

1 Geographic Location and Demography

The People's Democratic Republic of Algeria is the largest country in Africa, having an estimated population of thirty-six million as of 2011 (Algerian Office of National Statistics). It borders on the Mediterranean Sea with a coastline stretching close to 998 kilometers between Morocco and Tunisia. The geography is diverse and can be divided into three zones by the Tellian and Saharan Atlas mountain ranges, which cross the country from the east to west: the fertile coastal plain in the north, the Haut Plateau region, and the desert. Nearly 80% of the country is comprised of desert, steppes, wasteland, and mountains.

Ethnically the population is made up of about 80% Arabic and 20% Berber. The Berbers were the original inhabitants of the region and can be subdivided in four main groups. The largest group, are the Kabyles, who mainly live in the Kabylia Mountains east of Algiers. The Chaouias live in the Aurés Mountains, the M'zabites in the northern Sahara and the Tuareg in the desert.

The state religion is Islam, and 99% of the Algerian people are Sunni Muslims. Islam forms the basis of religious life in Algeria and acts as an important unifying factor not only between Berbers and Arabs within the country, but with other Arab nations. The range of observance among Algerian Muslims varies from area to area; however, people from rural areas tend to adhere to their traditional practices more strongly.

Officially, Algeria is a multiparty republic made up of 48 provinces or *wilayat*, each of which is headed by a governor, or *wali*, who reports to the Minister of Interior. The governor serves as the primary liaison between local and federal government. In general, there is a sense of animosity felt by the majority of the population towards the political elite. To a large degree, people do not feel represented by their government. The level of social unrest is exacerbated by political repression, poverty and unemployment.

Currently, over 50 percent of poor people live in rural areas, and more than 20 percent of the total population lives below the national poverty level. More people tend to cohabitate in rural households than in urban ones, and, accordingly, unemployment is much higher there. From a geographical perspective, the highest incidence of poverty occurs in the northern part of the country, in the Haut Plateau or steppes region, where this study was conducted, and in the south

Saharan region (International Fund for Agricultural Development; <http://www.ifad.org>).

Well before Algeria gained its independence, a steady migration from the rural countryside into larger cities or “exode rural” had been in motion. The reasons for this are job scarcity, a weak infrastructure, the deficit of goods in local stores, poor hygiene, and a lack of schools in the nearby areas. As of now, approximately ninety percent of the Algerian people live along the Mediterranean coast, which makes up 12% of the country’s entire land mass. Despite government efforts to discourage mass migration, forty-five percent of the population is urban and urbanization continues. According to the United Nations Development Program, Algeria has an immediate shortfall of 1.5 million housing units due to the continued influx from rural to urban areas.

Among Algeria’s poorest people living in the country’s rural areas are smallholder farmers; pastoralists; female heads of households; and unemployed youth, the so-called *hittiste*. The Arabic word for wall is *hit*, and so the young dispossessed males aimlessly propping up against walls throughout the country have soon become known as *hittiste*. All of these people are most affected by illiteracy. They include the so-called regressive illiterates, who relapse into illiteracy through the disuse of reading and writing on a daily basis.

1.1 Current Functional Literacy Program in Algeria

In recognition of the disparity in education, the Ministry of Education in Algeria made a new conceptual attempt to address the problem of adult literacy, which it introduced on the occasion of World Literacy Day on January 8, 2007. One of its ultimate goals is to reduce illiteracy by fifty percent by the year 2016. This literacy campaign, headed by the nationwide women’s literacy organization Iqraa (the imperative of the verb “read” in Arabic) with the support of civil society associations, claims to direct its efforts towards women and girls as its focus groups. It aims to achieve an appreciable increase in the literacy rates of families living in rural areas and remote communities. Of the estimated 6,4 million non-literates in Algeria, 177,594 students attended literacy class in 2007/2008 and 85% of them were women (www.magharebia.com/cocoon/2007).

Among its official strategies for motivating women to join the literacy classes has been the addition of vocational courses such as embroidery, sewing, hairdressing and small business training to the curricula. Furthermore, certificates of achievement are to be awarded to women at the end of each course in order to honor their accomplishment and encourage them to continue on with

their studies (Hammoud, 2007:Archive Nr. 66, http://www.iiz-dvv.de/index.php?article_id=208&clang=1).

Two years into the program, Aicha Barki commented at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), held in Brazil in 2009, that a literacy strategy for Algeria must entail an innovative approach that mobilizes funds and sensitizes the government and affected populations to the severity of this problem. She used this platform to give an update on the situation of literacy and, more importantly, to take advantage of the opportunity to make a direct appeal to CONFINTEA:

Dear Colleagues,

Algeria, in the North of Africa, also has high rates of illiteracy. In fact, 21.36% of its population is affected by this. A state institution is in charge of the national strategy to combat illiteracy with the support of civil society associations. This strategy was adopted in January 2007.

Algeria aims at eradicating this problem by 2016 and is investing important human and financial resources. We must remember that schooling for children between 6 and 16 has reached 97% this year. Nevertheless, within the framework of this big operation, the method to take care of illiterate people faces problems in finding support from the affected populations; although this year more than 562.000 registered for literacy courses, we are still far from our forecast.

I take advantage of this space to ask from those of you who have made use of an innovative approach for mobilization and sensitization, those of you who implemented a successful experience, to contact us so that we can improve our own experience.

For CONFINTEA, we expect much more in terms of action. We all know the diagnosis, we must act. Communities are tired of unfulfilled promises, millions of boys and girls do not go to school, there are millions of young people exploited, millions of women excluded. How can it be expected that countries with schooling and illiteracy rates beyond any understanding invest in an operation for adult education?

If there is a message that must be heard it is that of Action. CONFINTEA must claim accountability from all those who have made commitments and have done nothing, who have not kept their word. We must Act, act...Africa suffers, under the eyes of all those who plunder their wealth and continue to do so.

CONFINTEA must look at countries in conflict, where education is the last concern, looking a bit to Palestina. I fear that this is going to be just another meeting. (www.icae.org.uy/eng/icaeconfinteasemcomdiezonce.html)

In general, CONFINTEA VI gave women from different backgrounds a chance to have their voices heard within the parameter of gender justice. Among the main themes covered by the conference were adult learning, gender equality, as well as the empowerment of women.

1.1.2 Arab Uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa

The problems of illiteracy as linked with poverty and unemployment are not a phenomenon unique to Algeria. Also referred to as the Arab Spring, the revolutionary events in the Arab world that began on 18 December 2010 are a direct reflection of this. The Algerians were captivated and inspired by the courage shown by their Arab counterparts, who during several weeks of civil uprisings and mass protests widely used Facebook and text messages in a “peoples’ revolution” for democracy set off by government corruption, human rights violations, inflation, extreme poverty and severe shortage of jobs. The televised demonstrations were closely followed until autocratic rulers were ousted from power after decades-long rule in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Similar protests soon followed and are ongoing in Yemen, Bahrain, Lebanon and Syria.

On 12 February 2011, just a month after the president of Tunisia fled to Saudi Arabia and the day after Egypt’s president, Hosni Mubarak, finally loosened his 30-year-long grip of power, an estimated 10,000 Algerians demanding democratic reforms flooded the streets of downtown Algiers, gathering in the central First of May Square. Their actions defied the two-decades-long state of emergency, which bans demonstrations in the capital. As was the case in other protests in the Middle East, the presence of women who actively participated was high.

A major political slogan of the demonstrators in the Arab world has been *Ash-sha’b yurid isqat an-nizam* (“the people want to bring down the regime”). The slogan, which first emerged during the Tunisian Revolution, has frequently been used by Algerian protestors along with “No to the police state”, “Make room for youth”, and “Bouteflika out”. The last slogan refers to President Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika, who has been in power since 1999. Bouteflika, now in a somewhat fragile state of health, was re-elected in 2004, again in 2009 after revising the constitution to allow for an indefinite number of terms, and most recently in 2014.

However, anticipating the protests, the Algerian government sent out squads of heavily armed police. As the masses made their way towards the central square, they were confronted by 30,000 officers. Considering this overwhelming threefold police advantage, the demonstration was quelled before it could begin.

Many protests were met with violent responses from authorities. The government, however, immediately responded to the popular uprisings by lowering the prices of food and televising plans set in motion for political reforms.

Just prior to the demonstration in Algiers, several isolated cases of self-immolation attempts made by both men and women were reported as taking place near official buildings in form of anti-governmental protest. This form of protest has been traced back to Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, who set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, in protest of the confiscation of his wares because he did not have the appropriate permit for selling on the streets. This act became known as the catalyst for the Tunisian revolution that set off subsequent protests in several other Arab countries.

Many street vendors support their whole family, as did Mohamed Bouazizi, who also financed his younger sisters' way through college. In Algeria, some boys as young as 10 years old resort to this way of earning a living because it is the only way to survive. Others simply prefer to make money rather than go to school. Often their parents are illiterate and either underestimate the importance of an education or see how little difference a school certificate makes in the first place.

Renewed protests started up again a year later towards the end of January 2012. During this time a young street vendor set himself on fire in the wilaya Tiaret in protest of getting his wares confiscated. Other incidents of self-immolation have been reported throughout Algeria since then. Protests in Tiaret rallied against the ongoing deficit of apartments, which fail to match the steady growing demand of young families, who increasingly wish to live in their own homes separate from the husband's patrilineal kin group. Throughout Algeria families are forced to wait for 15 plus years for adequate housing (see also Le Suer, J. *Algeria since 1989: between terror and democracy*, 2010).

Similar to elsewhere in the Arab world where Western-supported dictators have abused their power, the Algerian people are fed up and frustrated. Theoretically, resource-rich nations such as Algeria have the means for building functioning societies that flourish. The number of the intellectually willing and able is high if only their leaders would invest in them instead of feeding corruption. However, the anti-governmental sentiment is not so much directed towards President Bouteflika as it is towards the age-old regime.

Although the opposition, which is largely comprised of the unemployed youth, is frustrated by poor living conditions, lack of housing, high food costs, a deficit of jobs even for university graduates, poverty and corruption, many Algerians, if not the majority, want to see in Bouteflika the man who intelligently and gracefully lifted them out from the decade-long blaze of civil war. Algeria is still

emerging from several years of internal conflict, set off by the military *coup d'état* of January 1992 that left over 150,000 dead and thousands wounded.

In the weeks surrounding the uprisings, one would often hear such remarks as “It is not the same situation as in Egypt or Tunisia” and “We have our freedom of speech and can wear our *hijab*” (Islamic dress and head cover). After randomly talking to ordinary Algerian citizens, one soon gets the impression that the men and women, whether they be professionals, farmers, students, elderly or non-literate, uphold a sense of pride and admiration when they speak of their president.

Added to the equation are the scars people still carry around from what Luis Martinez describes as “one of modern history’s most savage and incomprehensible civil wars. . . which put a sudden halt to the country’s incipient democratic process” (*The Algerian Civil War*, 2000. The French-Algerian author writes under the pseudonym Luis Martinez). His empirical analysis provides a solid account of the events taking place in Algeria during the 1990s. This decade-long war deepened poverty and unemployment in rural areas and contributed to the deterioration of the natural resource base.

During this time, thousands of people throughout northern Algeria fled from the countryside only to live in overcrowded households that rapidly emerged in squatter zones located at the periphery of cities. These settlements are characterized by astonishing density, decrepit housing structures, horrid sanitation, disease-laden water, minimal or nonexistent social services, and unemployment upwards of 50%.

The living situation is somewhat reminiscent of the squatter house phenomenon in Algiers, the first so-called *bidonvilles*, dating back to the 1930s. Although they resulted from different circumstances, namely, the population influx under the colonial regime, the living situations were similar to those seen today. Similar circumstances are also evident in cities in Tiaret, near the location of this study.

In 2010, just a year prior to the uprisings in the Middle East, 130 politicians and businessmen were imprisoned for fraud and corruption in Tiaret alone. Though this may be indicative of the government’s increased efforts to curb the widespread problem of corruption, the general sentiment among the people is that this is still not sufficient.

In April 2009, President Bouteflika made his way to Tiaret to oversee the official opening of a dry port that had recently been built in the area. On the eve of his visit, street workers hastily began paving roads until the late hours of the night, a task that should have been done years ago. The job was so poorly done, that within just weeks after Bouteflika had left, the once shiny new streets already began to crumble.

The corruption seems to have an effect on people's sense of common civic conduct as well. In Tiaret, several highly populated parts of town still remain unpaved. Underground pipe-laying projects, for example, are left half finished. The streets are dug up; pipes are installed and then carelessly covered with dirt. The job is apparently considered to be done. Then during the winter months when the rainfall is at its highest, the dirt roads soon turn into a disastrous muddy mess, making it impossible to drive and very difficult and unpleasant to walk through.

Among the most common sights in Tiaret are trees and barbed wire gates literally filled with plastic bags that have aimlessly blown about after being simply cast away. At the corner of almost every block are the uncanny piles of garbage, almost predictably scattered in the vicinity of large green public trash bins rather than finding their proper place within them. It is almost as if the careless way people litter up their towns and cities is a reflection of their resignation to ever attaining a more just way of life.

Reminiscent of Mohamed Bouazizi are scenes of young boys scrambling down an alley with their two-wheeled push-carts piled high with plastic wares that were made in China or with seasonal fruits and vegetables in desperate attempts to escape the police right at their heels. Without a school degree, they are working the only jobs available to them but constantly face the limitations of law. These are among the more unpleasant images that make up part of the rural-urban Algerian landscape today. One thing does deserve mention: the government briefly reversed its anti-street vending rule directly after the 2011 protests in North Africa reached Algeria.

Indeed, it would not be fair to exclude the fact that there are just as many, if not more, engaging scenes that counterbalance this picture. Some of the endearing day-to-day sights of Algerian people bring forth images of Pierre Bourdieu's early documentary snapshots taken during the 1950's of women scurrying through narrow streets in their white, one-eyed haiks; men in their camel-colored hooded burnouses carrying home bags full of groceries to their families; and the street vendor youth pushing the same home-made carts they use today.

The similarities between then and now are so striking that it sometimes seems as if time had stood still (see Franz Schultheis, *Pierre Bourdieu in Algerien* 2003). Overall, however, it can be said that the latest civil war placed an enormous strain on the infrastructure -- and thus on education -- and that this strain has left its marks for years to come.

Since 2010, Algerians avidly follow the events of the revolution spreading throughout the Middle East and North Africa. However, due to the violence they experienced during the Black Decade (civil war during the 1990s) of their own, the social climate is cautious. When asked whether they thought Algeria would

be next in line for a revolutionary revolt, many faces fell and paled at the thought of a similar crisis happening again so soon in their own country. The fear is especially written on the faces of people from the older generation, who experienced the mysterious loss of family members first hand.

The Algerians did not learn about the details of the events unfolding in Algiers from the local news channels, nor did they expect to since the government holds a monopoly over broadcast media. The news here is widely referred to as “*yateem*” – literally defined as *orphan*. It is an off-the-record term referring to the lack of truthfulness, exhibiting no basis in fact and having no integrity.

When Algerians really want to find out what is happening in their country, they either read one of the 45 daily newspapers published in French and Arabic or switch to *Al Jazeera*, the pan-Arabic news station based in Qatar, whose star anchorwomen, Khadija Bin Ganna, is an Algerian. In addition to her esteemed manner of presenting the news, Khadija Bin Ganna is highly regarded among men and women alike for her courage to wear a headscarf on an international news program. For other Algerian onperspectives why the Arab Spring has not yet materialized, see “Algeria: The Revolution that never was” (<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/05/2012516145457232336.html>).

One of the immediate outcomes of the revolutionary wave that has rippled throughout the Middle East is that it has shown the world that Arabs are capable of much more than merely being pitiable statistics of unemployment and illiteracy. In Egypt, for example, both men and women took to the streets thus uniting together for the same cause and have proved their strength in numbers instead of being powerless subjects of ‘moderate’ but ‘strong’ leaders who are essentially modern-day dictators.

Though for now the anti-governmental protests in Algeria have quieted, a leader of the Movement of Society for Peace called for more opposition parties to join the alliance “to give the best possible chance for the Arab spring to happen in Algeria as well” (Ouali, Aomar (26 February 2012). “Algerian Islamists agree on alliance ahead of vote” (The Huffington Post/The Associated Press). Alongside all this, somewhere caught in between the layers of this diverse, complex, and sometimes seemingly irrational nation are the non-literate women, to whom little attention has been given so far.

Street vendor (5); Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika presidential campaign 2009 (6)



1.2 The Fieldwork Setting

The fieldwork for this study was carried out in an Arab community in the province Tiaret, located in the northern plateau region of Algeria. The province lies southwest of the capital of Algiers in the western region of the central highlands, in the Tell Atlas. This area averages 914 meters above sea level and is characterized by limited rainfall and great rocky plains. The region is predominantly one of agriculture specializing in wheat. According to the most recent demographic survey conducted in 2008, the town had a population of 178,915.

The community was chosen for various reasons. Primarily, it was due to the connection I have maintained with the family of my husband over the past ten years. This familial link proved to be invaluable in a study where close ties are central for establishing solid contacts in order to observe and interview informants over a long period of time. Another reason for selecting this area, as mentioned earlier, was that it belongs to one of the regions in Algeria where the rates of female literacy consistently remain among the lowest in country.

After 132 years of French occupation, Algeria was left with a dismally low level of educational development. By the time of independence in 1962, 85 percent of the entire population was illiterate. Since then, Algeria has made noticeable progress in raising these rates, currently at 79.6 percent literacy for men and 60.1 percent literacy for women. Again, it is the women who constitute the majority of the non-literate total. Wilayas consistently affected by low rates of literacy are Tamanrasset, Ain Delfla, Médéa, Chlef, Khenchela, Djelfa, Tissemsilt, and Tiaret (www.ElMoudjahid.com/accueil/forum/10422; www.Algerie-dz.com/article14783).

Originally, I planned to carry out my study in a smaller village located an hour away from the city where I lived in the Tiaret province. However, contrary to the claims of the literacy campaign launched in 2007, no literacy classes were being offered in the remote rural areas within the vicinity of Tiaret during the onset of my research in April 2008. Two years later, in the fall of 2010, a literacy class was offered in a local elementary school in one of the villages in question.

According to some local inhabitants there, only 4 or 5 women regularly attend these classes. I was informed by four young women and relatives of one of the participants in her late fifties that she dropped out for good after one year. The reasons she gave for quitting were that the classroom was too cold during the winter months due to lack of heating and because she was disappointed with her own rate of progress.

Even though I focused my attention on the literacy program in a city within the province Tiaret, I refer to the setting as *semi-rural* or hybrid (part rural/part urban) because it is located in the vicinity of a farming and wheat-growing re-

gion, and the city inhabitants maintain strong ties to the surrounding villages, which are known throughout Algeria for preserving their traditional way of life. Tiaret provided the optimal backdrop against which to trace both the changes and gains made by the female participants of the literacy program.

Traditional Algerian society has been well documented by Pierre Bourdieu's in-depth ethnographic research on Kabyle society (1958). His findings were corroborated by Miner and deVos (1960), who conducted a study of a small-scale traditional Arab community in Sidi Khaled near Biskra in southern Algeria. Both these social anthropological accounts serve as the basis for Peter Knauss' theory (1987) on the persistence of patriarchal structures in present-day Algeria, which he traces back to pre-colonial times.

The origins of modern patriarchy in Algeria can be found in the patrilineal, patrilocal extended family of the Berber and Arab tribes of precolonial Algeria, and in the Kabyle concept of male honor. The root of modern Algerian populism and socialism can be found in the egalitarian traditions of communal land tenure and the democratic principle of collegial decision-making in the Algerian tribes. Algerian Islamic doctrine, like Islamic dogma elsewhere in the Muslim world, contains important egalitarian moral imperatives as well as certain requirements that support patriarchal arrangements (Knauss 1987:1).

The central components of traditional Algerian society in the high plateau region include the patrilineal and patrilocal extended family, the sense of family honor as reflected by the moral conduct of women, and the religious adherence to Islam. Customarily rural women led their lives in the close proximity of their homes. Most were marginally schooled or illiterate, having dropped out after primary school. Some marrying as young as age twelve, they filled their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers.

During my fieldwork, I met several young women who were coaxed into dropping out of school between the ages of 15 and 17. The reasons for this were similar to those of their grandmothers, namely, to avoid contact with young men and thus uphold a good moral reputation before marriage as well as to help their mothers in the home.

At the same time, however, I noticed a trend that seemed to take root around the year 2000. This coincided with the end of the decade of terrorism and the time President Bouteflika was first elected to office in 1999. It seemed as though all of a sudden more and more young women were completing their secondary school level and continuing their studies at the local Ibn Khaldun University, established in 1980. A number of the university graduates whom I interviewed are now working as secretaries and teachers. One interviewee especially stands out over the rest. She is a professor of veterinary medicine and drives a car to work.

Although a clear improvement has been made in school enrolment for girls and the tendency for women with traditional backgrounds to attain higher education has widened, the ongoing gender disparity in adult literacy indicates the importance of reviewing the situation of education for women and its impact on their status both at home and in society.

1.3 Research Objective

This study attempts to examine the question of gender in adult literacy within the ethnological context of Algeria. It represents the first empirical study of its kind that analyses the role of gender within the framework of empowerment as it specifically pertains to rural Algerian women. It contends that the ethnographic data collected for this study can offer valuable insight into the current situation of female literacy and can be utilized for *improving* and developing literacy strategies addressing women's needs.

Although the literacy strategy implemented in 2007 is in the narrowest sense “only” a functional literacy program with no explicit objectives to address the issue of gender and disempowerment, it has described specific initiatives to furthering gender equality in education through its intention to target women and girls from remote areas. The recent claim by the literacy program in Algeria to include vocational courses in female literacy curricula has an obvious practical value. However, are these courses too narrow in scope in the sense that they focus on discrete skills rather than on the broader social context of the learners' lives?

■ The hypothesis that previous literacy attempts have failed because learners' literacy needs were not being met seems reasonable. The question then becomes, is the most recent literacy strategy implemented in 2007 to target women and girls effective enough in recruiting and sustaining female learners over a longer period of time? If not, in what ways could it expand its strategy to include issues of gender and empowerment and more importantly, what does “women's empowerment” mean in the context of an adult literacy program in Algeria, and how can progress in empowerment be measured?

This dissertation draws upon the notion that literacy is a set of cognitive skills developed within a cultural context imperative for understanding the written word (Stromquist 2009a). It discusses the theoretical and conceptual issues of empowerment arising from the practice of educating Algerian women. It is stipulated that the number of female literacy class participants, their long-term motivation, and their subsequent empowerment through literacy acquisition will

increase if policy makers design literacy programs that address gender issues and include the local traditions so as to meet the needs of the students.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First and foremost, it investigates the experience of a group of women over a three-year period as students in the literacy program Iqraa. It assesses who the learners are and probes what these women perceive to be their literacy needs. A closer look is taken at how the cultural structures surrounding this patriarchal society affect female literacy.

The pedagogical practices and instructional materials of the literacy program are analyzed for their cultural relevance and to determine whether they support the needs of the women learners. Aside from the obvious gains of learning to read and write, included in this work were the effects of the literacy program on women's empowerment in the areas of self-concept (intrapersonal empowerment), social participation (interpersonal empowerment), family dynamics and Islam.

Throughout this study, literacy is considered a prerequisite for empowerment and educational advancement. As this topic correlates to and extends beyond female literacy, the experience of a small sample of students attending the Ibn Khaldun University in Tiaret was surveyed in order to help project future trends of women's education. An interesting parallel to the low rate of female literacy in rural areas is the fact that women now constitute the overwhelming majority of those who attend universities.

The current generation of Algerian women represent nearly 60 percent of the total university population nationwide (Altman *et al.* 2009:206). Similar trends have been observed throughout the MENA region as well (Akkari, Vol. 5, N°2, 2004; Moghadam Oct. 2003; Spratt 1992:121-132). This development is comparable to present rates found in Europe and the United States. Therefore, this study also examines female access and gender equity in higher education and employment. Among the intentions of the gender-survey was to determine whether rural attitudes toward women's education at the tertiary level and increased participation in the workforce have begun to change.

1.4 Central Questions

The questions central to this study have been divided into three parts: Female Literacy and Empowerment; Workable Strategies for Female Literacy; and, Access and Gender Equity in Higher Education and Employment. The first set of questions specifically addresses how illiteracy in the context of rural Algeria is essentially a women's issue.

By using the participants' personal accounts as primary data, one of its main objectives was to determine what kinds of adult education policies are relevant to the needs of rural women and in what ways do the functional literacy classes empower women. The overwhelming similarities in culture and ways of thinking among societies in North Africa suggest that the following questions related to female literacy and education could be relevant for policy formulations throughout the Middle East.

1.4.1 Women's Literacy and Empowerment

From the perspective of the women learners, how can or does literacy or illiteracy impact their daily lives? To what extent do rural Algerian women believe that literacy contributes to or illiteracy limits their ability to contribute to the well-being of their families and to the socio-economic progress of their community? Is it possible to determine a link between the access to literacy and the empowerment of rural women within their households and communities?

What are local attitudes towards women who aspire to join or who already attend a literacy class? What socio-cultural boundaries stand in the way of women becoming literate, and what are some of the strategies women develop to overcome them? To what extent can the problematic surrounding the attainment of literacy be attributed to patriarchal structures, and to what degree can this problem be attributed to political issues involving poor learning concepts and a lack of resources?

Other related questions focus on the classes themselves, the teachers, and the participants. Is Algeria's new literacy concept effective in targeting women in rural societies? Does the class content meet the socio-cultural needs of its participants? Who are the students, why are they illiterate, and what reasons do they give for wanting to become literate now? Who are the teachers and how are they recruited and trained? Does the discrepancy between the spoken dialect and classic Arabic pose a problem for literacy students? How are the courses organized didactically, and what is the program's ultimate objective? How do mothers manage to fulfill their household tasks in order to attend class on a regular basis? What are the most common reasons for being absent or dropping out altogether? How do women retain their literacy after the course has ended?

1.4.2 Workable Strategies for Female Literacy

This set of questions probes possible strategies for improving female literacy and higher education within the context of a rural Algerian society. In what ways can traditional patriarchal families be sensitized to the importance of an education for girls and women? What is the Islamic perspective on women, literacy and higher education, and how does this diverge from traditional views? What kinds of policies should be implemented in future literacy programs in order to better suit the local situation. How can more women be recruited to attend a literacy class, and how can their motivation as long-term learners be sustained? How can the government support women in their basic and higher educational endeavors, thus contributing to the empowerment of women and the country's socio-economic advancement?

1.4.3 Access and Gender Equity in Higher Education and Employment

The following questions correspond to the recent development of young women who are taking advantage of the opportunity for furthering their education. What do women hope to achieve by pursuing a higher education? How do rural Algerians and family members feel about and react to this trend? How are traditional female roles changed or challenged? What problems or conflicts arise? In what ways does going to the university alter women's status?

What is the pattern of female education within families? Do all female members get access to the same educational opportunities? What explains the apparent contradiction between a social reluctance to fostering (or even allowing) adult women to become literate on the one hand and the parallel boom in the number of female university students on the other? What factors enabled some women within the same setting and within the family to become literate or highly educated and entering the workforce while impeding others from access to similar levels of education? For example, why do some women remain illiterate while their sisters or daughters finish their studies and pursue a career?

1.5 Method

The strategy implemented in developing the present work derives in part from a compilation of information focusing on women, gender, and literacy acquisition from earlier publications. Throughout this study comparisons of social change

among women within the region will be made and factors that best explain the differences in women's status through time will be emphasized.

The method of analysis of the functional literacy program in Algeria draws on data from recent research investigating the link between literacy and empowerment. As a main point of reference for conducting a gender analysis of the current functional literacy program in Algeria, UNESCO's guidelines for analyzing literacy programs from a gender perspective (1999) was put forward.

The historical method was used in order to better understand the developmental context of female education in Algeria. I have relied upon ethnographic monographs and evaluated other secondary sources about the education of girls and women before, during, and after the French colonial regime in Algeria. This in turn establishes a platform from which a culturally appropriate strategy for female literacy programs and projects that are gender based can be designed.

Fieldwork conducted over a period of three years (2008-2011) on a literacy program and community not formerly subjected to empirical analysis in this subject provides the primary data for this study. Quantitative and qualitative methods such as a participatory and systematic observation were utilized. Controlled in-depth interviews were taken from all 17 members, aged 16-72 years, of a women's literacy class, which was held at a local grade school. Beginning with a brief family history, topics profiled family literacy and education patterns.

Other questions focused on their motivations and goals for attending. The participants' level of contentment with the learning material and style of teaching was assessed. Also surveyed were literacy activities on an everyday basis, health, culture, and religion, as well as family attitudes towards women, literacy, and higher education. Finally, in addition to the observation of obvious gains such as the attainment of basic reading and writing skills, subtle changes impacting the women's concept of self and of social and cultural status were measured throughout the length of the course.

In addition to this class, all 10 members of the adjacent men's literacy class, aged 32-73 years, were interviewed. Although the men's survey was not as comprehensive as the women's, the content of their questions centered around their attitudes towards the development of female literacy and higher education in Tiaret. The data from both classes were cross-checked and examined, and the answers pertaining to male and female perceptions about the role of women in education were highlighted.

Controlled interviews were undertaken with both directors of the literacy programs based in Tiaret. Their questions focused on the programs' objectives for targeting women. Regular contact was sought out and maintained with the female program director throughout the duration of the study. The programs were monitored for any possible changes of the class content or teaching strate-

gies during the course of the study. Additional interviews were made with four literacy class teachers, one grade school teacher, and one university professor, all of whom were women working in Tiaret.

Information was gathered through archival research at CRIDSSH (Centre de recherche en information documentaire des sciences sociales et humaines) in Oran. Informal interviews with local families and an ethnographic survey maintained throughout the study supplement the data. Descriptions of the present refer to the time of my fieldwork.

1.6 Adult Literacy Research in Algeria

It would not be within the bounds of proper scientific practice to discuss the kind or combination of literacy approaches and strategies taken into consideration for rural Algerian women without first reviewing the previous research on adult literacy in Algeria. However, this research is notably limited.

Academic investigations of adult education in the Arab region are meager. So far only UNESCO and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have published data specifically related to this subject. There are few ethnographic accounts on literacy in Arab countries and even fewer that deal with literacy as it pertains to the situation of women from a gender perspective.

Currently within the Maghreb region, the bulk of publications stem from research done in Morocco (Agnou, 2001, 2004; Belarbi, 1991; Spratt, 1992; Wagner, 1993). Previous research on literacy in Algeria has treated the subject in general terms, relying on statistics as a way for measuring the level of success or failure of previous mass literacy campaigns.

Although the topic of female literacy and higher education has not always been neglected altogether, it has only been modestly addressed as a sideline consideration in publications focusing on societal development and the position of women in Algeria (Bennoune, 1988; Gordon, 1968; Knauss, 1987; Leßner, 1978; Nestvogel, 1985; Széll, 1967).

Interest in adult literacy research in Algeria is very recent and quite sparse. One of the main reasons for the practical void of information about this subject most likely has to do with the fact that Algeria is still recovering from years of severe internal conflict sparked by the military *coup d'état* of January 1992. This civil war was prevalent during all of the 1990s with sporadic incidents continuing to occur during the beginning of this millennium.

The aftermath of the conflict considerably stalled literacy efforts, thus essentially halting programs and research altogether. As a result, cooperation in the area of adult literacy has only recently been initiated between the government of

Algeria and UNESCO. It was first in 2007 that Algeria officially announced the validation and implementation of a National Strategy for the Eradication of Illiteracy (SNEA), which includes among its recent claims the attempt to target girls and women living in remote areas.

The few available research works that have dealt with the topic of illiteracy consist of evaluations of the government's endeavor to nationally address this issue. These are largely based on official ministerial and national literacy strategy documents and brief updates commissioned by UNESCO. Due to the scarcity of information on adult literacy in Algeria, a small sample of reports published just prior to the decade of conflict in Algeria will be included in this review.

Ouane et al. (1987) addresses the issues of post-literacy and learning strategies based on the experiences from a series of case studies, including Algeria. Each report includes background information on the country and its educational system, a description of literacy and continuing education programs, as well as a discussion of the learning strategies used so far.

The results of these studies are meant to be of use for understanding the scope as well as the limitations of previous approaches and programs and for considering pre-conditions and possible obstacles in the design and implementation of appropriate learning strategies for the future. The case study of Algeria summarizes the stages of literacy and adult education implemented just prior to and after independence. It is a general survey that focuses on the problem of literacy retention among neo-literate adults.

The overall conclusion given for previous literacy campaigns in Algeria was that they had all been categorized as unsuccessful. A well-defined policy for literacy education, a correct estimation of the current situation, and a definition for a practical plan were deemed necessary and urgent. However, no future strategies were outlined, and the subject of female literacy was excluded altogether.

El Joundi et al. (1998) is a similar yet more updated monograph, which includes a review of past and current adult literacy campaigns in each country within the Maghreb region. It highlights the government's efforts to curb illiteracy in the region since independence. At the same time, however, the authors note that these efforts have been largely impeded by general, pedagogical, and financial obstacles.

The most current report on literacy for the Maghreb region is by Bougroum et al. (2007). This report, commissioned by UNESCO for the regional conference Literacy Challenges in the Arab States Region, which was held in Doha in 2007, provides a recent overview of literacy policies and strategies and underlines the need for changes in current literacy approaches. It argues that recent political commitment towards literacy in this region must be backed up by the

implementation of realistic strategies linking efforts in both formal and non-formal education.

The contributing authors point out the urgent need to reconsider the quality and relevance of basic education currently provided whether in formal schooling or in the area of adult literacy. Other issues mentioned are the problem of relapse into illiteracy that has been observed in certain contexts, as well as significant disparities based on gender and income within these countries. Finally, it is argued that funding is one of the issues that are intimately related to institutional arrangements for literacy provision.

Other publications attest to the identified benefits of female literacy in North Africa and the Middle East in terms of better maternal behavior regarding child health, child rearing, and family planning (Allman 1978; King & Hill 1993; Beck & Keddie 1978). The Women's Fertility Survey (WFS) has played a significant role in making a connection between a mother's education and a child's well-being. Two facts common to other developing regions were confirmed for in the Arab world; namely, that the urban fertility rate is lower than the rural one, and that women's education, particularly post-primary education, is a factor of fertility decline.

As elsewhere, literate and educated Algerian women tend to have fewer children, lose fewer children to disease, and use more modern health care practices (Kateb 2003; Kouaouci 1993). A strong link between women's educational status and fertility has also been established in Algeria. Furthermore, as Vallin argues (Allman 1978:144), a woman's economic status, like her education, is a decisive element in fertility. Women with a higher education are more likely to marry later and make use of contraception.

The topic of the condition of Algerian women as linked with literacy is a relatively new phenomenon. The reasons that the discussion of women in public space and their role in society are still in its beginning stages may be partially due to the wave of the previous terrorist activity and partially due to the fact that minimal attention has been paid to the status of women in society. Meyer (1990) is among the only authors that solely address the issue of non-literacy as it relates to the position of women in Algeria.

In her report, *Analphabetentum und die Marginalisierung der Frau in Algerien* (Literacy and the Marginalization of women in Algeria), Meyer claims that Algerian women are marginalized in society as a result of their illiteracy. She argues that the educational situation of women relates to the social politics of the government, which in turn is a direct reflection of the values and attitudes of traditional societies in general and Muslim societies in particular. She attributes the failure of female literacy acquisition in Algeria in part to what she de-

scribes as its religious moral background as well as to a deficient concept of literacy for adult women.

Although the amount of research on adult literacy in Algeria is relatively limited, the authors cited above seem to arrive at the same conclusion as other literacy studies conducted in the Maghreb region do; namely, there is an urgent need for an adult literacy strategy that effectively recruits and retains participants, as well as addresses the issue of literacy retention. This is closely related to another aspect in the field of adult literacy, which has been virtually neglected until the nineties.

Current trends in adult literacy studies take a look at the problems of women's education from a gender perspective. Research is increasingly showing how women's access to literacy affects all aspects of their private and social lives in society from health and child welfare, economical, psychological to issues of empowerment and attaining power in the realm of politics.

Changing Female Literacy Practices in Algeria
Empirical Study on Cultural Construction of Gender and
Empowerment

Laaredj-Campbell, A.

2016, XVIII, 394 p. 32 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-11632-3