

## Preface

Women's literacy has increasingly become one of the primary objectives of developing countries since the *World Conference on Education for All*, which was held in Jomtien Thailand in 1990. However, the most common portrayals of Arab Muslim women by Western scholars today are those that still depict them as neglected in terms of education, lacking self-confidence, or simply as oppressed members of society. This is often related to the prevalence of Islamic law and norms in Middle Eastern societies (Mernissi 1987; Moghadam 1993). Among the intents of the following study is to reexamine these cultural stereotypes as they pertain to the current situation of female literacy and higher education in the province Tiaret, located in the northern High Plateau region of Algeria.

Since the country's independence in 1962, the numerous literacy programs implemented by Algeria nationwide reflect a general concern for the promotion and development of human resources. Nonetheless, all attempts so far at curtailing the problem of illiteracy among adults in a significant way have been classified as varying in effectiveness from inadequate to complete failures. Large segments of the female population are more severely affected by this, which is particularly due to low retention and high drop-out rates.

A regularly cited reason for failing female literacy programs has been the influence of rigid patriarchal social structures stemming from the "...Algerian male nationalists' needs to defend the family and 'reclaim' Algerian women" (Knauss 1987/*Preface*). At the same time, however, current trends for women university enrolment nationwide are at an all-time high. This has in part been attributed to pro-education policies and financial aid offered under the government of President Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika.

A recent trend in the area of literacy studies has been the concept of empowerment and how it ties into the range of activities undertaken by and for women (Stromquist 2009a (Empowerment discourse), 1997 (Brazil); Kagitcibasi et al. (Turkey) 2005; UNESCO 2005; Moghadam (Iran) 2005); Agnaou (Morocco) 2004; Egbo (Sub-Saharan Africa) 2000). This study endeavors to take a look at the literacy practices and their theoretical implications for empowering women in Algeria. The impact of functional adult literacy on the empowerment of women in the absence of formal schooling will be addressed.

One of the intentions of the inquiry was to determine whether participants showed changes beyond the regular benefits of learning how to read and write. These additional gains extend into the sphere of self-concept, family dynamics and social participation and are what current research in female literacy refers to as empowering.

The data presented here are based on ethnological fieldwork conducted on a women's literacy class in the province (*wilaya*) Tiaret, Algeria, during a 3-year period (2008-2011). Algerian informants, in-laws and friends have contributed greatly to the completion of this dissertation. For the sake of anonymity, most of them have been given fictitious names. Out of cultural respect for the people included in this study, I ask that all photo material not be reproduced.

So far, there exists little research on how educational systems and policies, instructional materials, and pedagogical practices best support the literacy and educational achievement of women literacy learners from a gender perspective. "Assessment of literacy program impact is particularly difficult given the irregular attendance and duration of enrollment of participants as well as the significant variation in levels of acquaintance with print that participants bring with them. Also, the content and intensity of literacy programs vary, making the aggregation of findings across programs difficult" (Stromquist 2009:2). Where women's recruitment and sustained attendance of a functional literacy class over time are problematic, I argue that the literacy courses in Algeria, as they have been constituted so far, still do not meet the needs of the learners.

The following is a qualitative study, which focuses on the needs of a small sample of women learners from their perspective. It recommends using a woman-positive approach, which considers the local culture-based Islamic practices such as female segregation. Other socio-cultural factors such as the value placed on privacy, the division of labor and gender-based inequality affecting adult female literacy are considered for crafting the progress of future literacy programs. Some ideas toward a concept of female literacy within an Islamic context are introduced. Before a workable gender-aware strategy for female literacy in Algeria can be planned, it is necessary to find out to what degree this problem can be traced to the literacy programs and to what extent the traditional patriarchal structures act as a barrier.

After having spent an ample amount of time in the Haut Plateau region over the past decade with various Algerian women, ranging from those who have never held a pen to a university professor, it is my personal ambition to offer some insight on the significance of gender as it ties into the traditional practice of Islam and Islamic guidelines as expressed in the Qur'an and Hadiths and thus contribute to the intercultural understanding of rural Muslim societies and their own perception about women, literacy, and higher education. In this process, I

hope that some common negative images about the role of women and education in Islam can be dispelled.

Although interdisciplinary in part, this study examines the educational situation of women in the Haut Plateau by using methods derived from the field of ethnology. One of the advantages this discipline has for researching topics involving other cultures is the importance it places on what Clifford Geertz (1973:5-6) referred to as the thick description of human behavior. This entails a method of doing ethnography that not only explains behavior but does so within its cultural context so that its meaning can become intelligible for the outsider.

To date, there are no empirical studies on adult female literacy in Algeria that focus on the cultural construction of gender and empowerment. A gender approach to education is committed to establishing reasons for the deficiencies of literacy among women. The present study is a conscientious effort to supplement the current scholarship and meant to be of use to policy makers and campaigns working toward the improvement of female literacy programs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region).

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Empirical Study on Cultural Construction of Gender and  
Empowerment

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