



A series of 29 booklets  
documenting workshops  
held at the Fifth  
International Conference  
on Adult Education

**CONFINTEA**  
**HAMBURG**  
**1997**

## 4b Raising gender issues

Raising gender issues in formal and  
non-formal settings



This publication has been produced by the UNESCO Institute for Education within the context of the follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

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## Theme 4: Promoting the empowerment of women

Booklets under this theme:

4a Women's education: the contending discourses and possibilities for change

4b Raising gender issues in formal and non-formal settings

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## Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference **The Hamburg Declaration** and **The Agenda for the Future**, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,  
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg  
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

# Raising gender issues in formal and non-formal settings

## Introduction

This booklet highlights the main issues raised at the workshop “Raising gender issues in different educational settings” at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, held in 1997 in Hamburg. The aim was to review the current situation of women’s education in different formal and non-formal educational settings, in different regions and contexts. The panel featured the following speakers: Vimla Ramachandran, ASPBAE, India; Lean Chan Heng, Malaysia; Alejandra Valdez, The Women’s Institute of Chile; Elsie Sutherland, Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Ghana.

While considerable gains have been made in women’s access to education, which have benefited some, their participation continues to be lower than that of men. Although political leaders, administrators and policy-makers are aware of the magnitude of the problem, the education of women is not being raised as a major issue in the context of the political agenda. Where policy exists, it has not been translated into concrete action. The workshop’s main message to policy-makers was the need to have a strong advocacy in education, particularly in the South Asian and African regions. It was also held that this advocacy would be possible only through in-depth research on gender issues in the area of education.

Fortunately, there are more effective non-formal adult educational initiatives coming from outside governmental offices and from social movement organisations. These seek to empower women through activities, such as leadership and gender-awareness training. In discussing these non-formal programmes, participants expressed the view that current education for women needs to pay more attention to women's subjectivity, their diverse cultural identities as well as their emotional well-being. These aspects of empowerment are particularly important for women in countries in transition to democracy, as well as in situations where increased economic competition among people, groups, nations and regions are resulting in discrimination against women workers.

# Gender gap in educational participation

Women's participation in formal education continues to be lower than that of men. Statistics reveal the low value of education in women's lives in many countries. According to UNESCO sources (1996), there are an estimated 556 million illiterate women in countries of the South, compared to 315 million illiterate men. There are also 73 million out-of-school girls, compared to 37 million out-of-school boys. In sub-Saharan Africa alone 27 million girls are not in school. There is a big gender gap in women's participation in formal education for South Asian women too. African and South Asian countries therefore have a long way to go in closing the gender gap.

A study sponsored by UNESCO (PROAP AND ASPBAE) has examined the reasons for this imbalance in South Asia in the past 50 years. One of them is the little attention being paid to implementing reforms. Despite a subsidised education system professing equal treatment for both sexes, there have been few attempts to implement reforms aiming to promote the education of girls and women. Girls seldom get scholarships. In rural areas, parents are reluctant to send their daughters to school because of the low recruitment of female teachers in schools. In rural schools in India only 20 per cent of teachers are women. Administrators seldom view girls' education as being important, despite numerous policy statements to the contrary.

The strategies developed in the 1970s to promote women's adult education focused on setting up separate women's departments, projects and programmes. Although the women's movement argued for a special status for women's programmes, this in fact has inadvertently resulted in their isolation from the rest of the system and has often reduced women's influence in other departments and sectors. It was difficult, for example, for women's departments to influence the World Bank's programme on the vocationalisation of secondary education, which fell under the jurisdiction of the education sector. Women had little say in demanding courses geared to the labour market. They continued to receive a training in predominantly non-technical subjects. Similarly, literacy programmes have often been run as women's programmes, separate from other adult education programmes.

The tension between the allocation of a special status to gender issues and the integration of these issues into adult education is both a major problem and challenge for adult education. A different approach is being

attempted in the case of women's health, in which reproductive health programmes are designed not only for women but also for men. Reproductive health is to a large extent about male responsibility for preventing disease and controlling family size. In short, the need to integrate gender issues into adult education still remains a big challenge.

Comparable to the situation in South Asia, in Africa literacy programmes are seldom linked to women's and girls' multiple roles outside the educational field. Insufficient attention is being given to the social and cultural barriers which prevent girls and women from entering the educational mainstream. Women's participation is also hampered by poor curricula, inadequate text books, ill-trained teachers and badly managed programmes.

The negative perceptions of girls' and women's education often discourage them from continuing their education, or undertaking further education. Limited resources for education cause parents to make decisions in favour of the education of boys. There are hardly any policies worth the name dealing with marginalised disabled girls or girls who leave school on becoming pregnant.

Often, adult learning is implemented in a haphazard or ad hoc manner, and in many countries it suffers from limited funds. It is widely synonymous with literacy education and often has to make do with part-time staff.

## Advocacy for girls' and women's education

Although political leaders, administrators and policy makers are aware of these problems, it is often the case in developing countries that education in general and women's education in particular, are not a major political priority. Even where adult educators have been trying to promote gender issues, and even where the education of women is an important part of policy, that policy has seldom been implemented, as the South Asian case study in this booklet has shown.

There needs to be strong advocacy for any education movement. It is necessary to mobilise public opinion, the media and people in power and to bring education onto the political agenda.

A good example of effective lobbying and advocacy is the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). It brings together African women in high-ranking government or university positions to support the educational concerns of women. It has had a significant impact on policy reforms in Africa in a short period of time. The work of the Forum is based on in-depth research into gender issues, particularly in the area of education. Among other things, the Forum:

- provides research data for targeted policy and practice;
- proposes alternative paradigms of education for African girls and women;
- consolidates evidence on women's education, making people aware that gender discrimination is unacceptable in the educational system;
- sensitises policy-makers and administrators of programmes on the centrality of women's and girls' education;
- trains policy makers and decision makers;
- sensitises teachers and instructors;
- is critical of text books that often portray women as helpless;
- promotes affirmative action, especially for disabled girls;
- brings pressure on governments to bear more responsibility for the continuing, post-basic as well as higher education of women.

FAWE promotes a holistic view of education and the “genderisation” of education policy and practice, concentrating on human rights and social justice. It does research on the relationship between empowerment, development, education and gender. The essence of FAWE is to network with people who are doing similar kinds of work in different countries. Its approach is to use women in privileged positions to help other less privileged women and girls to succeed in education.

## Adult education in non-formal settings

In the 1980s the women's movement in many Latin American countries was striking in its extent and variety, and the feminist movements in those countries were remarkably successful in bringing their perspectives to bear on the core issues of de-legitimising military influence and reconstructing civil society. With the return to democracy in many Latin American countries, the women's movement is redefining its role in relation to governments. Many of the organisations active in the 1980s have disappeared. New groups have emerged. There has been a rise in governmental organisations working with women and supporting women's studies programmes. Women's groups have also moved in the direction of becoming more professional adult learning organisations. They are no longer characterised as mere grassroots activist initiatives.

The Women's Institute in Chile, developed during the period of transition to democracy after 18 years of dictatorship, introduced a new educational practice for enabling women to take an active public role, and to deal with social and political issues. There was a big demand for training women candidates for public functions, and for enhancing the competencies of those already in important decision-making areas. Women demanded training in organisational skills for the management of their organisations.

Although women were largely united against dictatorship, their response to the new situation of democratic transition revealed diversity and difference. Cultural, political and social differences among women began to be articulated in a positive way.

## The Women's Institute, Chile

Its aims were to:

- bring about changes in social, cultural and political institutions;
- elaborate and articulate political issues such as women's rights as well as issues linked to the woman's private sphere;
- establish a network of political support for women in all fields of life;
- promote female leadership, emphasising at the same time cultural diversity;
- define leadership in terms of the complex nature of identities, taking into account the different roles which women occupy as mothers, workers, urban citizens, activists, daughters, wives, consumers or patients in the health system.

Adult learning in such organisations deals with women's issues in an inter-dependent and interdisciplinary way. Topics range from issues of gender, power, women's rights, to issues of conflict and women's invisibility. A free association of themes is encouraged as a way of constructing new meanings and of creating new knowledge. Emotions and feelings and a participatory approach play an important role in knowledge construction. Attention is drawn to the diverse kinds of discourses, imaginations and collective projections that affect women's lives. Emphasis is placed on family histories, personal memory, and accounts of the country's history – each theme being explored in its symbolic context – and on deconstructing the ideology of the past. The aim of these learning processes is to promote empowering capacities such as individuality, eloquence and creativity among women. Another very important aspect is the emphasis on project ownership: women are given the opportunity to distinguish themselves from the collective identity and yet be a part of it. Another aim is to promote useful capacities which relate to the immediate needs and interests of women. Women are encouraged to evaluate their situation and circumstances in a creative way and to air rather than suppress conflicts. A final objective of such adult learning is to promote the capacity for visibility. This includes disseminating competencies that help women in building a public presence and taking over public tasks. At the same time women are helped to recognise their interests, ambitions and personal wishes in different political environments.

The aim of such adult learning practices is to relate educational processes to women's identity and individuality. Women are being helped to overcome their invisibility, not only through participation in public institutions but also through the construction of discourses and through the development of their personalities and personal identities.

## Connecting the local and the global

Adult education should recognise the experiences of women at the local level, taking into account the forces of globalisation that are creating more competitive relations among people, groups, nations and regions. The global economy often exploits the traditional subordination of women at the local level. One example is the use of women on global assembly lines. These women work under very poor conditions that barely allow them and their families to survive. Women's work as global assembly line operators is tedious, repetitive and menial. They are non-unionised, often unskilled shift workers, and are subjected to discipline, pressure, verbal abuse and intimidation from supervisors and male co-workers. Their environments are both hazardous and stressful. Gender relations at work are a common source of subordination as well as work-related stress for women.

Although working conditions have improved in the past 20 years, the subjective experiences of women have not. Society continues to view them disparagingly. Male-dominated organisational practices and pedagogical methodologies tend to deny women workers the space and authority to talk about their gender experiences. In fact women experience further subjugation and often internalise the stereotypes about themselves through the kind of educational work that they undergo. Adult education for women workers has centred very largely in the past on their objective material situation, their employment conditions and their rights. Hence consciousness-raising about women's exploitation and the importance of workers' unity have been important parts of the agenda. The focus has been on "gender practical needs" of women. However, women's subjectivity and their personally lived experiences are rarely taken into account. Even in situations where gender agendas are covered, women's unspoken thoughts, feelings and emotions tend to be overlooked.

## Importance of subjectivity in adult learning

Subjectivity means how women relate to themselves and to others. It is made up of emotions, modes of understanding the world, a personal sense of being, individuality, uniqueness, gender identity, continuity, an awareness of the other as well as conscious and unconscious thoughts.

It is vital to recognise the centrality of emotional well-being of women in adult education work. Adult education needs to address the following aspects of women workers' subjectivity: their emotional experiences and subordination, their feelings of powerlessness, inferiority and subjugation in workplaces and in homes.

How should these feelings and emotions be addressed in educational work? There should be a methodology of adult educational work that emphasises the use of reflective talking, story telling and sharing experiences in small groups. This process of articulation, naming and reconstructing, gives women a sense of worth and self-confidence.

## Conclusion

A political agenda is needed to respond to women's needs in the context of the global economy. Although there is a great deal of talk about women entering the global economy, there is very little being done in the development of their education to meet the challenges of the global markets. The vast majority of the women are unable to compete in the global market without education.

There is no point opening more schools unless the question of women's participation in educational processes is resolved. Literacy alone is not enough; the issue of proper quality and relevance at all levels of the educational system has also to be addressed. Education for women has to be a multi-pronged and multi-faceted approach.

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

## Theme 4

### Promoting the empowerment of women

Booklets under this theme:

- a Women's education: the contending discourses and possibilities for change
- b Raising gender issues in formal and non-formal settings