



Role of Functional Literacy and its Impact on Women's Empowerment

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Abstract: *This research paper aims to elucidate the synergistic outcomes resulting from the integration of functional literacy initiatives with the objective of promoting women's empowerment in the District of Mardan. The research adopts a quantitative approach, with the primary objective of investigating the influence of functional literacy on women's empowerment and exploring its direct effects. The population of the study consisted of all five hundred female individuals enrolled in the functional literacy program in District Mardan. Hundred females were conveniently chosen from two union councils as a sample. In order to examine the data, descriptive statistics i.e. average and variability measured by the standard deviation were utilized. The results were tabulated along with corresponding interpretations. The primary outcome of the study indicated that knowledge of functional literacy positively influenced the lives of participants. Moreover, the research findings emphasized the crucial contribution of organizations in promoting women's empowerment through the facilitation of functional literacy. In order to build upon these discoveries, it is advised that future investigations delve into the incorporation of novel and advancing technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality within functional literacy initiatives. This exploration holds the potential for amplifying the influence of such programs on women's empowerment.*

Introduction

Based on data provided by the International Labor Organization, there has been a notable rise in female labor force participation, ranging from 52.4% to 54.6% (Abramo, L., & Valenzuela, M. E. (2005). Additionally, according to a survey conducted by Mc Kinsey & Company (2019), the global representation of women in the field of entrepreneurship has reached 36%, indicating a growth of 13% since 2014 (Hunt, 2019).

Functional literacy encompasses a broad range of cognitive abilities, practical skills, aptitudes, and attitudes necessary for individuals to actively and adeptly participate in a specific profession or occupation within the dynamic labor market. It surpasses basic reading and writing proficiencies and encompasses a diverse set of essential competencies essential for successful performance in various professional contexts. These competencies include critical

thinking, problem-solving, information literacy, numeracy, digital literacy, and effective communication and collaboration skills. Possessing functional literacy equips individuals with the necessary tools to navigate and adapt to the intricate demands of their chosen field or trade.

However, functional literacy extends beyond work-related aspects alone. It also plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to effectively engage in everyday activities and make well-informed decisions that impact their personal lives and communities. Beyond the scope of employment, functional literacy empowers individuals to comprehend and interpret different types of media, critically evaluate information, manage personal finances, access healthcare services, fulfil civic responsibilities, and actively contribute to the social, cultural, and political dimensions of society. Essentially, functional literacy serves as a foundational cornerstone for lifelong learning, empowerment, and active citizenship, allowing individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern world and realize their full potential in both professional and personal spheres.

. Any endeavors aimed at enhancing an individual's knowledge, conduct, and competencies should yield a discernible impact on the individual's overall social welfare. When communities deliberate upon literacy, they incorporate receptive skills, encompassing reading and listening, and productive skills, comprising writing and speaking (Smagorinsky, 2001). Women's empowerment encompasses a diverse range of conceptualizations, with distinct definitions emerging within different communities and spheres of society. Nonetheless, a common understanding revolves around the notion of enabling women to assert their viewpoints, enhancing their societal standing through awareness campaigns, fostering literacy and educational development, and facilitating the redefinition of gender roles. These efforts aim to afford women greater

autonomy in pursuing their aspirations and goals (Malhotra, A., Schuler, S. R., &Boender, C. 2002, June).

To instil confidence in women, it is imperative to grant them the freedom to exercise agency in decision-making, ensure access to a wide array of opportunities, and enable them to take control of their own lives. Women's empowerment can be delineated into five fundamental dimensions: social, educational, economic, political, and psychological (Tandon, T. 2016). Achieving women's empowerment necessitates the equitable provision of resources and opportunities, enabling them to exercise their prerogative in making decisions concerning their livelihoods, both within and beyond their households. In order to enhance the efficacy of women's leadership in decision-making processes, it is imperative to grant them social, economic, and political autonomy (Moyo, C. S., & Francis, J. 2010). Recognizing this imperative, various governmental and non-governmental organizations have implemented numerous initiatives with the primary objective of empowering women and promoting their well-being. These programs encompass literacy initiatives that aim to emancipate women from traditional gender roles and facilitate their integration into the mainstream economy. These organizations are committed to enhancing consciousness and fostering literacy among individuals. The primary aim of pursuing women's empowerment is to realize gender parity by enabling them to acquire functional literacy skills, thus granting them equitable employment prospects in the marketplace. How society treats women unfairly, causing them to experience various forms of domestic abuse, societal injustice, and denial of their basic human rights needs to transform their lives (Shah, 2011).

Objective of the Study

To investigate the importance of functional literacy and how it directly impacts women's empowerment

Research Question

How does functional literacy contribute to the empowerment of women and what are its direct effects?

Literature Review

Functional literacy skills significantly contribute to the empowerment of women (Kabeer, 2019). Functional literacy plays a pivotal role in empowering women by enabling their active participation in various economic and political endeavors, significantly improving their health and overall welfare, and equipping them with the necessary capacity to make informed and knowledgeable choices. By enhancing women's proficiency in essential skills such as reading, writing, and basic numeracy, functional literacy opens up a world of opportunities for them. With improved literacy, women gain the ability to access a wider range of employment opportunities, enhance their income-generating potential, and contribute meaningfully to economic growth. Moreover, functional literacy equips women with the critical thinking and analytical skills necessary to navigate complex societal issues, engage in public discourse, and actively participate in political processes. As a result, women's voices and perspectives are amplified, and they can advocate for their rights, challenge gender inequalities, and promote inclusive policies and practices. Beyond economic and political domains, functional literacy has a profound impact on women's health and overall well-being. It enables them to comprehend health information, access healthcare services, and make informed decisions regarding their own and their families well-being. Additionally, functional literacy equips women with the knowledge to adopt preventive measures, manage chronic conditions, and understand important health-related aspects such as nutrition, reproductive health, and child care. By promoting functional literacy among women, societies can break the cycle of poverty and discrimination, foster gender equality, and create

an environment where women can fully realize their potential and contribute to the social, economic, and political progress of their communities. (Fawe, 2018). Furthermore, having functional literacy empowers women to acquire knowledge and access valuable resources, facilitating their journey towards self-sufficiency and independence (UNESCO, 2019).

Functional literacy plays a crucial role in empowering women and improving their overall quality of life. By enhancing women's skills in reading, writing, and basic numeracy, functional literacy enables them to engage more actively in society and enhance their overall welfare. Researchers have identified various factors contributing to the low literacy rate among Nigerian women, including historical influences from the colonial era and the impact of Christianity. Despite efforts by Christian missionaries to promote literacy through Bible reading, these factors have affected literacy levels in the country. However, as colonial rule expanded, there was an increasing emphasis on literacy. Nonetheless, the strict adherence to Western ideology further exacerbated the lack of access to education for females. The recipients of the advantages of literacy were primarily men who were entrusted with the task of teaching (Mengistie, T. A. 2021). As the nation's economy transitioned from an agrarian foundation to a more modernized and industrialized one, women found themselves facing devaluation and deprivation, highlighting their exclusion from the process of socio-economic progress and the overall development of their country. This widespread practice had profound consequences, particularly on women's access to significant educational benefits, which were withheld from them. The shift in the economic landscape placed women at a disadvantage, as traditional gender roles and societal norms limited their opportunities for advancement and intellectual growth. Women were often confined to domestic roles and denied the chance to pursue education, limiting their potential contributions to the

workforce and their ability to participate fully in the nation's progress. This deprivation of educational benefits not only perpetuated gender inequality but also hindered the country's overall development, as it failed to harness the talents and potential of half of its population. By disregarding the intellectual and educational needs of women, the nation missed out on diverse perspectives, innovation, and expertise that could have propelled it forward. Therefore, the exclusion of women from educational opportunities served as a significant impediment to their empowerment and stifled the nation's social and economic growth. (Adetuyi, 2015). A significant number of women suffer from chronic anaemia, a condition characterized by a deficiency of red blood cells or haemoglobin, leading to fatigue and weakness. Sadly, this health issue not only affects their physical well-being but also seems to impact their overall ageing process. Astonishingly, studies have shown that women with chronic anaemia may age at a rate twice as fast as their husbands or male counterparts, highlighting the additional burdens they face.

In addition to grappling with health challenges, women also play a crucial role in enhancing the economic resources of their families. Through their contributions and earnings, they contribute significantly to the financial stability and prosperity of their households. However, despite their undeniable importance, women's full potential remains largely unexplored due to the prevalence of deep-seated societal inequality.

Throughout history and across various cultures, women have encountered persistent targeting, assault, and discrimination in multiple facets of their existence. These forms of oppression manifest in diverse ways, including limited access to education and employment opportunities, gender-based wage disparities, and the perpetuation of harmful gender stereotypes. As a result, women often find themselves trapped in a cycle of inequality that

hampers their personal growth, restricts their professional aspirations, and undermines their overall well-being.

The consequences of this systemic inequality extend beyond the individual level and permeate the broader fabric of society. When women are denied equal opportunities and face ongoing discrimination, societies miss out on the immense potential and talent they possess. By marginalizing women, we are depriving ourselves of their unique perspectives, innovative ideas, and valuable contributions to fields ranging from science and technology to arts and culture.

It is imperative that society recognizes and addresses these deep-rooted disparities to create a more equitable and inclusive environment for women. By implementing policies that promote gender equality, ensuring access to quality healthcare, fostering educational opportunities, and combating gender-based violence, we can begin to dismantle the barriers that hinder women's progress. Empowering women not only benefit individuals but also leads to more prosperous communities and a more just society as a whole.

In conclusion, chronic anaemia affects a significant number of women, contributing to an accelerated ageing process. Despite playing a vital role in enhancing their family's economic resources through their contributions and earnings, women face profound societal inequality. They endure persistent targeting, assault, and discrimination across various aspects of their lives, preventing them from reaching their full potential. Addressing these systemic challenges is crucial for building a fairer and more inclusive world where women can thrive and contribute their invaluable skills and perspectives. (Gupta, (2017).

Research Design

The research study utilized a quantitative descriptive research design, which proved to be

the most effective and dependable approach given the collection of data from multiple participants.

Sampling

Convenience sampling involves the selection of study participants who are readily available and willing to take part. To ensure a representative sample of the population of interest, individuals were enlisted from diverse segments of District Mardan. The study focused on women who were 18 years of age or older and had completed at least primary school as the eligible participants.

Data Collection

In this study, the researchers utilized a five-point Likert Scale questionnaire as a method for data

collection. The goal of the survey was to gather quantitative information on how functional literacy affects the empowerment of women in collaborative environments. The participants were personally given the questionnaire and were provided with the choice to remain anonymous while completing it.

Data Analysis

Statistical software like SPSS was utilized to analyze the data gathered from the five-point Likert Scale questionnaire. The analysis involved condensing the data and conveying the findings using descriptive statistics, such as the Mean and Standard Deviation.

Table 1

The significance of functional literacy and its direct influence on the empowerment of women

S#	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Having functional literacy has instilled a sense of confidence within me.	4.2	0.75
2	Functional literacy provides individuals with the fundamental knowledge required to generate financial resources.	4.0	0.80
3	I have achieved the ability to financially support my family by acquiring functional literacy skills.	4.1	0.73
4	I have developed the ability to actively engage in the decision-making process within my family.	4.1	0.73
5	Functional literacy has had a positive impact on my life by enhancing my knowledge.	4.3	0.66
	Overall	4.1	0.67

Based on the data, it is evident that functional literacy has had a beneficial influence on the lives of the participants. All five statements received mean scores above 4, suggesting that a majority of the participants either strongly agreed or agreed with them. Among these statements, "The knowledge acquired through functional literacy has positively impacted my life" obtained the

highest mean score of 4.32, accompanied by a standard deviation of 0.66, indicating that this particular statement was highly favored by the participants.

The statement "Functional literacy gave the basic knowledge about creating financial resources" received the lowest average rating of

4.05, along with a standard deviation of 0.80. This suggests that the participants showed the least strong agreement towards this statement, although there was still a relatively high level of consensus.

In general, the data indicates that functional literacy has brought about positive changes in the participants' confidence, financial knowledge, and ability to support their families financially and contribute to family decision-making. Nevertheless, there is a suggestion that further enhancements can be made in delivering a more extensive education on generating financial resources.

Findings

The findings demonstrated that women's confidence, financial resources, and decision-making skills are positively influenced by functional literacy. Participants expressed that acquiring the ability to read and write improved their comprehension of the world and enhanced their communication skills. Furthermore, functional literacy empowered them to effectively handle their finances and make well-informed choices in various aspects of their lives. The research also assessed the impact of functional literacy on women's social empowerment, revealing that it heightened their awareness of basic rights and empowered them to establish objectives for their families. Participants shared that they became role models and motivated their communities to pursue knowledge and provide support to their families.

The study's findings underscore the significance of functional literacy in empowering women. The research illustrates that programs aimed at improving functional literacy have a positive impact on women's self-assurance, ability to make decisions, and financial capabilities, ultimately resulting in greater empowerment. Furthermore, the study suggests that functional literacy enhances women's knowledge of fundamental rights, motivates

them to establish goals for their families, and fosters community mobilization. These findings indicate the importance of organizations prioritizing the promotion of functional literacy among women and harnessing technological advancements to maximize the benefits of such programs. Policymakers should allocate sufficient resources and establish appropriate schedules to ensure favorable outcomes. By taking these steps, women will be better equipped to make informed choices and take charge of their lives, ultimately leading to increased empowerment and overall well-being.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were drawn in the light of research findings;

1. When examining the lasting consequences, it was discovered that functional literacy positively affected women's empowerment. Nevertheless, to obtain a more thorough comprehension of the long-term viability of comparable initiatives, it would be beneficial to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the program's impact over an extended duration. Undertaking follow-up studies several years or even a decade later would provide valuable insights into the enduring effects of functional literacy on women's lives.
2. To obtain a comprehensive comprehension of the correlation between functional literacy and women's empowerment, it would be advantageous to expand the scope of the study beyond a specific geographical area. Conducting further research that includes women from diverse regions, cultures, and backgrounds would provide valuable insights. By undertaking cross-cultural studies, it becomes feasible to explore how various factors like socioeconomic status, cultural values, and educational background influence the relationship between functional literacy and women's empowerment.

3. Although the investigation primarily focused on women, incorporating men into functional literacy programs may also yield beneficial outcomes for women's empowerment. Future research could delve into the potential influence of men's participation in such programs on women's lives and the overall empowerment of the community.
4. The study emphasized the significance of technology in augmenting women's empowerment and suggested that forthcoming research could delve into the integration of novel and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality. These technologies could be incorporated into functional literacy programs to amplify the effects on women's empowerment.

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