

## PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF LITERACY AMONG AGED WOMEN IN IFE CENTRAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*The study investigated perceived benefits of literacy among aged women in Ife Central Local Government Area, Nigeria. Both primary and secondary data were sourced and used for the study. Concept of literacy was used to anchor the study. Cross-sectional survey technique using purposive sampling method was adopted. Eight grandmothers aged between 65 and 85 years, with no formal education, that 'acquired literacy skill' after the age of fifty that were willing to provide required information were purposively sampled for the study using a set of standardized interview guide. Information obtained focused mainly on respondents' socio-economic characteristics and perceived benefits of the literacy. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics while qualitative data were content analyzed. The study identified quest for personal fulfilment as the most common reason for acquiring literacy skills; 75% of the respondents acquired their literacy skills through their children /grandchildren while 25% acquired same through faith-based Non-Governmental Organizations; all (100%) acquired skills in basic arithmetic plus reading and writing in Yoruba language; all (100%) reported ability to read, write and send messages on mobile phones; most common challenge was fear of being mocked by 'teachers'; all (100%) reported significant benefits in terms of: feeling less bored as leisure hours are devoted to literature reading; being more informed; being able to keep records and personal diaries; being able to write private letters and messages; being able to use drugs as prescribed; being more mentally alert; and being able to guide their grandchildren in their academic assignments. Major challenge centred on absence of adequate reading materials for their age group. It was concluded that literacy is perceived to be beneficial to the aged women in the study area. Strategies were proposed to enhance aged women participation in literacy programmes and improve their access to reading materials relevant to their age.*

**Key Words:** Literacy, Numeracy, Illiteracy, Perceived benefits, Grandmother

### Introduction

Invaluable benefits of education is well documented in the literature (Anderson, 1988; Babalola, 1995; Obanya, 2003; Feinstein *et al.*, 2006; Narayan and Smyth, 2006; Abdullah, Doucouliagos and Manning, 2015; Hahn

and Truman, 2015; Hall, 2018; Zajacova and Lawrence, 2018). That females are discriminated against in access to education have also been well documented in the literature (Plan International, 2011; Warrington and Kiragu, 2012; KidsRights Report, 2013;

Yousafzai, 2013). Diverse contributory barriers to females' education have also been well documented in the literature (Aderinto, 1991; Fapounda and Ojo, 1995; Somefun, 1995; Stromquist, 1995; *The Nigerian Woman*, 1997; Walker and McGregor, 1998; Ogidi, 2000; Ankerbo and Hoyda, 2002). General tendency in most of the existing literature on females' education is focusing on youths and young adults that could have economic pursuit as an important goal for their participation in the various educational programmes. Little attention has been given to people older than sixty years, the statutory retirement age in most of the countries in the world. cursory observations revealed that some women in this category, that never had the privilege of attending formal school, for one reason or the other, voluntarily venture into acquiring literacy skills. That there is the need to identify reasons for their 'dabbling' into literacy programmes at this stage of their lives, is a major gap in the literature the study set out to fill. In achieving this goal, the following six questions were raised to guide the study:

1. Why do aged women who never attended formal school decide to acquire literacy skill?
2. What is their source of literacy acquisition?
3. What level of literacy do they acquire?
4. What are the attendant challenges in their acquiring literacy skills?
5. What are their perceived benefits of becoming literate?
6. What are their perceived challenges of their becoming literate?

## **Conceptualization and Literature Review**

Concept of literacy, as used in anchoring the study, is explained in this section.

### ***Concepts of Literacy***

'Literacy' has been conceptualized in diverse ways in the literature. In its earliest form, literacy was conceptualized as "ability to read, write and use numeracy in at least one method of writing" (Moats, 2000; Merriam-Webster, 2014). A review of the concept started in 1980s when scholars argued that the scope of conceptualizing literature should be widened to take cognizance of and incorporate "the complex ways reading and writing always happen in a specific context and in tandem with values associated with that context" (Goody, 1986; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 1984d). Later conceptualization of literacy emphasizes the incorporation of the social and cultural elements (Beach *et al.*, 2005; Sitwe, 2018), and literacy is thus conceptualized as "an ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (UNESCO, 2006). From that era, the scope of 'literacy' has been widened to incorporate modern means of communication like the ICT, mobile phones and the like. For instance, in Scotland, literacy has been defined as: "the ability to read, write and use numeracy, to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners"(Scottish Government, 2001).

Since the study is based in Nigeria, a developing nation, where more than two-thirds of females are still non-literate in terms of ability to 'read, write and use

numeracy in at least one method of writing' (Moats, 2000; Merriam-Webster, 2014), the earliest conceptualization of literacy is adopted with modification to include ability to read, write and transmit messages through the use of mobile phones.

### **Literature Review**

In this section relevant literature are reviewed under three subthemes: 'benefits of education'; 'discrimination against females'; and 'factors inhibiting females' education'.

### **Benefits of Education**

Convergence of opinions in the literature have identified the importance of education as a contributory factor to development, irrespective of how it is measured (Anderson, 1988; Babalola, 1995; and Obanya, 2003). Because of constraints of time and space, relevant literature reviewed on benefits of education, is limited to economic and health benefits of education. Narayan and Smyth (2006) investigated the causal relationship between real income, real investment and tertiary education using data for the People's Republic of China over the period 1952 – 1999 and found that real income, investment and tertiary education are co-integrated when real investment is the dependent variable. Abdullah, Doucouliagos and Manning (2015) examined the effects of education on inequality and found that education reduces the income share of the top earners and increases the share of the bottom earners. Hall (2018) investigated how the quality of education, measured by the average years of school attainment, affect the distribution of income and found that both greater educational achievement and educational attainment reduce income inequality.

Feinstein *et al.* (2006) measured the effects of education on health and civic engagement and found considerable international evidence that education is strongly linked to health and to determinants of health such as health behaviours, risky contexts and preventative service use. Hahn and Truman (2015) provided empirical evidence to support the argument that educational programmes and policies are crucial public health interventions. Zajacova and Lawrence (2018) investigated the relationship between education and health and found that adults with higher educational attainment live healthier and longer lives compared with their less educated peers.

### **Discrimination Against Females**

That females are discriminated against in accessing education is well documented in the literature. For instance, Plan International (2011:7) documented that '*In many societies, a young woman's place is seen as in the home. Yet, she is doubly disadvantaged because her youth reduces her status within her household and community. Because she does not have the same standing as her male peers, she is not perceived to have the same skills or capabilities, and so there is less value in educating her*'. Warrington and Kiragu (2012), from their studies based on Kenya, concluded that '*it makes more sense to educate a boy*'. Cusack (2013:18) concluded his report on gender stereotyping as human rights violation, that '*harmful gender stereotypes limit the ability of women and men to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about lives and life plans*'. Emphasizing that discrimination against girls begins at birth, Yousafzai (2013) documented that in her native country, '*rifles are fired in*

*celebration of a son, while daughters are hidden away behind a curtain, their role in life simply to prepare food and give birth to children'. KidsRights Report (2013:5) documented that '...a deep-rooted cultural perception exists in some regions of the world that women should be restricted to only domestic roles'.*

#### **Factors Inhibiting Females' Education**

Existing literature have emphasized the fact that a great disparity exists between a boy child and a girl-child, which has been to the detriment of the girl-child (The Nigerian Woman, 1997; Aderinto, 1991; Ogidi, 2000). Other researchers have tried to shed lights on some of these factors that pose daunting challenges to females' access to education. Ankerbo and Hoyda (2002) identified household chores, perceived to be females' primary assignment, as major constraints to females' education. Sutton (1998) attributed females' low access to education to economic, household, socio-cultural and school-system factors. Stromquist (1995) identified a host of factors outside the school system, such as lack of time due to domestic work (cooking, obtaining water and firewood, caring for younger siblings, and so on), child labour, early marriage, low aspirations, distance to schools, parents preference for sons' education, and lack of female teachers as affecting girls' enrollment and participation in education.

Walker and McGregor (1998) found that greater responsibility for household chores had a negative impact on girls' school attendance. Fapounda and Ojo (1995) identified the culture of the people, their belief and religion and the nature of the society as some of the obstacles in the way of girl-child education. A study conducted by Walker and McGregor (1998) found that greater responsibility for

household chores had a negative impact on girls' school attendance.

Somefun (1995) identified other constraints resulting in lower female enrollment at all levels of education and consequently, in lower educational achievement by females. Prominent among these are: early marriage and the practice of purdah; economic factors, such as cost of procuring education; the location of the school far away from home; much time spent on domestic chores which reduces time available for study; opportunity costs of formal education to parents in terms of forgone earnings by children; and unsettled life styles of some groups such as nomads and isolation of some settlements such as in the riverine areas.

A major common characteristics of all studies on females' education participation reviewed in this section is that they are all focused on youths and teenagers that could reap economic benefits from participating in educational programmes. The case of elderly women who might have other diverse reasons for participating in education programmes have not been given adequate attention in the literature. This is a major gap in knowledge the present study set out to fill.

#### **Research Methodology**

Both primary and secondary data were sourced and used for the study. Cross-sectional survey technique using purposive sampling method was adopted. Eight grandmothers aged between 65 and 85 years that 'acquired literacy skill' after the age of fifty that were willing to provide required information were purposively sampled for the study using a set of standardized interview guides. Information obtained focused mainly on respondents' socio-economic characteristics and perceived benefits of the literacy.

Percentages were used in analyzing quantitative data on respondents' socio-economic characteristics while qualitative data on respondents' literacy acquisition, challenges and benefits were content analyzed.

### **Result and Discussion**

Given the fact that having no formal schooling experience is one of the major

criteria for selecting sampled respondents, other socio-economic characteristics of the respondents investigated in the study are: marital status, source of literacy, number of children, age, literacy 'skills' acquired, challenges in acquiring literacy skills and perceived benefits of acquiring literacy skills. Results of the investigations are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Respondents' Socio-economic Characteristics**

S/N	Socio-Economic Characteristics	Population	Percentage
1.	Marital Status		
	Married	5	62.5
	Widowed	3	37.5
	Total	8	100.0
2.	Source of Literacy		
	Children/Grand Children	6	75.0
	Non-Governmental Organization	2	25.0
	Total	8	100.0
3.	Age (in years)		
	65 - 70	2	25.0
	71 - 75	4	50.0
	76 - 80	1	12.5
	81 - 85	1	12.5
	Total	8	100.0
4.	Number of Children		
	≤ 4	3	37.5
	> 4	5	62.5
	Total	8	100.0
5	Attendant Challenges in Acquiring Literacy Skills		
	Fear of being mocked by teachers	7	87.5
	Conflict with domestic chores	3	37.5
	Conflict with religious obligations	2	25.0
	Conflict with cultural obligations	1	12.5
	Conflict with social obligations	4	50.0

The study revealed that 62.5% of the respondents were married, 37.5% were widowed, none (0%) single and none (0%) separated. Observed high incidence of married status among the respondents could owe much to the high cultural values attached to being married among the Yorubas, as observed by Somefun (1995) and Sanni (2013). Practice of

polygyny that is popular in the study area might also be a significant reason (Fapounda, 1995; Somefun, 1995; Sanni, 2013). As high as three quarters (75%) of the respondents acquired their literacy skills through their children and/or grandchildren and the remaining (25%) acquired theirs through non-governmental organizations. A quarter (25%) of the

respondents were aged between 65 and 70 years; a half (50%) were aged between 71 and 75 years; 12.5% were aged between 76 and 80 years and 81 and 85 years, respectively. As high as 62.5% of the respondents had more than four children and the rest (37.5%) had not more than four children. That the youngest among the respondents was about 30 years of age in 1985 when the government introduced the policy of maximum of four children per woman might be significant in explaining observed high level of fertility among the sampled population. On being asked specifically why they relied on either the family or religion-based non-governmental organization for their literacy acquisition, all the respondents claimed ignorance of any government owned adult education outlet, especially for their age group in the study area.

Investigations on respondents' perceived benefits of acquiring literacy skills revealed that: All (100%) respondents claimed to have benefitted in terms of: acquisition of skills in basic arithmetic plus reading and writing in Yoruba language; ability to read, write and send messages on mobile phones; feeling less bored as leisure hours are devoted to literature (especially, religious holy books) reading; being more informed; being able to keep records and personal diaries; being able to write private letters and messages; being able to use drugs as prescribed; being more mentally alert; and being able to guide their grandchildren in their academic assignments. Their perceptions corroborated earlier findings on perceived benefits of education documented in the literature (Fapounda and Ojo, 1995; Somefun, 1995; Obanya, 2003; Sanni, 2013)

In-depth interviews conducted with the respondents provided more information on respondents' perceived benefits of acquiring literacy skills. Results here are presented in form of case study reports, as follows. Since all the sampled aged women claimed to have similar benefits of literacy already enumerated above, specific case study of four of these women are presented below, depicting these women's diverse journeys to literacy.

### ***Ruth***

Presently in her 70s, Ruth was the first of her father's ten children and the only female. She was 'automatically' excluded from being considered for formal education because of her being a female. All her siblings were sent to school, three even become lecturers in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Right from childhood, she had secretly lusted for ability to read and write as she believed that she was not a dullard, but that she was denied formal education because of her gender. By 18 years of age, she was married out to a trader in their community. She had six children in quick secession and was very busy raising money to send them to school. At 55 years of age, she was assisting her first daughter in taking care of her grandson who was then in primary one. As a loving grandmother, she developed interest in the child's academic pursuit, always asking him to read and revise his every day's school works with her. Her major challenge in acquiring literacy skills was to accept to be corrected by her daughter and her son-in-law, a practice that was contrary to traditional norms and practice. But she persevered. With the assistance of her daughter and her son-in-law, she was able to acquire reading and writing skills in Yoruba language. She also acquired enough

knowledge in basic arithmetic to become her grandchildren's 'home teacher'. With her acquiring reading and writing skills, she devote most of her leisure hours to reading diverse literature written in Yoruba language, ranging from the Bible to every printed material she could lay her hands on.

### **Lola**

Lola, presently in her 80s, was never sent to school because of her parents' belief that women are meant for the kitchen. She had six children, the sixth, a family planning 'accident', 16 years after her fifth child. Being the child of her old age and her second son, Oluwasinaayo, was the closest child to Lola, their mother. He shared everything with her, relating everything they did in school to her, expecting her to even guide him in his works. Being more matured and more intelligent, the mother picked up reading and writing skills from her son's school works and home assignments. By the time Oluwasinaayo was in primary three, Lola had become very versed in reading and writing in Yoruba language and handling basic arithmetic, which is of invaluable assistance in monitoring her trading activities. A voracious reader, she complains of inadequate relevant Yoruba literature for people of her age.

### **Grace**

Grace was never enrolled in any school during her youth days because of her being a female. Presently in her late 60s, she was an active member of her church, a devout 'prayer warrior' with fervent drive for evangelism. It was her desire to be able to read and freely quote the Bible that made her enroll in the adult literacy program of her church. She was so much interested in becoming literate that she devoted all her will power to the literacy program. Within six months, she could read the Bible to the

extent that she often read out quoted Bible verses in the church. Initial challenges she faced in her literacy pursuit is the fear of being scolded by her tutors, and being ridiculed by her course mates. She got over these challenges by devoting more time to learning everything they were taught in 'school'. At present, she is an avid reader of anything written in Yoruba language. She complained of not having enough reading materials relevant for her age.

### **Tade**

Like others sampled for this study, Tade, 78, was never enrolled in formal education classes because her parents were gender biased. Mother of seven married children, she works as a textile trader in which she prospered. Her desire to become literate after her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, was spurred by three major factors: she observed that persistent loss of textiles in her shop could be arrested by her being able to, periodically, personally take stock and record her existing stock; her desire not to thump print her last child's wedding certificate as she had done on previous occasions; and, her desire to be personally involved in academic grooming of her first granddaughter named after her. She therefore voluntarily enrolled in the adult literacy programme introduced by her church. Despite initial discouragements from friends and relatives, and pressure from social, cultural and economic activities, she stuck to her desire to become literate, and she succeeded in becoming the best in her set. Since then, she reads voraciously everything written in Yoruba to update her reading skills. She achieved the dream of writing and signing her last child's marriage certificate. She keeps a personal diary in which she records important events of every day. She feels highly fulfilled as she is now literate to her satisfaction.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has provided empirical evidence that some aged women in Ife Central Local Government Area, Nigeria, have perceived acquiring literacy as being beneficial to them. The study identified quest for personal fulfilment as the most prominent reason for aged women participation in literacy and established that these aged women felt fulfilled. It was therefore concluded that the local government area was ripe for conscious government intervention in the provision of literacy programmes for aged women.

To this end, the following strategies are proposed: there is the need to evolve and domesticate existing national policy on literacy programme to incorporate literacy needs of the aged in general, and aged women in particular in Osun State. This should be adopted in the local government areas in the state. The domesticated policy should be backed by government's political will to ensure the success of the policy. All major stakeholders in education – the government, the family, non-governmental organizations, religious bodies and members of the general public - should be encouraged to contribute meaningfully to the success of the policy.

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