in her son's life, where he too will breed non-literate children. Corina's assertion corresponds with what Freire (1987) expounds as limited awareness of real-life experience which contribute to limiting social change especially within the non-literate women and their uneducated children. In addition, her statement relates to their inability to guide the children on the significance of education and their educational achievement.

4.3. Support to Children's Homework

Moroni, Dumont, Trautwein, Niggli, and Baeriswyl (2015) have described homework as an important part not only for school children's lives, "*but also for parents' daily lives, and it can be viewed as the setting in which home and school intersect most closely*" (p.418). Reading, writing and numeracy skills contributed to improving children's performance in school as well as in their future career. Arao, a 41-year-old woman and peasant farmer asserted:

As for my children who are now in middle primary school level, with constant support in their homework, they now utilise their time very well and work independently every evening after supper. Moreover, currently there is less external coaching. At this time, their school performance has greatly improved and this made me very proud of their education.

Arao's account on the children's proper utilisation of time for homework illustrates that the earlier reading as well as writing ability in the Luo in addition to English language led to improvement of her children's performance. This finding corresponds Aljohani and Alajlan (2020) and Cun (2022) views that through family literacy practices, mothers participated in reading and working on math assignments. Reading and writing with children is indicative that literate women are more likely to act as a link between school and

the community and generally monitor their children's schoolwork, since they stay at home most of the time. This implies that FAL-trained women's support to children's homework helped the children to develop positive habits and responsibility towards their success in education. The children's positive habits led to improved performance in school, which in turn would help them throughout their education cycle, future career and improved lives. Therefore, women's reading, writing and numeracy skills significantly contributed to the success of children's education. The women became active, but not passive participants in socio-economic development as asserted by Kabeer (2005).

Compared with the women who were trained in FAL, here is Arao's experience:

Yah, although I was non-literate, I checked their books, but I could not interpret their homework. ... I only understood that she has not performed well in homework through cross (X) and tick (✓) signs marked using a red pen. For example, one time, I saw the results from her homework in Mathematics and saw more cross signs than the ticks...

Arao only followed up on her children's progress of school through studying the times her children earned crosses or tick signs. She was neither able to comprehend the content of her children's homework nor provide guidance in the process of answering questions asked in their homework. In the end, she confessed, "... I would send them for extra lessons in the poorly done subjects...; my fellow women in the nearby area were also non-literate".

Filomena, a 54-year-old woman, peasant farmer and community leader had this to add: "I did not help my children with their homework because I did not understand anything. My children were very bitter with me...my neighbour who had reading and writing skills had little time helping them..."

Filomena was also unable to understand or comprehend her children's homework, just like in the case of Arao cited above. In the end, she acknowledged that, "[She] used to leave them on their own". Arao and Filomena's decisions to turn to, "extra lessons" and "leave them on their own" projects a sense of frustration at being unable to engage with the children's work and offer solutions to them. The women's agency had been forced to be 'passive' and limited in choice of decisions (Kabeer, 2005). Nonetheless, the women's articulation, "I only understood ... through cross and tick signs marked using a red pen" and my neighbour that knew how to write ... demonstrates that they still utilised the few abilities they had, such as intuition to be involved with the children's work. Their agency was constrained, but they were still making an effort. Arao and Filomena's accounts refuted the findings of a study conducted in the state of Odisha in India which found out that although non-literate mothers were concerned about their children's education, they did not take part in guiding their children on homework or routine learning at home (Panda, 2015).

5. Conclusion and Implications for Practice

The study concludes that, women's enhanced understanding on the importance and success of their children's education and future career was associated with their reading, writing and numeracy skills. From that perspective, it can be observed that literate mothers participate more in their children's education than their non-literate counterparts. As a result, the children's education is bound to have long-term future socio-economic benefits on lives of women. The women's support for their children's education and improved family's well-being indicates that FAL changed the socio-economic lives of trained women. Also, this article makes an important contribution to the academia by providing new empirical knowledge on FAL's contribution towards women's socio-economic development in Uganda. Therefore, the findings of this study are important to civil society and policymakers (both at national and local government levels). It provides an insight into the life-changing for women beneficiaries of FAL from a socio-economic perspective. Also, it provides an understanding on the constraints experienced by both non-literate women and those that had acquired reading, writing and numeracy skills but find hardships in effectively using the skills to change the socio-economic dimension of their lives. This study will inform policy-makers to formulate policies and legislations relevant to improve the lives of such women living in Lango Region.

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