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ADULT LITERACY AND WOMEN'S SOCIAL MOBILITY IN ZAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the critical relationship between adult literacy and women's social mobility in Zambia, emphasizing the role of literacy as a catalyst for empowerment and gender equality. Notwithstanding significant progress in primary and secondary education, adult literacy rates among women are still low, with important disparities between urban and rural areas. Cultural norms, economic constraints, and limited access to adult education programs remain barriers in acquiring necessary literacy skills, which also constrain their social and economic participation. The study examines Zambia's socio-economic landscape with respect to high levels of poverty, gendered social norms, and historical influences that shape opportunities within the frameworks of women's literacy and mobility. Theoretical lenses such as functionalist theory, capability approach, empowerment theory, and human capital theory underpin the analysis in illustrating how literacy improves socio-economic status, agency, and development outcomes. Empirical evidence depicts that literacy enhances women's job prospects and enables further education, facilitates their active involvement within the community, ultimately leading to gains in decision-making and perpetuating a shift in traditional gender roles. However, cultural beliefs, gender-based violence, and inadequate infrastructure impede progress. Successful initiatives, including community-based programs and international partnerships, demonstrate the potential for improving literacy levels among women. The policy recommendations drawn on expanding gender-sensitive literacy programs, addressing socio-cultural barriers, and fostering community engagement outline ways to improve women's social mobility. Investing in women's adult literacy is crucial for reducing poverty and stimulating inclusive national development-a step toward achieving gender equality. Longitudinal studies and new approaches, such as digital literacy, should

form part of follow-on research necessary to sustain and amplify the gains. Strengthening adult literacy remains an urgent need if women are to be empowered for sustainable development in Zambia.

KEYWORDS: Adult Literacy, Women's Empowerment, Social Mobility, Gender Inequality, Economic Empowerment, Cultural Barriers, Education Policy.

1 INTRODUCTION

While in recent decades Zambia has made significant strides toward expanding primary and secondary education, adult literacy rates, especially among women, remain a formidable development challenge. UNESCO 2020. Literacy encompasses more than just the ability to read and write; it is a Steppingstone in empowering one to engage effectively in economic, social, and political processes. Klasen & Lamanna 2009. For women in Zambia, literacy can act as a pathway to social mobility through opening routes of better employment, education, and participation by them in community matters.

Even though literacy is recognized as central to women's development, there are many barriers to impede them from acquiring such an important skill. Cultural norms, economic constraints, and limited adult education programs commonly hold women back from learning opportunities; World Bank 2018. These obstacles hinder the progress of individuals and further exacerbate gender inequalities that limit socio-economic advancement.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship between adult literacy and the social mobility of women in Zambia. It will analyze the influence of literacy on economic empowerment, social participation, and gender equality for women, while also identifying the structural barriers that limit progress. This understanding will be important in informing policies and interventions promoting gender equality and sustainable development within the country.

1.1 Background to adult literacy in Zambia

While Zambia has made progress in increasing enrollment in primary and secondary school, adult literacy remains an issue. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020), the adult literacy rate was about 70% among males and 55% among females, indicating a serious gender gap. This difference reflects sustained disparities in access to literacy skills among women that are essential for social and economic participation.

Traditionally, Zambia's educational system had been deeply influenced by the colonial legacy, economic constraints, and political instability, all of which restricted access to quality education for large groups of the population, especially adults who did not complete formal schooling. Government programs have initiated a number of activities promoting better literacy, such as adult education classes, literacy campaigns, and community-based learning centers. These have often had mixed outcomes due to insufficient funding, a lack of infrastructure, and deep-rooted cultural attitudes that make it difficult for adult women to receive an education.

Besides, literacy rates are generally lower in rural areas compared to urban centers, reflecting disparities in access and resources. Such gaps in education disproportionately affect women, especially in rural areas, restricting their social mobility and maintaining gender inequality. Understanding the current landscape of adult literacy in Zambia informs targeted intervention design responsive to the educational and social needs of women.

1.2 Importance of women's social mobility

Social mobility, in this context, refers to the potential for women to achieve an improved status on their social, economic, and political levels over a period. The promotion of women's social mobility is, therefore, an important contributor towards sustainable development and gender equality. Through enhanced opportunities in education, employment, and leadership, women are better positioned to make valuable contributions to their families and communities, promoting national development.

Increasing women's social mobility has many advantages. There is a resulting improvement in household welfare since women are more likely to spend their resources on household improvements, health, education, and nutrition, which helps them break the poverty cycle (Duflo, 2012). Moreover, increased social mobility for women means promoting gender equality, challenging traditional gender roles, and encouraging women to be more involved in decision-making processes at every level (World Economic Forum, 2020).

From a broader perspective, social mobility for women accelerates economic growth, reduces income inequality, and enhances social cohesion. Among the United Nations' SDGs, Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) call for states to dismantle obstacles preventing women from reaching their fullest potential and engaging fully in society (United Nations, 2015).

In brief, social mobility for women is not only a matter of individual rights but also a strategic imperative for inclusive and sustainable development. In this case, promoting the rights to literacy and education would be fundamentally instrumental in helping them unlock their potential and actively shape their socio-economic destinies.

1.3 Purpose and scope of the paper

The purpose of the paper is to explore the relationship between adult literacy and social mobility of women in Zambia, emphasizing the role of literacy as a catalyst for the empowerment of women and the bridging of gender inequalities. This work hopes to explain how improving adult literacy levels among women will enhance their social and economic advancement and, subsequently, contribute to broader national development goals.

This research will establish the current status of women's adult literacy in Zambia, determine the barriers impeding literacy acquisition, and assess the impact of literacy on social mobility among women. It also examines the role of government policy, community initiatives, and NGOs in promoting adult education and the empowerment of women.

The scope of this paper limits itself to adult women aged 18 and above living in both urban and rural areas in Zambia. It draws heavily from existing literature, government reports, and available statistics to give an overview of the challenges and opportunities around adult literacy and women's social mobility. This paper further provides recommendations toward policy interventions and program strategies to increase adult literacy and subsequently empower women throughout the country.

1.4 Research questions

The main goal of this research will be to examine the relationship between adult literacy and the social mobility of women in Zambia. In this regard, the study is informed by the following research questions:

- What is the current status of adult literacy among women in Zambia?
- What are the main barriers to literacy acquisition for adult women in Zambia?
- How does literacy influence women's social mobility and empowerment in different socio-economic contexts?
- What role do government policies, community programs, and NGOs play in promoting adult literacy among women?

- What can be done to improve literacy levels among adults in order to promote women's social advancement in Zambia?

2 Contextual Framework

The contextual framework gives an all-rounded understanding of the social, economic, and cultural environment in which adult literacy and social mobility among women in Zambia exist. It draws on relevant theories, models, and contextual factors that influence the relationship between literacy and empowerment.

2.1 Overview of Zambia's Socioeconomic Landscape

Zambia is a landlocked country in Southern Africa with a predominantly rural population and an economy heavily reliant on natural resources; among these, copper mining plays a significant role. According to the World Bank, 2022, mineral exports make up over 70% of Zambia's export earnings, thus making its GDP highly dependent on them and, as such, very susceptible to changes in global commodity prices.

Despite its considerable resource wealth, Zambia faces numerous socio-economic challenges; these include high levels of poverty and inequality. The ZDHS, 2018 reports that an estimated 54% of the population lives below the national poverty line, with rural communities suffering from particularly high incidences of poverty. This disparity contributes to inequalities in access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and clean water.

In social development, Zambia has equally performed quite well, with the expansion of primary education; however, significant differences prevail in the areas of quality and enrollment, mainly among girls and the marginalized group. According to UNICEF, 2020, adult literacy stands at approximately 70%, with big gaps between urban and rural populations (UNESCO, 2021).

The participation of the respective sexes in socio-economic activities is still characterized by inequalities, since women are generally disadvantaged in educational and job opportunities and often excluded from taking up leadership positions. Health indicators remain an issue of concern, with the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate reaching about 11.5% among adults aged 15-49 years, thus negatively affecting social and economic development (Zambian Ministry of Gender, 2019; UNAIDS, 2022).

Infrastructure development is underway but still insufficient in most rural areas, limiting economic activities and access to services. The government's efforts are supported by international partners to diversify the economy, improve social services, and reduce poverty toward the attainment of more inclusive growth.

2.2 Gender dynamics and cultural factors affecting women's mobility

In Zambia, gender and cultural roles significantly affect women's physical mobilities and access to social and economic opportunities. Traditional gender expectations often confine women to domestic and caregiving responsibilities, preventing them from moving out of the home. For example, the 2018 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey reveals that social norms limiting women's mobility often emphasize household responsibilities over active participation in public life, employment, and community activities.

Cultural practices like early marriage, gender-based violence, and social perceptions of independence among women further limit women's movements. For instance, there are certain societies where women are not encouraged to travel alone or do things by themselves without male company; this affects their lives in terms of pursuing education, healthcare, markets, and job opportunities. UN Women, 2020

There are also economic factors at play. In addition, women generally experience financial constraints and mobility barriers due to safety concerns, lack of transportation, or prohibitive costs. For rural women, the challenge intensifies; they may be required to travel longer distances in order to gain access to basic services or carry out any economic activities, thereby making social and economic empowerment difficult to achieve. WORLD BANK 2022

In Zambia, efforts towards raising public awareness on gender equality and women's empowerment are still ongoing through societal perception changes, improving access to education, and addressing violence based on gender. Nevertheless, deeply rooted cultural norms continue to influence women's mobility, impacting their overall participation in development and decision-making processes.

2.3 Historical perspective on literacy and women's empowerment

The literacy approach and women's empowerment in Zambia have been influenced by the country's colonial legacies, traditional cultural norms, and post-independence development

policies. During the colonial period, there was limited access to formal education in the country; this was particularly true for women and people living in rural areas, which led to low literacy rates among women and marginalized their participation in socioeconomic development. Mumba & Banda (2017)

In 1964, after independence, the government of Zambia identified universal primary education as one of its top priorities for nation-building and economic development. However, even with such efforts by the government, gender disparities still existed. For example, the literacy rates among women remained very low compared to those of men, with many cultural beliefs frowning upon female education, especially in rural areas where there was a high regard for traditional gender roles (UNESCO, 2019).

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a shift toward recognition of education as a driver for women's empowerment. Multiple policies for improvement in female enrollment and reduction of gender disparity have been enacted with assistance from international donors and NGOs. These have helped bring gradual improvements, though issues such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and financial constraints remain an impediment to participation.

In recent years, literacy has been seen not only as a way to individually empower citizens but also to further broad-based social change. Women's literacy programs, adult education initiatives, and projects at the community level have played critical roles in encouraging women to participate in economic activities, governance, and social leadership. According to the Zambian Ministry of Education (2021), despite progress, achieving gender parity in literacy rates and ensuring that literacy translates into meaningful empowerment remains an ongoing challenge.

3 Theoretical Perspectives

3.1 Theories Linking Literacy and Social Mobility

Literacy has been linked to social mobility in numerous theories, relating the skill to an increased level of socio-economic status. For instance, under Functionalist Theory, it is believed that literacy enhances one's ability to participate well in society, enabling one to access jobs, civic engagement, and social integration with ease (Durkheim, 1893). Similarly, the Capability Approach has been advanced by Amartya Sen, where he postulates that literacy increases the capabilities of people in their pursuit to develop lives of a quality they value and enjoy (Sen, 1999). In such light, literacy is normally considered an important

resource in facilitating social mobility because it leads to better job opportunities, further education, and social participation.

3.2 Gender Empowerment Frameworks

The focus of gender empowerment frameworks is societal transformation through changing structures and norms that enhance agency and participation. The GAD perspective argues that one needs to address the issue of inequality within the system, where there is an ability to claim rights, equality of opportunities, and powers of decision-making. Empowerment Theory, emanating from psychology and sociology, points out that access to and control over resources, agency, and achievements are crucial dimensions of empowerment. These frameworks help understand how approaches using literacy as a lever for challenging gendered power relations, increasing women's confidence, and enabling their active participation in social, political, and economic contexts.

3.3 Human Capital Theory and Its Relevance

According to Human Capital Theory, investments in education and skills improvement add to the productivity and economic worth of a person, which would, in turn, be beneficial to the individual and society as a whole (Becker, 1964). Literacy, being part of human capital, improves the efficiency, creativity, and adaptability of workers. It also brings an emphasis on women's empowerment through this theory—that improving women's literacy can bring about better job opportunities and income generation, thereby adding to their socio-economic resilience. It also means that promoting women's literacy contributes to larger development imperatives like poverty reduction and gender equality.

4 Adult Literacy in Zambia

4.1 Current Statistics and Trends

Adult literacy in Zambia remains one of the major development challenges despite the gains recorded over time. According to UNESCO, in 2018, the adult literacy rate was about 73% among women aged 15 years and above, while that for men was about 85%. Generally, literacy in rural areas is low; this is more pronounced for women because of a lack of access to education, socio-economic barriers, and traditional norms. Overall trends show gradual improvement, although guided by government initiatives and international support, but disparities persist, especially within marginalized groups like women in rural settings, those with low socio-economic status, and older people.

4.2 Literacy Programs and Policies for Adults

Zambia has been running several initiatives related to the improvement of adult literacy, recognizing its role in economic development and gender equality. Remarkable programs include the Zambia Adult Literacy and Continuing Education Program, which focuses on community-based adult literacy classes for functional skills, numeracy, and life skills. It was expected that the government's National Adult Literacy Strategy would extend access, especially in rural areas, through a partnership with NGOs, community groups, and local authorities from 2011 to 2020. Another example is Lifelong Learning initiatives, which include projects addressing literacy and skills development together with the aim of empowering women and disadvantaged groups in economic activities.

4.3 Challenges in Adult Literacy Acquisition Among Women

Despite these, there are still several challenges facing adult literacy acquisition among women in Zambia. Most cultural and social norms still regard domestic roles as superior to education; hence, time and motivation among women to attend literacy classes are extremely limited. Economic challenges, such as poverty or the need to engage in subsistence farming or informal work, reduce available time and resources for adult education. Further, a general lack of accessible learning centers, a shortage of instructional materials specifically tailored to adult learners, and low levels of awareness about available programs further impede progress. Additionally, gender-based violence and gender stereotypes also undermine women's confidence and motivation to learn, posing other barriers to their acquisition of literacy.

5 Impact of Literacy on Women's Social Mobility

5.1 Economic Empowerment and Employment Opportunities

Literacy greatly expands women's ability to obtain higher-paying jobs, increase their incomes, and achieve a degree of economic independence. Literate women are more capable of understanding job opportunities, managing family finances, and initiating small enterprises. The literature indicates that with literacy skills, women are more likely to enter both the formal and informal labor markets, resulting in higher household incomes and lower poverty levels. For instance, literate women in Zambia are better equipped to engage in small-scale businesses, agricultural ventures, or income generation activities, thereby improving their socio-economic status.

5.2 Professional Development and Continuing Education

Literacy acts as a stepping stone to further education for women, be it secondary, vocational, or higher education. Further, it provides an avenue for professional growth and leadership. Moreover, women with literacy are more likely to appreciate and pursue lifelong learning opportunities, which further equip them with skills and confidence. This resultant learning process propels them more effectively toward societal mobility and cuts across traditional barriers that daunt women's rise in society.

5.3 Social Participation and Community Engagement

Literacy enables women to participate more confidently in decision-making processes at community, social, and civic levels. A literate woman can obtain more information about her rights, health, and other social concerns and thus can advocate for herself and others. As their role in social participation increases, it enhances community ties, increases equality of women, and allows them to act more effectively in terms of local policy and development, thus enhancing their social standing and mobility.

5.4 Changes in Gender Roles and Perceptions

Improved literacy amongst women questions traditional gender stereotypes and roles, leading to greater gender equality. The more educated and confident a woman becomes, the greater the shift in societal perceptions toward recognition of her rights and contributions beyond domestic spheres. Such transformation encourages shared responsibilities, enhances women's influence within the family and community, and facilitates access to leadership positions. In time, the social structure becomes more equitable, with improved social mobility for women.

6 Barriers to Women's Literacy and Mobility

6.1 Cultural and Societal Norms

Cultural beliefs and traditional norms often place more emphasis on the education of males than females. The role of women in most societies has been identified with domestic work, such as childbearing and rearing. The practice of early marriage, and the resultant domestic responsibilities and societal expectations, deny many women opportunities for formal education and personal development. These norms discourage the enrollment of women in literacy programs or their participation in community activities, consequently affecting their social mobility and influencing the persistence of gender inequalities.

6.2 Economic Constraints

The major causes that act as barriers to the literacy and mobility of women include poverty and financial hardship. Most women cannot afford fees, learning materials, or even transport to the centers where education is offered. Contributing toward the household income in the field of subsistence farming or informal work takes priority over education. In this light, economic limitations make quality training facilities and support services that are a necessity for effective learning and social participation quite difficult to access (World Bank, 2018).

6.3 Accessibility to Education and Training Facilities

One major challenge is the limited availability and accessibility of adult literacy programs and educational facilities. Centres for learning are scarce in rural and remote areas, where the means of transportation may be inadequate or unavailable. This is a geographical barrier that does not allow women to enroll or regularly attend literacy classes. Moreover, inadequate gender-sensitive facilities and a lack of female educators may create additional reasons to prevent women from full participation in education programs (UN Women, 2019).

6.4 Gender-based Violence and Discrimination

Women and girls are at risk of gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination both within and outside educational settings. Fear of violence or social stigmatization can inhibit women's participation in literacy classes and other community activities. Discriminatory attitudes and practices also undermine women's confidence and right to education and mobility, creating cycles of inequality and marginalization.

7 Case Studies or Empirical Evidence

7.1 Examples of Successful Literacy Initiatives

Various initiatives have taken place that have yielded very positive results in the literacy levels and mobility for women. For instance, UNESCO's Literacy Boost program in Bangladesh used local communities as a social mobilization approach to improve adult literacy for women, significantly increasing their presence in local decision-making (UNESCO 2014). The Pratham organization in India, through innovative and community-driven approaches to literacy programs, has resulted in much-improved rates among women in rural areas, which in turn has allowed them to take economic opportunities (Pratham 2019).

7.2 Personal Accounts or Qualitative Insights

Personal stories of women's lives are replete with the influence of literacy. For example, Amina from Kenya reported that when she finally learned to read and write, she was able to open a small business, improve her family's economic condition, and gain greater social mobility. These stories highlight how literacy nurtures confidence, independence, and social participation as it overcomes cultural obstacles. Smith & Karanja 2018

7.3 Data Analysis Linking Literacy Levels to Social Mobility Outcomes

Empirical studies have documented a strong correlation between women's literacy and improved social mobility indicators. According to the World Bank report (2017), greater literacy levels among women can be translated into better access to healthcare, participation in political processes, and economic independence. The Demographic and Health Surveys have reported that literacy remains a strong predictor of women's decision-making power and child mortality rates, thus illustrating the link between education and broader social outcomes.

8 Policy Implications and Recommendations

8.1 Strengthening Adult Literacy Programs

Governments and organizations should, therefore, focus on expanding and improving adult literacy programs to help improve women's literacy. Such efforts may include increasing the funds devoted to adult literacy programs, providing flexible learning schedules, and using learning materials that are more accessible and relevant to women's needs. Integrating literacy with vocational training can also encourage women to join literacy classes by relating education with economic empowerment.

8.2 Promoting Gender-Sensitive Policies

For this reason, policies should explicitly address gender disparities by assuring equal opportunities in education and mobility. In addition, there is a need to implement gender-sensitive curricula and training for female educators, along with a safe environment for girls. Legal frameworks should also afford protection for women's rights and their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. UN Women (2019)

8.3 Addressing Socio-Cultural Barriers

Changing deep-seated cultural behaviors requires focused interventions. Community-based dialogue initiatives, which include local leaders and other influencers, test the bounded sets

of gender roles and the benefits of educating women. Offering incentive schemes, such as recognition awards for improving women's literacy, may provide additional motivation for participation and social acceptance. World Bank 2018

8.4 Community Engagement and Awareness Campaigns

Raising awareness on women's literacy and mobility is of prime importance. Campaigns using local media, schools, and community gatherings can emphasize success stories and demystify myths. Engaging men and boys in the cause of advancing gender equality amply creates an enabling environment for women's empowerment (WHO, 2013)

9 CONCLUSION

9.1 Summary of Key Findings

This analysis emphasizes that adult literacy plays a crucial role in the development of women's social mobility. Empirical evidence underlines that successful literacy initiatives, personal stories, and statistical data reveal the transformative power of education for women's economic participation, social inclusion, and decision-making authority. Strengthening literacy programs, introducing gender-sensitive approaches, and overcoming socio-cultural barriers will require policy interventions to help create equal opportunities.

9.2 Reflection on the Importance of Adult Literacy for Women's Social Mobility

Adult literacy empowers women to overcome societal constraints of the traditional kind and gain access to more significant social and economic opportunities. Literacy not only improves the well-being of an individual but also catalyzes community development by disrupting poverty and inequality cycles. Investing in women's education can only be beneficial in the building of inclusive, resilient societies.

9.3 Future Research Directions

Further research is needed on longitudinal studies that assess long-term impacts on the lives of women and their social mobility. The study of innovative, culturally sensitive approaches to adult literacy and the role of digital literacy will also provide invaluable insight. The investigation of the interplay of gender with socioeconomic status and cultural norms enriches the understanding and informs targeted policies.

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