

The Missing Millions:

why we should invest in women's literacy



Hosted by **Feed the Minds** in partnership with the **Literacy Working Group (LWG)** and the **British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID)** at the Harvard Theatre, London School of Economics, London WC2A 2AE

17th June 2014

The forum was opened by **Josephine Carlsson**, Director of Feed the Minds, who welcomed presenters and participants to this important event in the 50th Anniversary 'Unlocking Potential' campaign of Feed the Minds.

The aims of the forum were

- To stimulate discussion around policy relating to women's literacy in the post-2015 context
- To explore potential strategies for addressing the challenges of women's literacy, including the need for targeted research and evaluation of existing initiatives.

Forty eight people participated in the forum including academics and practitioners, some with considerable experience and others currently studying with an interest in literacy, learning and development. Click [here](#) for a list of the participants and their organisations.

Katy Newell-Jones, Programme Director of Feed the Minds and Chair of BALID, facilitated the forum.

Stimulus material for the forum "Missing Millions" was provided through short presentations from four key speakers.

In his presentation *Closing the Gender Gap*, **Illapavuluri Venkata Subba Rao**, Chief of Section for Literacy and Non-Formal Education at UNESCO in Paris, highlighted why investing in women's literacy is a smart strategy decision. He talked passionately about women's literacy as the invisible thread of sustainable development. Although there is relatively little change in the data regarding women's literacy in developing countries, there is some evidence that the gender gap is decreasing, and there are

examples of innovative initiatives with important lessons to learn. He finished by suggesting we must keep up the momentum together, to advocate for the inclusion of women and learning post 2015. Click [here](#) for Subba Rao's presentation.

The next presentation was from **Fatimah Kelleher**, consultant in international social development and women's rights titled *Increasing Literacy Among Adolescent Girls and Women*. Fatimah emphasised the importance of empowering women through economic programming and enterprise. She reminded us that women are not a homogenous group and that many young girls become women in their early teens. She also illustrated, through locally-published Hausa novels from Nigeria, the powerful influence which can be gained from women writing for women about women's interests in their mother-tongue. At each point Fatimah drew our attention to the literacy and numeracy practices which were key to women's status, self-image and empowerment. She finished by reminding us that collaboration is a vital aspect of successfully engaging and supporting more women's learning, including literacy. Click [here](#) for Fatimah's presentation.

Barbara Reynolds, Head of Education, Save the Children called her presentation *The 'Missing' Millions? Really? In 2014?* She encouraged us to consider the 'near universal use of mobile phones by women' and the fact that mobile phones have circumvented many barriers in the drive for women's literacy. She went on to highlight the six types of barriers to literacy acquisition by women (political, religious, sociological, psychological, economic and physiological). She talked about the aspects of speaking, listening, reading and writing and reminded us of the key place of numeracy. Barbara reminded us of 'literacy rights', and linked this to the need for the right techniques, environment, content and costs – including the fact that literacy should be an enjoyable activity. Finally, Barbara indicated the key importance of involving men, boys, fathers, husbands and sons in addressing gender imbalances and women's access to learning. Click [here](#) for Barbara's presentation.

Finally, **David Archer**, Head of Programme Development, ActionAid drew some of the threads together and returned us to the global picture. He reminded us that we know what works to create transformative learning but that in many of the learning and literacy initiatives these factors are not present, and so transformative learning is simply not happening. David stressed the need for investment in knowledge and skills for all members of communities and to develop active citizenship with both young people AND with adults. He stated that none of us can afford to sit back and leave policy making and lobbying to others and he finished by reiterating the need to collaborate, network and advocate loudly for the inclusion of adult literacy, especially for women, in whatever succeeds Education for All (EFA) post-2015.

Following the presentations participants divided into groups to discuss key issues from the presentations and the question

What steps should / could be taken to raise the profile of women's learning and literacy, with policy-makers, donors and international development agencies, over the next 5 years?

The discussions were rich and varied with each group having newcomers to literacy as well as veterans, each bringing their unique perspective.

Key points from the discussions

Joining the policy debate

- The key message from all our presenters was co-operation, collaboration, networking and partnerships in advocating at this crucial time for developments post 2105.
- There was wide recognition that it is not easy to see how literacy for women can rise up the international agenda given many of the factors raised by the presenters.
- There is a need to reframe literacy, away from an 'educational skills-set' and instead for it to be re-positioned within a gender inequality context.
- We define women's literacy as a right, however, it needs to be seen by beneficiaries and donors as an essential contributing factor to development and well-being.
- Recognising the value of making links to current policy priorities, for instance, given the prevailing focus on universal primary education (UPE), women's literacy can have a positive impact on early childhood care and education.

Evidence and the need for research

- There is a need for more research into **what** literacy means for women, what they want in terms of literacy skills and practices and their intended **purposes**. Also what their preferences are in terms of **how** they would like to acquire these skills. There is recognition that this information might be **different in every context** and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach should not be sought but instead recognition of the need for **locally determined approaches**.
- The evidence for the **impact** of women's literacy is limited and fragmentary. Convincing donors of the value of programmes is extremely difficult when outcomes are not easily quantifiable and when an outcome might only be that a woman can write her name – significant though this might be for the person concerned. There is a need for both **qualitative** and **quantitative** evidence.
- Instead of bold statements about numbers of people 'becoming literate' there should be a move towards clear evidence of the **standards achieved and benefits**. Thought should be given to what these might be.
- There was discussion about the value of developing formulae for **unit costs, impact, outputs** and **outcomes** of adult literacy. This led to further discussion about accountability and the desirability as well as the validity of **measuring human development** as a (direct) result of literacy development. The advantages and challenges of **Randomised Control Tests (RCTs)** were briefly explored. Further research into, and debate around this field is needed.
- Practitioners, policy makers and researchers should be able to access evaluation studies more easily. This has implications in terms of **resourcing for evaluations** as well as tools and processes.

Factors for effective literacy programmes

- Literacy has to be **contextualised** both socially and politically, and this has to be made a criterion of good quality literacy programmes
- **Embedding literacy in other development initiatives** is a means not only of securing funding from donors who do not prioritise literacy but also a means

of enabling women to acquire relevant literacy practices which are more sustainable.

- We should find high profile **champions for women's literacy**, for example Warren Buffet, Mark Zuckerberg.
- Greater consideration should be given to **mobile technology**, its relevance to literacy in the 21st century and its outcome for business. There were conflicting views, some seeing technology potentially as
 - a reason for literacy (the fun and importance of texting) – in both major languages such as Hausa, and in minority languages;
 - a burgeoning vehicle for women's literacy – mobile phone usage is on the up and up;
 - a vehicle for writing as well as reading – texting is an active process;
 - a platform for books, on both mobile phones and on cheap e-readers
 - a vehicle for the expression of the voice of marginalised people, for example through publications in indigenous languages.

Others, however, questioned whether women would be able to benefit from technology as much as might be hoped, seeing that many do not have easy access to mobile phones when they are introduced into communities.

- Greater consideration could be given to the acquisition of relevant literacy skills to support the use of **social media as a medium for advocacy and campaigns**.
- It is important to involve the **male community**, locally, regionally and nationally in women's literacy although also being careful for this not to result in women's voices being suppressed.

Cross-sectoral debate and involvement

- **Include other sectors in the debate** rather than just talking to educationalists, thereby making the edges of the debate porous so literacy specialists don't appear to be **exclusive and excluding**.
- Making the case for adult education as a whole not just adult literacy.
- If literacy was embedded in wider development programmes, as mentioned above, this would stimulate greater debate and also wider recognition of the value of **literacy as a cross-cutting issue**.

Janine Eldred, Chair of the Literacy Working Group, drew the forum to a close and thanked the presenters and Feed the Minds for a vibrant, interesting and stimulating event.

Action pledges

Participants were invited to make personal and organisational pledges to take action as a result of their engagement in the Forum.

Fatimah Kelleher's post-forum article for the Guardian Global Development Professionals Network called *The Literacy Injustice: 493 million women still can't read* is available [here](#).

BALID leads a series of informal literacy discussions (ILDs). The next one will be on January 12th 2015 with Juliet McCaffery leading a discussion on *Is Education for All?* See www.balid.org.uk for details.

LWG is currently seeking funds for a research project called *Bridging the Gap*, bringing together NGO/INGO stakeholders with academic researchers to explore how greater collaboration can inform the development of adult literacy learning, and women's literacy in particular.

Feed the Minds will be hosting another forum on Thursday February 12th 2015 exploring the question 'Are increases in self-confidence and self-esteem valid goals in post-2015 development?' Further details will be available on www.feedtheminds.org. Email info@feedtheminds.org to register interest.