Adult education and indigenous people: Addressing gender in policy and practice

Nitya Rao[a,*], Anna Robinson-Pant[b]

[a]*School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK*
[b]*Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK*

Abstract

Adult education programmes developed for or by indigenous communities rarely seem to have addressed gender inequalities. Yet, compared to mainstream adult educational interventions promoting instrumental approaches to 'functional literacy', such programmes often appear highly politicised, starting from a standpoint of promoting indigenous peoples' rights. We look at the reasons for the absence of gender analysis from policy and research on indigenous adult education and highlight key issues within indigenous adult education, when viewed from a gendered perspective, particularly language, assessment, learning structures and programme objectives. Drawing on case studies of indigenous adult education programmes in South and South-East Asia, we emphasise the need for participatory, non-hierarchical processes in adult education that can provide legitimate space for multiple voices within indigenous groups, without enhancing the sense of marginalisation. The principles underlying indigenous adult education programmes can help planners to challenge and respond to gender inequalities.
© 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Indigenous communities; Adult education; Gender; Adult literacy; South Asia

1. Introduction

Adult literacy classes in South Asia usually consist of a large majority of women. Shaped by the assumption that educated women make better wives and mothers, with lower fertility rates (Cochrane, 1979) and a lower incidence of child mortality (LeVine et al., 1991), such programmes invariably adopt an instrumental approach to women's empowerment (Longwe, 1998). The curriculum is often based around women's reproductive role with materials about family planning, nutrition and childcare. International policy on adult education has tended to emphasise the importance of educating women in terms of increasing their contribution to development— but failed to take a gendered perspective on programmes and curricula. Despite the success of

*Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: n.rao@uea.ac.uk (N. Rao),
a.robinson-pant@uea.ac.uk (A. Robinson-Pant).

small-scale NGO programmes in promoting a more politicised approach to women's literacy (for instance through legal literacy programmes to provide information to women about their rights), international donors and national governments have used a more limited definition of 'functional literacy' as skills for employment or improved livelihood. Only recently has the 'rights' perspective been recognised in policy documents (see UNESCO, 2002) and begun to influence programmes to consider what kind of education women may desire as individuals, rather than as wives and mothers (Robinson-Pant, 2004).

By contrast, adult education programmes for indigenous groups in South Asia have arisen from and responded to the struggle for indigenous people's rights. This struggle is not new and, following the period of decolonisation in the 1960s globally, has become recognised as a part of the 'long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power' (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 98). There are more than 5000 indigenous and tribal groups, comprising almost 300 million people (of whom 190 million are in Asia), living in 70 countries across the world. Together they account for 4% of the world's population though in countries such as India, with about 400 tribal groups, they make up close to 8% of the population of the country (UNESCO Institute of Education, 1999). They include diverse groups such as the 'scheduled tribes' or 'adivasis' in India, the 'orang asli'(original people) in Malaysia and the Maoris in New Zealand. Each of these groups is different in their language and culture, and also differentiated internally along lines of class, gender and age. Yet in the international arena, they are often clubbed together, distinguished by their different cultural world-view consisting of both a custodial and non-material attitude to land and natural resources.[1] The colonial heritage (particu-

larly the loss of land and resources), the impact of globalisation and with it an increasingly privatised and materialistic world, and the domination of western practices, has led many of these groups to share their experiences and mobilise across country and regional borders, asserting at this level a collective indigenous identity. As Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 110) points out: 'The international social movement of indigenous peoples is at all levels highly political'.

Within this context, adult education has been intrinsically linked to a more politicised notion of 'empowerment' (though this term is rarely used) as indigenous groups use a discourse of rights and of self-determination. Indigenous education—in the formal sector too—goes beyond the educational realm, linked to land and the political struggles of indigenous peoples, with the *choice* of language and pedagogies seen as a means to restoring dignity and identity as a group. Rather than just guaranteed access or participation in education systems, *control* over the educational system and structures is seen as the issue at stake. As we discuss later, this distinction could be identified as the difference between adult education for indigenous people (suggesting access into mainstream educational structures) and indigenous adult education (implying control over the curriculum and learning practices).

Within the discourse on indigenous peoples' struggles around education, we found it surprising—given the emphasis on redressing unequal power relations and control—that gender identities are rarely mentioned and never prioritised. Even when compared to the dominant instrumental approach to mainstream adult women's education described above, indigenous adult education programmes can appear to adopt 'gender blind' approaches. In this paper, we explore the reasons for this through both an analysis of the nature and purpose of policy commitments and research studies, as well as recent field-level programmes. We focus particularly on case studies from South and South-East Asia because of our familiarity with this region.

In the next section, we first explore the absence of gender from both policy and research on indigenous education and the reasons for this.

---

[1]In the international policy arena, 'indigenous' status is being claimed by many 'politically marginalised, territorially based ethnic groups… who are culturally distinct from the majority populations of the states where they live' (Minority Rights Group website). Recognising that the term 'indigenous people' is not used in many of these contexts, we have tended to use the specific terms used in the countries described.

We highlight key issues within indigenous adult education, when viewed from a gendered perspective, particularly language, assessment, learning structures and programme objectives. We briefly look at the differences between indigenous adult education and adult education practice and theory, ending with an emphasis on the need for participatory, non-hierarchical processes in adult education that can provide legitimate space for multiple voices within indigenous groups, without enhancing the sense of marginalisation. At the same time, by recognising the more politicised 'rights' approach to adult education developed by indigenous groups, adult education planners working with non-indigenous groups can also learn ways of challenging and responding to gender inequalities.

2. Taking a gendered perspective on indigenous education policy and programmes

This section analyses educational policy and programmes for indigenous adults from a gendered perspective. We are particularly interested in analysing how far the two axioms of difference—gender inequality and political marginalisation due to being an indigenous minority—are acknowledged in policy and programmes as intersecting. We will then go on to discuss some of the key issues arising in relation to indigenous adult education and the implications of these for women in particular.

2.1. International policy declarations and influences on programmes

One of the first clear articulations of a framework to discuss indigenous peoples' education rights was the Coolongatta Statement adopted at the 1993 World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education. Its basic principles included indigenous control of indigenous education, education as a means of protecting and developing indigenous cultures including language, indigenous teacher education programmes based on culturally sensitive pedagogies, ensuring quality standards, culturally inclusive curricula and the use of

indigenous structures for imparting education (http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/coolongatta.html).

Based on this, Article 27 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights specifically mentions the rights of indigenous people to enjoy their own culture, or use their own language. The question as to whether literacy needs, uses of language, suitability of pedagogies or indeed access to indigenous institutions may differ for men and women is not even hinted at.

The 1997 Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning further affirmed the right to learn of indigenous people worldwide.[2] Article 15 highlighted the need for adult learning to reflect the richness of cultural diversity and respect traditional and indigenous peoples' knowledge and systems of learning. Once again, indigenous culture is presented as being homogeneous, monolithic and unproblematic, not providing for differences of class or gender within indigenous groups, which are the realities of today. Article 18 further stated the right of indigenous people to access all levels and forms of education provided by the state, without denying the right to enjoy their own culture or to use their own languages.

Despite these statements that seek to give due place to cultural diversity within education systems, there are several barriers to achieving this in practical terms. The choices within nation–states around the use of different language learning mediums or access to different education systems are constrained by a number of factors. One of the findings of the country studies[3] from Africa produced for the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education held at Hamburg in 1997 (Confintea V) was the existence of a large number of indigenous languages that made the provision of literacy in the mother tongue both a difficult and costly proposition. State investments were meagre, and the few initiatives that did exist were NGO-run small projects.

---

[2] This was an affirmation of the recommendations of the workshop on indigenous peoples and adult learning at Hamburg, attended by 120 people, a third of them indigenous representatives (UIE, 1999).

[3] The eight country studies were conducted in Senegal, Ghana and Cameroon in Africa and Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia in Latin America.

Invariably, adult education itself has received a very small proportion of the overall education budget. The assumption that contributions will be given by local communities (for classroom and volunteer staff) may particularly disadvantage indigenous people who often live in more poverty than other sections of the community (Rao, 2000). Recent National Sample Survey data in India (1999–2000), for instance, reveals that headcount ratios for poverty amongst Scheduled Tribes are 45.86% against an average incidence of 27.09% for the entire rural population (Dev, 2003). The relative lack of formal education of many indigenous people (see Table 1) also suggests that programmes could turn out to be higher cost, since additional training and resources may need to be invested in providing instructors from the same community. Adult education has tended to be provided 'on the cheap' in many countries, yet the experience of high drop outs, particularly from many indigenous communities, points to the need for greater investment and commitment to providing high-quality educational inputs. It is worth mentioning here that the policy discourse around adult education in general privileges the economic efficiency argument above a rights perspective: for example, in justifying the use of volunteer teachers

because they are cheap (see recent discussions in World Bank reviews, including Oxenham, 2003).

The Tenth Plan (2002–2007) document in India for the first time formally acknowledges the need to allow greater flexibility and initiate innovative programmes to meet the specific requirements of tribal pockets of the country. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs was set up in 1999 to attend exclusively to the needs of the tribal population. One of the programmes of this Ministry, implemented through NGOs, relates to the vocational education of tribal women and girls in low-literacy areas. The expenditure on this programme has however been minimal—about Rs 20 million per year nationally. The major strategy continues to be the setting up of residential schools for adivasi children, but as Rao (2002, p. 89) found in the case of Dumka district in eastern India, the ratio of schools was 10:1 in favour of boys. The government of Nepal provides another example of the introduction of incentives and policy to improve the access and retention of indigenous people in education programmes. Recognising that 'the centralised bureaucracy of the (development) projects did not attract the target communities', the Nepali Government formed a National Committee for Development of Nationalities in June

Table 1
Literacy Rates of Indigenous and General Populations

State/country	Percent of indigenous population (as part of total population)	No. of indigenous languages*	Literacy rate of total population		Literacy rate of indigenous population	
			Male	Female	Male	Female
India (2001)	8	105	63.2	45.1	48.2	28.4
Rajasthan	12.5	—	61.3	35.6	48.6	20.4
M. Pradesh	20	—	62.5	41.2	42.0	22.3
A. Pradesh	7	30	60.8	43.7	39.4	21.6
Jharkhand	26	—	55.0	31.6	43.7	22.1
Nepal (2001)	37.18	Estimates vary from 43 to 122	36.7 (total)	—	Varies from 27.5 for Tharu and Rajbansi to 35.2 for Limbu, Rai, Gurung and Sherpa.	
Bangladesh (1991 data)	1.13 (1,205,978)	27–35	50	30	18.39 (total)	

*These are all estimates and there are wide variations in most cases. Confusion between what counts as a language as compared to a dialect (Crystal, 1987), as well as political opposition to recognising certain languages, accounts for this variation.

1997 to 'formulate and implement plans and policies for the social and economic development of the nationalities' (i.e., indigenous communities referred to as 'nationalities') (Ukyab and Adhikari, 2000). As well as organising research, conferences and meetings aimed to protect indigenous cultural heritage, the Committee established scholarships for indigenous candidates to study within the country and outside. Despite these attempts to improve access to formal education for indigenous groups, there are only 6% of indigenous people in higher education and only 4.5% have received scholarships to study abroad in the last 20 years (Ukyab and Adhikari, 2000). The intersection between caste and gender inequalities is particularly apparent in the formal sector, where it has been noted that special provisions for indigenous people have benefited boys over girls and where special provisions have been introduced for girls and women, they have rarely benefited women from indigenous groups.[4]

These examples from India and Nepal suggest that though the 'indigenous' or 'women/girls' are marked out in policy as disadvantaged in educational terms, there may be considerable contrasts between different ethnic groups. Not only is the policy assimilationist—i.e., seeking to bring minority groups into mainstream education—but it also assumes 'indigenous' and 'women' to be homogeneous categories, undifferentiated by economic status, gender or age. Targeting indigenous groups as a whole for programmes may disregard the huge economic differences between them. Though many governments are committed to increasing the participation of indigenous groups in adult education and schooling, interventions tend to work in isolation and do not appear to address fundamental issues around participation related to language, curriculum and structure, as well as intersections of inequality (such as gender and caste). The traditional under-resourcing of adult education programmes as compared to schools means that it is even more difficult to address these inequalities of access and participation in the non-formal sector.

2.2. Key issues in relation to adult education for indigenous groups

In this section, we explore issues that have arisen in the context of developing adult education policy and programmes for indigenous groups. Drawing on accounts of small-scale innovative projects for indigenous groups in South and South-East Asia, we look at how planners and adult educators have responded to these concerns. We also view each of these issues from a gendered perspective, in order to analyse how far these areas of tension for many indigenous people can be recognised as affecting women and men differently.

2.2.1. Problematising language
In a review of the research conducted for Confintea V, Stromquist (2002) points out that while UNESCO has presented mother tongue education as an axiom,[5] there is no evidence that this is the best approach, especially for *adult* students. They may have developed strong *motivations* to learn the dominant, official language, whether for emotional reasons or indeed individual aspirations (emphasis in original), as demonstrated by the example of the Karen Women's Organisation discussed below. As Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, p. 12) notes, 'different languages have different political rights not depending on any inherent linguistic characteristics, but on the power relationships between the speakers of these languages'. Part of the problem with the issue of language in adult education is the underlying assumption that literacy has similar uses in different languages. However, this is not necessarily the case, and contextual and historical factors influence the learner's motivation and perceived need/use of the language concerned. The question of language choice and policy is often made on economic and educational grounds (see Oxenham, 2003), adopting a functional rather than a more political or critical approach to literacy.

---

[4]For instance, 84% of scholarships to study at secondary school level went to high-caste girls (CERID 1998).

[5]Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, p. 16) also notes that mother tongue can be defined in different ways—by origin and identification, or by competence and function. Depending on the definition used, the mother tongue can vary. The latter two criteria potentially reflect the denial of opportunities to learn in one's original mother tongue, leading to a lack of competence.

Programmes successfully using dual languages for literacy learning (see Millican, 2004) also suggest that the traditional notion of 'pure' language needs to be replaced with a more dynamic concept, based on a recognition that code switching can be an effective teaching and learning strategy for adult learners (Robinson-Pant, 2001).

Linked to this lack of recognition of multiple literacies and the differential uses of languages by adults are attempts to model indigenous language education on the literacy practices of non-indigenous people. Aikman (1995) shows in the case of the Summer Institute of Linguistics programme to codify Arakmbut language in the 1970s, and teach it in the bilingual school in the Peruvian Amazon, how local people did not accept this as a written language. Similarly, while the Santals, the largest tribal group in Jharkhand, India, for instance, have a distinct language and a rich oral tradition, there is no script. Efforts to formulate a script (*Olchiki*) and propagate written texts in this have so far not been successful. The official language is the one of power and as written literacy is often used only to negotiate with the state and its institutions, the Santals prefer this to their mother tongue. Such cases illustrate the importance of considering language policy as a 'bottom-up' rather than a top-down planning decision.

In many countries, a blanket education policy in favour of a standardised national language has left many indigenous people fearing that their children will not have the chance to learn their mother tongue. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000, p. 652) has called this process of 'forcibly transferring children from one group (indigenous/minority) to another (dominant)' through linguistic and cultural assimilation in schools as 'linguistic genocide'. In some cases where mother tongue teaching has been promoted, however, communities also worry that their lack of access to a language of power will exacerbate low status or lack of opportunities to paid employment. In adult education programmes, a more flexible and responsive approach to language policy can benefit indigenous people, in particular women, who often have less opportunity to learn the languages of power informally, than men in their own communities. Viewed from a gender perspective, language policy decisions become even more complex—with certain languages being valued by indigenous as opposed to mainstream populations, as well as gender hierarchies determining who has access to which languages.

When the Karen Women's Organisation was faced with setting up literacy programmes for refugees on the Thai–Burmese border, they identified three major languages spoken amongst their participants: Po Karen, S'Kaw Karen and Burmese. They began the literacy course in S'Kaw Karen as this was the first language of a majority of participants and was the language spoken in camp meetings and public places. However, they recognised that follow-up courses should also take place in Burmese, in response to the women participants' request to learn what had been perceived as the language of power (when they were in Burma). The literacy trainers had to translate materials from English into S'Kwa Karen and introduce teaching methods (such as discussion and learning words associated with pictures) that would enable people to learn in their own language. They recognised that women in particular viewed Karen literacy as a tool for gaining a voice within the camp leadership—many men had already learnt literacy through school or with Buddhist monks at the monasteries in Burma. Women however had been excluded from opportunities to learn basic literacy and saw it as a step towards empowerment (Norwood, 2003).

Practical considerations, such as a lack of textbooks in a certain language, can present a major constraint to facilitators and trainers. However, innovative literacy teaching approaches such as Language Experience Approach (where participants relate stories which are written down in their language by the facilitator), Learner Generated Materials (where participants write their own texts in workshops which are then published for other learners) and REFLECT (where PRA[6] visual activities are used as the basis for creating written texts in the participants'

---

[6]Participatory Rural Appraisal uses visual approaches (such as mapping, ranking and diagramming with local materials) to share and create knowledge between communities and outsiders as a basis for development planning.

languages) have been used effectively in situations where published materials are not available in the learners' mother tongue.

An important first step in many indigenous communities is simply to increase awareness about the value of their mother tongue—for young people may consider the language has already died or is irrelevant to their generation. In the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC) programme in Eastern Nepal, many Limbu people did not even realise that their language had a script (Subba and Subba, 2003). For the KYC team, the challenge lay first in reviving then promoting the Kirat Sirijonga script—educated Limbus only knew how to write their language in Devanagari script (the writing system of the official state language, Nepali) and there were no published materials in Limbu language. The project set about adapting Nepali language adult education textbooks to include appropriate illustrations from Limbu communities and Limbu names and used these as a basis for teaching the Kirat Sirijonga script in night literacy classes. In the Rajghat classes, college graduates sat together with adults who had never been to school to learn to read and write in Kirat Sirijonga script. The KYC team took a holistic approach to promote mother tongue literacy—through supporting Limbu publications and advocating for Limbu language classes in primary schools too. As the community began to value their mother tongue, parents started to give their new-born babies Limbu names, Limbu language magazines prospered and the community became active in trying to reclaim their land rights through the traditional system known as 'kipat'. The adult education programme provided the impetus for local Limbu communities to begin to challenge the gap between political rhetoric and reality—around legal provision for indigenous people's rights and language discrimination in mainstream education. Local communities are now demanding that the post of Limbu language teacher be created in schools.

These examples illustrate how critical attention to language policy within adult education programmes can ensure that the educational process is empowering for participants from indigenous communities. Although preserving and promoting indigenous languages can be an important part of strengthening a group's identity, it is essential to simultaneously respond to communities' requests to learn a mainstream language, which they may perceive not just as a higher status education, but one that gives them voice and a potential capacity to influence institutions of the state. Whilst many indigenous adult education programmes have recognised the political dimensions of language policy decisions (as compared to the educational or economic arguments often put up front in mainstream adult education), there has rarely been acknowledgement of indigenous women's and men's differing experiences of learning and using various languages and scripts in their everyday lives.

2.2.2. Assessing achievement and learning structures: the relationship between indigenous and western learning

A further tension within the discussion of formal versus indigenous education centres on the recognition that learning within hierarchical, non-indigenous systems has resulted in much poorer educational outcomes for indigenous people across the world. Some statistical indication of this is presented in Table 1, though it should be noted that statistical data on indigenous people is difficult to compare and analyse, due to differing country definitions as to who constitute 'indigenous' and even whether it is appropriate to disaggregate the population according to these terms.

It is interesting to note the consistent gap between the literacy rates of the general and indigenous populations for the sample countries for which data are presented. In some cases, such as Bangladesh, this gap is much larger than the gender gaps for the total population.[7] Secondly, where gender-disaggregated data are available, as in the case of India, it indicates that gender inequalities are further magnified and exacerbated when combined with other forms of inequality and marginality. As Ramachandran and Sahjee (2002)

---

[7]During the last decade, Bangladesh has adopted a pro-active policy to eliminate gender disparities in the education system (UNESCO, 2003).

point out in the case of India, and Crumpton and Cong Giap (2002) in Vietnam, there is growing evidence that children from particular ethnic groups are more likely to be denied schooling opportunities due to poor infrastructure, low quality of instruction, distance to school, teacher attitudes, alien pedagogies and so on. Clearly then we need to look deeper into why indigenous groups are left out of the mainstream education processes and increasingly represent a larger proportion of the non-literate adult population relative to their size.

While in the dominant European system, the curriculum has a programmatic character that can be completed and assessed, within indigenous systems it can be difficult to separate teaching, learning and evaluation, which are closely woven strands and in which failure is unknown (Aikman, 1999, p. 28). The modern education system has therefore not just led to a loss of indigenous languages, but also to the 'failure' of indigenous students within such education systems. Krishna Kumar (1989, p. 68) has pointed out in the case of India that texts place *adivasi* children in state schools in a difficult position. If they fail to answer questions on *adivasi* backwardness based on the texts, they are seen as educationally backward. If they do, they are in fact accepting an external judgement of being culturally backward: 'there is no escaping the label of backwardness'. The hidden curriculum—also reflected by teachers and managers belonging to mainstream rather than indigenous groups—therefore reinforces the unequal power relations present in society. The sense of shame generated in their identities leads to a loss of interest in education, poor performance and the reinforcement of the perception that they are 'backward' or 'deficient'. Linked to this is the dominant form of individual assessment of learning, which may promote values at odds with the collective practices regarded highly by indigenous groups.

The reasons why indigenous groups often fail to achieve in formal education systems have implications for the ways that planners respond to adults' educational needs in the non-formal sector. Valuing indigenous communities' traditional knowledge and skills is an integral part of the political empowerment process described above. Given indigenous groups' growing marginalisation globally, a majority of interventions however point to the cultural differences rather than commonalities with the mainstream culture. Adult education programmes, with the flexibility to develop different approaches to assessment and curriculum, do not necessarily see 'traditional' and 'western' knowledge systems and beliefs as in conflict or opposition, but as in the example below, recognise generic skills that can be applied in a variety of situations.

Beginning from a recognition of the contrasting needs and experiences of different generations of indigenous people, some indigenous education programmes have used inter-generational learning as a way of preserving and developing traditional knowledge. For instance, the Te Waka Pu Whenua Maori Adult Education Centre in New Zealand, aimed to help young people to 'live as Maori' through strengthening and disseminating indigenous knowledge as a way into developing a collective identity (Tarawa, 2003). Rather than regarding indigenous knowledge as a static store of information, such programmes engage with a dynamic process of creating knowledge from the experiences and beliefs of the elders or other members of the indigenous community (in the Maori example, the elders acted as guides to the younger Maori people introducing them to traditional mythology and indigenous beliefs through walking around their environment). This is important as there is a need to develop a shared understanding of their distinctive identity across generations. The skills involved in sharing this knowledge such as team work and communication, valuing their identity and raising self-esteem, can enable younger people to play a more confident role in the wider world, as well as in their own communities. However, this does not necessarily include challenging the differing roles of women and men in these communities. There is also the issue of how to respond to the differences between and within indigenous groups.

Though many programmes have drawn on indigenous knowledge to inform the content of their adult education curriculum, it is striking that few have experimented with indigenous forms of

class organisation or teaching methodologies, applying them to different contexts. A programme working in Andhra Pradesh took an indigenous social structure, the *gotti*, and attempted to transform it into a REFLECT[8] literacy circle (Madhusudan, 2003). By taking what was a traditionally male forum for discussion and decision making as a structure for women's literacy classes, they hoped to enable women to take a more active part in their communities. However, opposition was initially encountered from men when trying to transform this indigenous social structure.

Conversely, many programmes have tried to introduce Western participatory teaching methods, such as role play, group work and video, into classes for indigenous people. Whilst the examples above show that this is often an effective way of communicating new ideas and facilitating discussions around issues of importance to indigenous communities, sometimes there can be opposition from the participants themselves. In the Karen Women's Organisation literacy programme in Thailand discussed above in relation to language issues, Karen women did not consider such teaching approaches to be 'real learning' and preferred traditional rote learning methods (Norwood, 2003). There was some tension between the trainers and participants, as the facilitators strongly believed that only a participatory learning approach could enable the women to gain confidence and debating skills which were essential for them to take a more political role within the camps. To establish traditional relationships between teacher and student was seen by the trainers as contradictory to the project's overall aim—in that this would fail to empower women participants within the classroom.

These contrasting indigenous adult education programmes illustrate differing positions with regard to relationships with Western educational philosophies and methodologies (whether challenging or transforming these) and learning structures. They also vary in how far the programme

interprets 'empowerment' in the wider sense of encompassing gender relations within the household and community, or prioritises instead the indigenous struggle for equal rights and status.

2.2.3. Adult education objectives: learning for empowerment?

Learning for empowerment is an objective of many adult education programmes, yet as we discussed earlier, the term is often used in an economic rather than political sense (e.g., learning vocational skills in order to gain more economic independence, Oxenham, 2003; Lauglo, 2001). Functional literacy programmes have concentrated particularly on the links with health improvement, with curricula around family planning and nutrition. However, in the context of adult education provision for indigenous and minority groups, the term 'empowerment' has linked directly into these people's political struggles for control over resources (particularly land), self-identity and recognition of their culture and mother tongue. A rights-based approach to adult education has been promoted in most programmes for indigenous people, in the belief that education is just one part of their attempt to gain a stronger voice in society.

'Empowerment' is interpreted differently by differing groups of indigenous people in response to their particular contexts. In Burma, for example, the Karen community (a minority ethnic group) were forbidden to speak or teach in their own language, Po Karen, and were forced to give their children Burmese names (Norwood, 2003). In Malaysia, belonging to the Orang Asli community has been associated with stigma and low esteem—this group of indigenous people being considered 'lazy' and incompetent by the majority population (Chupil, 2003). In these very differing situations, empowerment has been associated with enhancing self-esteem, strengthening collective identity and promoting indigenous culture and language, as well as the opportunities to set up alternative educational structures. Feminist discussions of power relations and the process of empowerment also highlight the analytical distinctions between power as domination over others, power as the ability to influence decisions and power as the

---

[8]Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques is a literacy approach promoted by ActionAid—see Archer and Cottingham (1996), for further details.

strength within (Rowlands, 1998), similar in many ways to the indigenous discourse. The social reality of power relations leads to the adoption of a range of strategies, both individual and collective, that can contribute to the process of enhancing control over the course of one's life (Longwe, 1994). When speaking of empowerment, it is therefore important to recognise the different starting points; whereas for the Karen, the aim was primarily to develop ways of teaching people to read and write in their mother tongue, for the Orang Asli people, it was first necessary to raise awareness about the value of their own indigenous culture and languages. The examples discussed below illustrate the importance of starting from an understanding of where people are now (including what 'empowerment' means to them in specific terms) and building programmes from the bottom-up.

A rights-based approach to adult education implies not just 'conscientisation' around a specific issue or situation, but also developing the skills to initiate political action. The most successful programmes for indigenous adult populations have employed this two-pronged strategy. This might mean raising awareness through participatory action research, exchange visits with other indigenous groups and historical analysis, alongside legal literacy and learning skills of debating and writing petitions.

In Andhra Pradesh (India), Laya's alternative educational approach grew out of experiences with young tribal people who were campaigning against government land reform in 1989 (D'Souza, 2003). Recognising that they did not 'demonstrate a broader vision of tribal rights', the Laya team introduced a training programme for young tribal people to gain deeper understanding of the macro- and micro-level context within which they act (such as deforestation, land alienation, displacement), as well as the skills to tackle injustices within their communities. The participants were also trained in approaches for working with their communities (how to form *sanghams* (associations) or pressure groups) and with government (how to write petitions, present problems to government representatives). An important part of their education was learning about legal structures—laws relevant to tribal areas (forest laws, displacement laws), people's rights vis-à-vis the policy and the role of customary law in the tribal context. Besides reading or hearing about the legal framework, trainees were taken to visit district courts to see land cases first-hand and were encouraged to practise their legal skills through role play in mock courts. The skills developed through these educational activities included literacy, debating, critical analysis and leadership.

As the programme developed, trainers began to identify specific problems faced by tribal women and set up a separate programme to address issues such as domestic violence and lack of property rights. Women from differing tribal communities visited other groups, sharing their experiences and learning from their differences—for example, within one community the practice of dowry was an oppressive tradition, but not in others. Whilst not gender-focused to start with, the programme grew to recognise differences within the tribal communities and the need to address these, alongside the problems between the tribals and the non-tribals. The example of the Laya programme illustrates the importance of recognising that political action may take many forms, and that empowerment should be seen from a more complex perspective—as freedom from ethnic, political and gender oppression.

The examples discussed above show that indigenous adult education is something different from 'education for the indigenous'. It revolves around presenting a challenge to the dominant education system—implying a radical change in content, teaching approaches and learning structures in order to recognise and value indigenous peoples' knowledge, skills and languages. Research within adult education in general, notably the body of work known as the 'New Literacy Studies' has increasingly emphasised the importance of recognising and valuing multiple languages and literacies (Street, 2001). Within the context of indigenous adult education, this can provide a theoretical framework for analysing the power dimensions of indigenous literacy practices as compared to dominant models of adult education and schooling, as well as to further explore the issues around alienation of indigenous people within the classroom.

3. Indigenous adult education versus adult education for indigenous people: whose language, whose knowledge and whose structures?

One of the major questions posed by research studies—a majority of them focused on children rather than adults—relates to ways of bridging the gaps between formal education (schooling) and indigenous learning, given the issues of power and status of different knowledges and languages, as well as the perceived oral-written divide between indigenous and formal learning. As we discussed earlier, these differences in power relate to debates about who controls and determines the kind of education on offer to indigenous adults and children. This discussion also needs to be seen in the context of women's education in general, as earlier critics have pointed to the notion of women's 'participation' being not just about increasing access of a previously excluded group. Rather than 'tinkering with the system' in order for women to have greater access (Wolpe, 1978), participation can also be regarded as women gaining control over curriculum planning and policy (Stromquist, 1998). The challenge for indigenous adult education programmes is how to respond to both these debates, in order to address the questions about whose knowledge, language and structures from the perspectives of indigenous minority women.

The Dakar Framework for Action 2000 highlighted the importance of taking account of the needs of ethnic and linguistic minorities amongst other disadvantaged groups as a key challenge for the next decade, if the goals of Education For All are to be met. ILO Convention 169 (formulated in 1989) stresses the need for the participation of indigenous people in the design of an education system appropriate to their needs, traditions and cultures. Part IV of the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (not yet ratified)[9]

focuses exclusively on the rights of the indigenous to their own educational systems and institutions, without being denied access to all levels and forms of education. Education, with a concern for the cultures, languages, rights and aspirations of indigenous people, is a major goal of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, and the underlying philosophy of the triennial World Indigenous Peoples' Conferences on Education (http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/bulletin).

There is clearly a struggle in the international arena, particularly the UN system, to shift the thinking with regard to indigenous people towards a human rights approach that guarantees the right to self-determination. In policy content, at least in discursive terms, one sees a shift from the concept of assimilation to that of cultural citizenship or recognition. This shift validates a notion of collective rights to a culture that may have been eroded due to conquest, colonisation and assimilation. It is particularly relevant to adult learning that goes beyond the acquisition of skills and learning abilities, to value systems, attitudes and patterns of behaviour. It is this notion of the 'collective', however, that in fact provides a clue into why 'gender' may be largely missing from the discourse around indigenous education. At this point, we need to point to the similar lack of a gendered perspective on adult education in general, as illustrated by recent World Bank papers which fail to disaggregate target groups of adult basic education other than to mention that programmes will be focused on 'the poorest' (see The World Bank, 2003). Though the instrumentalist discourse dominating adult education stresses the benefits of educating women in terms of improved health and fertility outcomes, there is little attention to gender bias and the dangers of promoting stereotypes in curricula or skills training programmes.

Whilst there is thus an emergent rights discourse in relation to indigenous education and knowledge systems, it is important to note the co-existence of a parallel instrumentalist discourse. Indigenous knowledge has been acknowledged as a 'significant resource which could contribute to the increased efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of the development process' (The World Bank, 2001) by

---

[9]The proposal for setting up of the Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples within the UN system and the submission of the Draft Declaration in 1995 is still opposed by several governments. Yet, the continuous struggle of over 100 indigenous organisations led to the declaration of 1995–2004 as the UN International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples.

a range of international agencies, including the World Bank. Successful examples, such as an adult literacy course conducted by a local NGO in Senegal contributing to the abolition of female genital mutilation in village after village, or the use of traditional land use systems to improve agricultural productivity in Tanzania, have been used to illustrate this point (Easton, 1998 and 2001, The World Bank, 1998). In fact, there are increasing examples of the application of indigenous knowledge particularly in the field of health and agriculture. Although an integral part of the culture and history of local communities, respect to and for indigenous knowledge seems to be emerging from a purely instrumental logic of leading to improved development outcomes. This logic, however, does little to change the relations of power that define interactions between different social groups. As Agrawal (2002) points out, valuable knowledge of weaker social groups can be studied and selectively appropriated.

3.1. Gender: the missing link?

Third world feminists have long held that gender identities are embedded within other identities of class, race, ethnicity, age, language, caste and religion and that the experience of gender varies with one's other social identities. So, a lower-caste or indigenous woman in India or Nepal may experience her gender identity quite differently from an upper-caste woman, or a landless from a landed woman. Hannah Arendt (1958) noted in *The Human Condition* that individuals consciously assert one of their many identities depending on the particular context and situation they find themselves in. For instance, in the context of African descendant women in North America, she found that they often put forward their racial rather than gender identity in the struggle for civil and political rights. This does not mean that gender identity was unimportant or not of concern to them, but at that particular juncture, a strategic choice was needed.

Perhaps it is the same in the case of indigenous women—the larger struggle is for recognition of the indigenous language and culture, for asserting the indigenous identity, and establishing control over resources, and in this process gender differences in access and control are not prioritised. When an entire community is marginalised from the mainstream, recognition as a totality is seen as the issue at stake—rather than differential access and rights within the group. Raising gender or class issues is seen not just as divisive and interfering with their traditional structures, but also as based on the 'colonising assumption that leadership is exercised by an individual and that the individual is 'naturally' male (Fitzgerald, 2003, p. 15). Fitzgerald illustrates in the case of the Maoris that 'all people were part of a collective identity and their survival rested on the collective responsibility of the group to value and respect each person' (Fitzgerald, 2003, p. 16). In fact, the domestication of Maori women was a result of the curriculum offered in mission schools. Writing about women in indigenous movements, Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 154) identifies a 'continuing resistance to the way western feminists have attempted to define the issues for indigenous women and categorise the positions in which indigenous women should be located'. She argues against attacking indigenous men as a group, 'because for indigenous women the issues are far more complex… In the end, indigenous men and women have to live together in a world in which both genders are under attack' (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 154).

Responding to this intersection of both gender and ethnic inequality can thus imply conflicting priorities within the indigenous struggle, which many activists are keen to avoid. In the examples given in this paper, indigenous adult educators either explicitly deny gender difference or discrimination (as in the Limbu project in Nepal), or add it on to their agenda at a later stage of the project (the Laya project, India). They identify ethnicity/indigeneity as the key form of marginality that has negative consequences on educational outcomes.

4. Conclusion

The adult education programmes for indigenous groups reviewed in this paper point to the attempt

to look outwards, and expand knowledge and skills, whilst simultaneously looking inwards, at the group's identity and history. Gender identities are not often explicitly prioritised, yet the principles underlying this approach to promoting indigenous adult education seem amenable to achieving gender equality as well. A summary of these principles might include:

- Adopting a rights-based approach: trainers, planners and facilitators are not necessarily members of the indigenous community, but share their ideological standpoint and begin from the position of wanting to initiate political and social change. Education is just one (important) part of this wider political process.
- Developing curriculum and other programme activities in collaboration with participants and in relation to their goals for empowerment. This may be around raising critical awareness as well as supporting specific skills for taking political action.
- Recognising that indigenous communities are not homogeneous but have differing needs and experiences according to age, gender and language. Strengthening the links between generations and using elders as a key resource in learning.
- Taking a flexible and responsive approach to language policy: mother tongue teaching may not always be regarded as empowering and members of the adult class may want to learn different languages for different purposes.
- Exploring and developing indigenous knowledge and skills as a way of presenting alternative viewpoints and value systems, as well as strengthening generic skills such as leadership skills or literacy.

As compared to mainstream adult education programmes, interventions for indigenous populations *appear* to have several advantages: a more cohesive group, a common language and a shared experience of oppression. However, this can mean that planners overlook the differences within indigenous communities and take a static view of indigenous education as preservation of language and culture, rather than as a force for change. As

we have seen above, the most successful programmes acknowledge that indigenous groups' identities are diverse and are always changing. They see the potential of younger generations to critique, build upon and transform their parents' values as integral to their struggle for political change within society as a whole. But what they often tend to ignore—at least at the start—are differences along gender and class lines, as they are immersed in an ideology of collective identity and responsibility.

A further issue concerns the recognition and validation of diverse pedagogical approaches. The strong emphasis on both collective and individual identity within indigenous education systems can in fact have wider relevance at the global level, for instance, in pursuing the Dakar vision of education as strengthening democratic spaces and practices, alongside individual capabilities (May and Aikman, 2003, p. 142). The domination of European norms in education is perhaps not related as much to their greater intrinsic value, as to the power they command. A major challenge is to mobilise resources in order to strengthen the voice of indigenous groups in developing educational approaches and structures that not only meet their specific needs, but also contribute to mainstream educational systems on a larger scale.

Both indigenous and mainstream adult basic education policy needs to recognise the implications of adopting a rights approach, in relation to gender as well as political inequalities. As the examples in this paper illustrate, taking this broader perspective implies deconstructing what 'empowerment' means as an objective, rather than assuming the less radical, depoliticised definition of women's 'empowerment' assumed in many international policy documents.

References

Agrawal, A., 2002. Indigenous knowledge and the politics of classification. International Social Science Journal 54 (173), 287–297.

Aikman, S., 1995. Language, literacy and bilingual education: an Amazon people's strategies for cultural maintenance. International Journal of Educational Development 15 (4), 411–422.

Aikman, S., 1999. Intercultural Education and Literacy. John Benjamin's Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.

Archer, D., Cottingham, S., 1996. Action research report on REFLECT, ODA Serial no. 17, ODA, London.

Arendt, H., 1958. The Human Condition. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

CERID, 1998. Evaluation and review of incentive schemes to encourage participation of girls and women in basic education. CERID, Kathmandu.

Chupil, T., 2003. Creating knowledge for change: a case study of Sinui Pai Nanek Sengik's educational work with Orang Asli communities in Malaysia. ASPBAE case study series, Mumbai.

Cochrane, S., 1979. Fertility and Education: What Do We Really Know? John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, MD.

Crumpton, B., Cong Giap, N., 2002. Can I afford to go to school today? A Report on the financing of basic education in Vietnam prepared for Oxfam GB.

D'Souza, N.G., 2003. Empowerment and action: Laya's work in Tribal education and implications for policy advocacy. ASPBAE indigenous adult education case study series. ASPBAE, Mumbai.

Dev, M., 2003. Rural employment: trends and policies. Paper presented at the All India Conference on Agriculture and Rural Society in Contemporary India, December 17–20. Bardhaman, West Bengal.

Easton, P., 1998. Senegalese women remake their culture. IK-Notes # 3. The World Bank, Washington, DC.

Easton, P., 2001. Malicounda-Bambara: the sequel. IK notes # 31. The World Bank, Washington, DC.

Fitzgerald, T., 2003. Changing the deafening silence of indigenous women's voices in educational leadership. Journal of Educational Administration 41 (1), 9–23.

Kumar, K., 1989. The Social Character of Learning. Sage Publications, New Delhi.

Lauglo, J., 2001. Engaging with adults: the case for increased support to adult basic education in Sub-Saharan Africa. Africa Region Human Development Working Papers Series. The World Bank, Washington, DC.

LeVine, R., LeVine, S., Richman, A., Uribe, F., Correa, C., Miller, P.J., 1991. Women's schooling and childcare in the demographic transition: a Mexican case study. Population and Development Review 17 (3), 459–496.

Longwe, S., 1994. The women's empowerment framework. Women in development, culture and youth. Workshop Preparatory Readings 1–3 by Sara Longwe and Roy Clarke, reading 114.

Longwe, S., 1998. Education for women's empowerment or schooling for women's subordination? In: Sweetman, C. (Ed.), Gender, Education and Training. Oxfam, Oxford.

Madhusudan, 2003. Unpublished paper on REFLECT in Andhra Pradesh.

May, S., Aikman, S., 2003. Indigenous education: addressing current issues and developments. Comparative Education 39 (2), 139–145.

Millican, J., 2004. I will stay here until i die: a critical analysis of the Muthande Literacy Programme. In: Robinson-Pant, A. (Ed.), Women, Literacy and Development: Alternative Perspectives. Routledge, London.

Norwood, G., 2003. Fighting oppression through literacy: a case study of tzhe Karen's Women's Organisation. ASPBAE Indigenous Adult Education Case Study Series. ASPBAE, Mumbai.

Oxenham, J., 2003. Review of World Bank operations in support of adult basic education with literacy in Indonesia, Ghana, Bangladesh, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, 1977–2002. The World Bank, Human Development Education Network, Washington, DC.

Ramachandran, V., Sahjee, A., 2002. The new segregation: reflections on gender and equity in primary education. Economic and Political Weekly 27, 1600–1613.

Rao, N., 2000. Lessons to learn. Frontline 17 (16), 65–69 (August 5–18).

Rao, N., 2002. Standing one's ground: gender, land and livelihoods in the Santal Parganas, Jharkhand, India. Ph.D. Thesis, University of East Anglia, Norwich.

Robinson-Pant, A., 2001. Why Eat Green Cucumbers at the Time of Dying? Exploring the Link Between Women's Literacy and Development: A Nepal Perspective. UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg.

Robinson-Pant, A. (Ed.), 2004. Introduction in Women, Literacy and Development: Alternative Perspectives. Routledge, London.

Rowlands, J., 1998. A word of the times, but what does it mean?: empowerment in the discourse and practice of development'. In: Afshar, H. (Ed.), Women and Empowerment: Illustrations from the Third World. Macmillan, London.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T., 1988. Multilingualism and the education of minority children. In: Skutnabb-kangas, T., Cummins, J. (Eds.), Minority Education: From Shame to Struggle. Multilingual Matters Ltd., Clavedon, Philadelphia pp. 9–44.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T., 2000. Linguistic Genocide in Education or worldwide Diversity and Human Rights? Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey, London.

Street, B.V. (Ed.), 2001. Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives. Routledge, London.

Stromquist, N., 1998. The institutionalisation of gender and its impact on educational policy. Comparative Education 34 (1), 85–100.

Stromquist, N., 2002. Book Review of Kuper, W & T. Valiente-Catter (eds.) Adult education in Africa and Latin America: Intercultural experiences in a multicultural encounter, 2001, Eschborn, GTZ. International Review of Education 48(6), 527–529.

Subba, S., Subba, D., 2003. Learning in our own language: Kirat Yakthung Chumlung develop a Limbu literacy programme in Nepal. ASPBAE Indigenous Adult Education Case Study Series. ASPBAE, Mumbai.

Tarawa, N., 2003. Reading our land: case study of Te Waka Pu Whenua, Maori adult education centre in New Zealand. ASPBAE Indigenous Adult Education Case Study Series. ASPBAE, Mumbai.

The World Bank, 1998. Indigenous Knowledge for Development: A Framework for Action. Knowledge and Learning Center, Africa Region, Washington, DC.

The World Bank, 2001. Indigenous Knowledge for Development: Opportunities and Challenges. http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/key.htm.

The World Bank, 2003. (Easton, Sidikou, Aoki, Crouch) Rethinking World Bank policy and practice in support of adult and nonformal education. Draft paper.

Tuhiwai Smith, L., 1999. Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. Zed Books, London and New York.

Ukyab, T., Adhikari, S., 2000. The Nationalities of Nepal. HMG Nepal, Ministry of Local Development Committee for Development of Nationalities, Kathmandu.

UNESCO, 2002. Education for all: is the world on track? EFA Global Monitoring Report, Paris, UNESCO.

UNESCO, 2003. Gender and education for all: the leap to equality. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4, UNESCO, Paris.

UNESCO Institute of Education, 1999. Cultural citizenship in the 21st century: adult learning and indigenous peoples. Booklet 1b. UIE, Hamburg.

Wolpe, A.M., 1978. Education and the sexual division of labour. In: Kuhn, A., Wolpe, A.M. (Eds.), Feminism and Materialism. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Websites used

http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/coolongatta.html.
http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/bulletin.

Further reading

Crystal, D., 1987. Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/key.htm.
www.portal.unesco.org/uis.
www.minorityrights.org.