

Learning and gender in REFLECT¹ circles in Lesotho

A total of twelve REFLECT literacy circles, termed ‘learning circles’, were set up in the Malealea, a remote area in south-western Lesotho. Residents in this valley, as elsewhere in Lesotho, are primarily subsistence farmers, although further employment opportunities have been created through the establishment of a tourist lodge in the area. The Malealea Lodge offers tourists accommodation and a range of activities, such as pony trekking, hiking and fishing.

The learning circles established in Malealea have responded to tourism in different ways. The first learning circle to be established, ‘the co-operative learning circle’, was set up as an income generation co-operative which made crafts for sale to tourists. The learning focus within this circle centred primarily on income generation, with participants using the REFLECT approach to structure learning related to managing and operating their business. The other eleven learning circles, termed ‘village learning circles’, were established in villages further away from the Lodge. Participants in the village learning circles placed greater emphasis on community development activities (for example related to health and sanitation, erosion, deforestation, etc.) and used the REFLECT approach to guide development-related learning. These circles sometimes welcomed tourists wanting to learn more about the community and development activities, but unlike the Co-operative learning circle, the focus of these circles was not explicitly or exclusively related to tourism or income generation.

Members of the learning circles ranged in age from 16 to 70 years, with the majority of members in the 30 - 60 age group. Some of the village learning circles were composed predominantly of shepherds, while others, including the Co-op learning circle, were a mixture of housewives, farmers, retrenched miners and self-employed people. In five of the twelve circles, the chiefs of the villages joined as participants. In total, 65% of all circle members were women, 35% men. None of the participants was significantly better off, all participants being from the same socio-economic background (i.e. poor peasant farmers).

Each learning circle was facilitated by one or two local facilitators trained in the REFLECT approach. Only six of these twenty local facilitators were men. The predominance of women in these leadership roles reflects the skewed gender demographics of the area, a high proportion of men having taken up migrant work in cities or mines in South Africa leaving women at home to run the family households.

Establishing a gendered perspective

When learning circles were first set up in Malealea, certain ground rules were established in the circles to guarantee that all participants, men and women, young

¹ REFLECT is an acronym for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques. In an effort to make a meaningful connection between literacy and development, this approach draws on the work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, as well as a practical participatory development methodology, known as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

and old, had an equal opportunity to participate. This was especially important given that the circles were of mixed gender and ages. It was also important to establish a process of valuing women's and men's knowledge equally, a process that took time to develop in the context of a patriarchal society where it is assumed that men's knowledge is more valuable. However, the establishment of ground rules that highlighted these issues at an early stage in the learning process served as an important foundation for further gender work...

At other times in the life of the REFLECT project, circles focused on gender as a specific learning focus. A variety of PRA tools were used to help participants to analyse the different ways in which men and women's lives were structured in relation to gender. For example, during one exercise, participants worked in separate gender groups to construct a daily gender workload calendar showing how the types of work assigned to men and women led to a different organisation of their days. Women and men used a matrix framework to compare times of the day and work done. The graphic illustrated how women generally rose earlier and went to bed later than men in order to complete their chores (for example, fetching water, preparing meals, washing up, etc.). Women also spent more time engaged in chores during the day than did men, although men's chores tended to be more demanding in the intensity of labour required. After the two groups had constructed their graphics, they met to compare and discuss their respective perceptions of daily reality...

Identifiable changes in perceptions of gender relations emerged over the course of the REFLECT project. In general, there was a noticeable difference between participants' and non-participants' consciousness of 'gender' as a social construct affecting people's lives. Women and men in the project developed a deeper sense of how their lives were organised according to their respective genders, and the ways in which existing gender relations disadvantaged women and men... The REFLECT learning circles offered participants a means to reach beyond literacy to an exploration of gender relations. Participants used the REFLECT meetings to learn more, not only about literacy, but about each other, and how relations between them were structured. The circles provided a forum for establishing, exploring and negotiating such relations in a number of different ways, at both an individual and a collective level.

Extracted from: "Women are lions in dresses': Negotiating gender relations in REFLECT learning circles in Lesotho" by Gillian Attwood, Jane Castle and Suzanne Smythe