

ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN

**Report of the Committee
Appointed by the
Ministry of Education & Social Welfare**

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PREFACE

The Policy Statement on Adult Education gives the highest priority to women's adult education. The Working Group set up by this Ministry in August, 1977 constituted a Committee on Adult Education Programmes for Women, which submitted its report in March, 1978. The recommendations of this Committee were generally accepted by the Working Group and have been incorporated in its report.

The report of the Committee on Adult Education Programmes for Women is being published in the hope that it would facilitate widespread discussion on this subject and will inculcate a firm resolve in the various agencies to organise systematic and massive adult education programmes for women.

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ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN

Women's educational deprivation

It has long been accepted that exclusion of vast masses of people from educational opportunity affects women much more adversely than men. This point admits of reiteration and elaboration. From the quantitative point of view the following tables bring out the size of the problem :

TABLE I
Adult illiteracy in the age-group 15+
(Figures in lakhs)

Year	Total Population	Illiterate Population		
		Total	Men	Women
1951	2150.17	1735.73 (80.74%)	784.93 (70.6%)	950.80 (91.6%)
1961	2588.54	1870.02 (72.24%)	782.28 (58.55%)	1087.74 (86.85%)
1971	3178.25	2095.11 (65.92%)	863.80 (52.31%)	1231.31 (80.64%)

TABLE 2
Illiteracy among Scheduled Castes in all age-groups

1961	644.17	578.01 (89.73%)	273.36 (83.04%)	304.65 (96.71%)
1971	800.05	683.71 (85.33%)	320.99 (77.64%)	361.72 (93.56%)

TABLE 3
Illiteracy among Scheduled Tribes in all age-groups

1961	298.79	273.31 (91.47%)	129.59 (86.17%)	143.72 (96.84%)
1971	380.15	337.19 (88.70%)	157.99 (82.37%)	179.20 (95.15%)

Figures in brackets indicate the percentage of illiterate population to total population.

The gravity of the problem is not uniform in all parts of the country, nor would any explanations be valid for all States. The basic problem is that the community, including the planners and the administrators, does not accord to women's education the same importance as it does to the education of men. This arises from the visualisation of the role of women in family and society. In other words, women's educational disadvantage is both a symptom and a cause of their social oppression.

1.2 It has to be recognised that illiteracy creates a barrier to the realisation of the constitutional goals of social justice and equality of status and opportunity between men and women. The Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) drew pointed attention to the failure of constitutional and legal guarantees in changing the lives of the vast masses of our women—because they do not have access to even knowledge about the status and rights that are guaranteed to them, or to the various programmes of social welfare and development that aim to improve their status. Policies to extend educational opportunities—both formal and nonformal—to women have failed to bridge the knowledge gap between the sexes which was emphasised as the main task by the National Committee on Women's Education (1958-59) two decades ago.

Need for a new approach

2.1 The reasons for this failure lie partly in the community's discriminatory attitude towards women and partly in the inadequate realisation among planners and administrators of women's multiple role in society. Viewing them primarily as home-makers, education for women was visualised mainly as an input to strengthen their roles as mothers and housewives. Both formal and non-formal systems emphasised the importance of household arts in women's education, ignoring the other reality that women formed a substantial and integral segment of the labour force in agriculture, industry and services. Failure to strengthen their productive and economic roles—particularly in the case of rural

women—has also contributed to the gradual erosion of their economic opportunities, to increased unemployment, mass poverty, and has burdened them with exacting labour for inadequate returns, in addition to their housework and childcare. The lack of leisure for either education or entertainment is the one common reality in the lives of poor women, in both rural and urban areas.

2.2 This is not to say that women do not need, or want, other forms of knowledge. Health, nutrition, childcare and family planning, which feature in most adult education programmes for women, are vital because they help to strengthen some of their natural roles. What is missing is the understanding of equality of rights and responsibilities between the sexes, the view of women as individuals with basic rights to dignity and autonomy, not merely as instruments of production and reproduction. Mahatma Gandhi believed that a just social order would become possible when women recognise their historic social role, reject their unequal position and actively involve themselves in working for social transformation.

2.3 The NAEP should therefore aim at

- (a) making women and men more conscious of their rights and responsibilities, the implications of the laws governing women's status in society and developing an understanding about the various manifest and concealed ways which cause women's oppression ;
- (b) assisting women to achieve economic viability, through acquisition of literacy and other necessary skills and resources ;
- (c) providing women access to knowledge in other areas, particularly in health, childcare, nutrition, family planning etc ; and
- (d) assisting women to form their own groups for learning and productive activity, and to strengthen their participation and voice in the developmental process.

Operational Structure

3.1 The Policy Statement on Adult Education has stated clearly that the adult education programmes have to be relevant, flexible and diversified. In planning adult education programmes for women, the following broad categories can be identified as they have reasonably well defined characteristics and problems which offer a base or an entry point for the programmes.

3.2 The most well defined and easily reachable category is that of women in the organised sector, which includes factories, mines, plantations, public undertakings like Railways etc. Their organised status and grouping and the fact that their employers are exposed to several forms of govt. regulations suggest that it may be worthwhile to make a beginning with this category. Women industrial workers are normally relegated to jobs requiring minimum skills with lower remunerations and are denied training and consequent promotional opportunities. Their participation in trade union activities is low and, with a few exceptions, they are seldom able to organise themselves into pressure groups. Other characteristics of this group are mechanical relationship between employers and workers, low wages, insanitary and crowded housing, inadequate amenities and continuous drudgery—both in the home and at work. In addition to their double burden of housework and earning, majority of them have to face ill treatment, including physical violence from men in their families, particularly when the latter are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. These women are not always able to control even their own earnings.

3.3 The second category consists of workers in semi-organised industries, e.g., construction, bidi, match, agarbatti etc., and contract or casual labourers in various organised or semi-organised establishments. They suffer from all the problems mentioned for the first group but in more acute forms. In addition, women in this group are victims of various forms of exploitation—by employers and intermediaries—as well as insecurity and stagnation at low levels of skill and wages. Unlike their counter-

parts in organised occupations, they enjoy no protection, either by law or by trade unions, and are not provided with essential services like maternity benefits, childcare or basic healthcare arrangements.

3.4 Generally speaking, organisation of adult education programmes for both these groups would be facilitated if the employers could also be involved in the process. An illustration of their involvement would be by relieving women workers from duty for the duration of the adult education class and provision of facilities for organisation of classes on work premises. The employers could also be persuaded not to discriminate against employment of married women and to provide facilities for childcare. It would not, however, be realistic to expect all employers in the organised or semi-organised sector to provide these facilities without some motivation, such as tax incentives or rebate for loss of work, public awards etc. In the case of the semi-organised industries this may prove far more difficult as these establishments generally evade the long arm of public regulation by a variety of disingenuous ways. The greatest need of women in this category is unionisation, to strengthen their powers of collective bargaining, and the best strategy could be to make this the core of the adult education programme.

3.5 The largest category consists of rural women, whose characteristics and problems vary across groups. Since traditions play a more important role in rural society, it is important to understand these differences to be able to design appropriate strategies for education of adult women in the rural areas.

3.6 Traditionally most rural women have been integrally involved in the production and distribution of goods and services in agriculture, livestock rearing, dairying, fishing, etc., in the primary sector, in cottage or household industry of all types, and in the traditional services e.g., washing, retail distribution of various agricultural and industrial products in local markets etc. This, of course, is invariably in addition to servicing their families through cooking, clothing, childcare, nursing etc.

3.7 Traditional constraints on these multiple roles of rural women are primarily sociological. Women of high caste or aristocratic families are not permitted to engage in any economic activity outside their houses, so their roles are limited to processing/storage of agricultural products. Their responsibilities include feeding and healthcare of the labourers (and their families) as well as looking after the members of their own families. For women in the non-aristocratic groups, constraints are imposed by (a) the traditional division of labour between the sexes and consequent stratification of skills; (b) the position of their families in the rural hierarchy with its consequent taboos, privileges and pressures; and (c) levels of poverty and ill-health aggravated by frequent pregnancies and malnutrition. For the women in this group—the landless agricultural labourers, the small farmers, the artisan and the service castes—poverty manifests itself in over-extended work days, scrounging for a living with low returns, minimum time and resources for family care and household activities, malnutrition and perpetual insecurity of life and living for themselves and their families. The introduction of a new crop, a new method, a new tool, of chemical weed killers, a drought, a flood can take away their precarious living, leaving them to join the ever-increasing group of perpetually moving migrant women—in search of some employment somewhere. If their traditional skills are no longer wanted by the society, they have no time to acquire new ones. They can become unskilled manual labourers in construction gangs, coolies or domestic workers in urban areas, or get recruited into anti-social, illegal, degrading or criminal activities.

3.8 The contemporary scene, however, is in many ways becoming different, and poses a challenge to the planners. The spread of modernization—in agriculture, industries and services—has resulted in a displacement of many rural women from their traditional occupations. Increasing complexity and commercialisation of all economic activities, the entry of science, technology and professionals, and of planned development by Government have precipitated on gap between rural men and rural women, in access to information, skills and services. Inequalities have widen-

ed, and the impact of increasing differentiation between prosperous and impoverished rural families have affected women even more adversely than men.

3.9 By and large this group is also afflicted by rigid caste formations, and it would require an ingenious and enlightened educational programme for the women to overcome the barriers created by the caste system. Another characteristic of rural life is the absence of differences between girls and adult women and separate programmes for them may not be necessary.

3.10 Keeping in view the above mentioned characteristics it would be worthwhile to avoid organising the programmes for women in rural areas during harvesting or sowing seasons, and to give importance to some recreation to relieve them from day-long drudgery. The meeting time for adult education class for women who are engaged in wage earning activities may have to be late in the evening or at a time appropriate to their house work. At the initial stages, there may be no escape from organising programmes separately for different communities with provision for inter-communal participation. The class strength of 30 need not be insisted upon for women's classes.

3.11 In addition to agriculturists a fair number of rural women are artisans of one category or another. These include weavers, leather-workers, potters etc. Adult education programmes for these women can be greatly facilitated if Khadi and Village Industries institutions, cooperative societies of handloom weavers or other sponsoring/marketing agencies could be involved in the programme.

Some General suggestions

4.1 All adult education programmes for working women will need an understanding of the special problems which affect their participation. Some arrangements for childcare would be helpful to enable mothers to participate in these programmes. In some areas school students of the neighbourhood, or university and college students have provided these services as a part of NSS

activity. This needs to be encouraged. Volunteers can also organise services to relieve women learners of some other chores, such as drawing water from the well, assistance in cooking etc. These activities, particularly systematic care of children of women participating in adult education classes should be a preferred activity under NSS.

4.2 Organising skill training—both to upgrade existing skills and to promote new ones—which may include productive, managerial, organisational and participatory skills tend to be somewhat expensive. It may become necessary to link them with other skill training programmes being organised by various development agencies that aim to promote supplementary or alternative sources of wage-earning. These would include artisan training by SFDA, programmes of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission, programmes for promotion of handlooms, Rural Industrialisation Projects, Krishi Vigyan Kendras, etc. For this purpose it would be necessary to establish appropriate coordination—both at the Project and at the Centre levels.

4.3 Although the NAEP emphasises the 15—35 age-group as its main target, keeping in view the uninhibited participation of girls in all family-activities, the age criteria should not be enforced to exclude girls below 15 and women over 35.

Methodology

5.1 A good deal of thinking and innovation is necessary on the content and methods of adult education programmes for women. Whereas literacy must form an indispensable component of such programmes, it would normally have to be preceded by several days of promotion of active participation by and consciousness building among the learners. Health programmes, particularly for their children, are known to interest women. They also have keen interest in affairs affecting their community and region. Learners can be helped to overcome shyness by organised discussions. In some cases it might be necessary to divide the class into smaller groups to help the participants' initial diffidence.

5.2 It would be desirable to organise seminars or discussions groups on local and regional basis to evolve suitable methods and materials with reference to the problems and conditions obtaining in different regions.

5.3 Discussion of their present predicament, leading to increasing awareness regarding women's status in society and the various instrumentalities for overcoming social, economic and civic oppression should form part of adult education programmes. It may be hoped that such awareness would logically lead to formation of women's organisations—such organisations could be simple Mahila Mandals or Trade Unions or Cooperatives—to strengthen the women in asserting their voice more effectively in all decision making.

5.4 Another aspect of programme content and methodology which cannot be overemphasised is recreation and cultural activities to aid the learning process, without destroying their intrinsic value. This can take many forms such as :

- folk theatre.
- community singing and dancing.
- group games.
- excursion to places of historical, religious and developmental importance.
- film-shows including feature films.
- radio and T.V. sessions.

Instructional and Organisational Agencies

6.1 A crucial issue in organising a mass educational programme for women is the difficulty in obtaining women instructors. Although it is not essential that all the instructors must be women (e.g. farm women do not object to agricultural instruction from male instructors), the rationale and the strategy of the programme outlined above make it imperative that the major responsibility must be borne by women. In most earlier attempts

almost total reliance was placed on women teachers of village schools. Although women teachers, who are interested and reside in the area where a programme is to be organised may become a suitable instructional agency, exclusive reliance on this category will not do, because the previous training and work experience of this group has not encouraged flexibility, innovativeness and dynamism. Owing to several reasons, women workers in rural areas are insufficiently paid and supplementation of their income can motivate them for adult education work provided they display the qualities needed for the approach outlined above. Such categories would include balwari and anganwari workers, gram kakis, grihalakshmis etc. In view of the massive nature of the programme visualised under the NAEP, other possible instructional agencies must also be explored. It is self-evident that the majority will have to be women of the community for whom the programme is to be organised. There is likely to be a fair number of women who have had some education either in the formal system of education or under the Condensed Course Programme of the CSWB who might be motivated to take up this work.

6.2 Women's Colleges, particularly, Home Science Colleges which already have some extension training component, should also be invited to participate in this endeavour. Even if these institutions are not able to undertake full responsibility for a complete project area, their involvement would be valuable for training of instructors and project staff, preparation of materials and experiments in programme organisation. Women workers need to be identified, suitably trained, supervised and guided, and enabled to develop a sense of confidence to shoulder this responsibility.. Student groups can, if properly guided play a catalytic role in the development of this programme and may even take field jobs during vacations.

6.3 The NAEP envisages that voluntary agencies, Government, universities, colleges and other educational institutions, employers, municipalities and panchayati raj institutions etc. all have a role to play in the implementation of the programme. There is a

large variety of institutions which cater to one or other aspect of women's welfare. These agencies include Mahila Mandals, employment oriented training institutions, Nariniketans etc., as well as women's organisations like YWCA, AIWC, NFIW, BGMS etc. All these institutions should be advised to take up adult education programme for their illiterate beneficiaries.

6.4 The CSWB's earliest programme for Women's welfare included adult literacy as an essential component. With increasing diversification of its activities and growing dependence on voluntary organisations, this earlier emphasis has been withdrawn. It is imperative to reintroduce it—particularly within the Board's currently expanding programme of socio-economic projects—so that they become models of integrated projects for women's development. This suggestion has already been made by the Working Group appointed by the Department of Social Welfare to formulate its 6th Five Year Plan. The same group also suggests that women's projects be developed around the ongoing and future ICDS projects initiated by the Department of Social Welfare. Another Working Group, appointed by the Department of Rural Development, has recommended organisation of composite projects, including income generation, adult education and health and childcare services through village-level organisations of rural women. The NAEP must establish coordinating channels with all these agencies, to maximise the effort and resources both human and materials, that would be needed to make this programme successful.

Administrative arrangements

7.1 For too long have men attempted to administer women's programmes and one of the tests of seriousness regarding extension of educational facilities to illiterate women would be the extent to which administrative responsibility is placed on women. This would include :

- adequate involvement of women at the advisory stage, at the national, State, district and block levels ;

- appointment of women in key administrative positions, again at the national, State and district levels ;
- entrusting the operational responsibility of the programme of the project level to women, particularly by appointing the majority of Project Officers and supervisors from amongst women ; and
- involving women in resource development, particularly in preparation of teaching/learning materials and in training.

Only when the decision makers are convinced that in all such appointments preference should be given to women who have empathy for the problems experienced by adult women, and who can be expected to have a personal commitment to the cause of women's equality, would it be possible to develop the NAEIP into a living and dynamic programme.

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