

Literacy Through Poetry in Yemen

Theme(s):

- Information, Education, and Communication

Type of Program:

- Provision of Services (education)

Country/Region:

- Yemen (Local)

Author:

- Najwa Adra: consultant

Submitting/Executing Organizations:

- The Social Fund for Development

Project Cost [Amount and Source of Funds]:

- 2001-2004: The World Bank: The Bank Netherlands Partnership Program (\$100,000.00)
- 2002-present: The Social Fund for Development, Sanaa (approx. \$50,000 + in-kind support)

Human Resources:

- Project Initiator and Coordinator
- Project Manager
- Two Curriculum Developers and Teacher Trainers
- Three supervisors from the Ministry of Education
- 8 Teachers residing in pilot communities

Partners:

- The Social Fund for Development, Sanaa (funding and facilitation)
- IEAEO which provided the supervisors and three of the teachers in the pilot
- Royal Jordanian Airlines helped defray transportation costs of the New York-based consultants.

Initiative overview: The initiative tackles the illiteracy increase among rural and urban women in comparison to men. It also confronts the current repression of women's traditional expression channels and voices, resulting from socio-economic changes and favourable cultural attitudes towards women's isolation. Among such changes, one can cite economic openness, which reduces rural women's economic participation, and adopting external and mistaken religious ideas detrimental to women's voices and mobility.

Social discriminatory practices targeted: In spite of equality between the sexes in laws and policies, traditions and mistaken religious ‘interpretations’ still prevail and negatively impact on equality between the sexes in education and the rights women had enjoyed before the unification of Yemen.

Socio-Cultural Context: In Yemen, women’s roles vary by region, economic status and social class affiliation, and urban or rural location. Historically, high class urban women were more isolated than low class urban women who had freer access to income-generating activities but a lower social standing. Rural women effectively participated in income generation, enjoyed greater mobility, and made a significant social contribution albeit in an unofficial manner.

Song lyrics and poetry represent a major source of women’s empowerment. In the past, they enabled women to use culturally acceptable means to express views on personal issues (the future husband) and politics. Socio-economic transformations have limited women’s opportunities for creating poetry. New conservative ideas emerged and limited women’s voices and social contributions. Statistics show that only 25% of rural girls at the schooling age go to school. Illiteracy among rural women is 78.2%, about twice as much as that for urban women (about 39.9%) and men (32.5% for rural men and 15.4% for urban men). The literacy rate among rural young women, aged 15 to 24, does not exceed 27%, as opposed to 82% among urban women.

Religious interpretations: Zaidi and Shafi are the most widespread creeds in Yemen and are not considered too strict on women’s issues. Discrimination between the sexes is historically rare in rural communities, and most rural women did not wear the veil. By experiencing the Wahabite influence over the last thirty years, a new negative impact on women’s mobility and expression styles was witnessed.

Such external religious conservative views targeted mixing between the sexes (which was a traditional norm in rural Yemen) as well as women’s mobility, songs and traditional storytelling. A woman’s voice is now considered ‘awra’ (a defect that must be hidden or covered). This was not the case twenty or thirty years ago. Women watching television generates fear from the idea that education and freedom will encourage Yemeni women to become more liberated.

Objectives and Goals

The initiative aims at teaching reading and writing to women past school-age and supporting the interest of the local community in preserving the endangered women’s oral heritage (poetry). The initiative’s long-term objectives are women’s empowerment, consolidating respect for women’s skills, and changing discriminatory social practices.

Good Practices

Innovative Approach

The initiative is unique in the sense that:

- Unlike other literacy programmes, it focused on rural women's needs for informal education, short learning periods and flexible schedules.
- It used women's traditional oral poetry and local traditions to facilitate the learning of reading and writing.
- It relied on the expertise of the beneficiaries to prepare specific texts for them.
- It adopted a participatory approach to create a sense of belonging to the literacy programmes.
- It relied on local texts appropriate to the new beneficiaries' traditional context. This was done by including the beneficiaries' poetry as a traditional means to voice opinions in the literacy programme.
- It ensured the sustainability of the literacy programme by building the capacity of the local trainers who acquired the basic skills of writing and reading in the first phase and implemented them in the second phase to train potential beneficiaries.
- It used a scientific approach based on evidence in project implementation and teaching methods. For example:
 - The initiative built teaching methods on the finding that adult learners in literacy programmes do not learn reading and writing from model lessons but from areas of interest.
 - The initiative focussed on the beneficiaries' potential and not their knowledge of the presented teaching materials.
 - The initiative enabled the new beneficiaries to benefit from the reading tools they had used in the training programmes and preserve their learning skills.

Overcoming Challenges

- **Men's opposition to the initiative:** In one of the districts, some men looted the classroom. Local leaders were contacted to explain the project objectives to these men and convince them of its benefit and importance. All forms of harassment stopped.

- **Young women's claim of poetic ignorance:** Some young women felt that traditional poetry was neither original nor innovative and claimed that they did not know anything about it or about popular proverbs. The teacher opened a discussion on the current problems in the local community and requested them to talk about them by using the proverbs listed on the board. As a second solution, young beneficiaries from the rural classes were invited to attend urban classes where they were welcomed with traditional poetry. To save face, the visitors replied with better and more varied poetry. This helped the rural women realise that poetry was in line with urban practices. The learners were not tied to traditional poetry types, but were free to use new types, as some of them did.
- **Differential learning outcomes:** In the second phase of the initiative, one of the classes was lagging behind in acquiring skills. To stimulate competition, a contest was held among the classes and the skills gap was overcome.
- **Literacy programme timing:** Timing is the major obstacle to adult literacy programmes in the Yemeni mountainous areas. Such programmes start in the harvest season, leading to high dropout rates, even among the school populations. The ideal solution is to start the course in December.

Immediate Successes

- **Limited dropout rates:** The dropout rate was 19% in the first phase and 26% in the second one. In the first phase, only two beneficiaries dropped out because they were not interested in the course. Others left for health reasons, change of residence, or because their husbands asked them to do so.
- **Requesting further courses:** All the beneficiaries requested an additional study year, using the same methods for adult learners, and formal education methods for the younger ones.
- **Acquired skills:** In the first three months of study, most beneficiaries learned how to read and pronounce words correctly and do easy dictation. 87% of the set objectives were reached in terms of the capacity for reading an unknown text, writing a small paragraph on an important issue, and identifying at least 50 words.
- **Significant indicators:** Among the 95 beneficiaries who completed nine months of study in the first phase, 72% of them were able to read and write good prose, 37% of them fluently, and 35% slowly. Note that 25% of the first phase beneficiaries had a prior literacy programme experience ranging between one and two months. Although the second phase lasted six months only, during which only beneficiaries with no experience of literacy programmes were admitted, 62.7% of them managed to read and write good prose⁽¹⁾.

1- The figures are approximate and may slightly vary depending on the exam supervisor who tested the beneficiaries.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- **Participatory monitoring and evaluation:**

The initiative beneficiaries including teachers and students made comments, which led to amending implementation strategies and modifying teaching methods.

- **Evaluating teaching methods and curricula:** This was carried out by supervisors in three inspection visits.

- **Comparison with peer beneficiaries:**

The reading and writings skills of the beneficiaries who completed the second phase (six months of teaching) were compared to the skills of their peers in the governmental literacy programme who had studied for one year and three months. The experimental group achieved higher than the government programme control group in all tests.

- **Inviting the beneficiaries to express transformations:**

The teachers noticed a change in the beneficiaries' behaviour, including a greater capacity for asking questions and debating. The beneficiaries reported the changes as occurring in their lives and resulting from participation in the experimental programme.

- **Intensive discussion groups and interviews for evaluating the empowerment level:**

Discussions were held with the teachers, the supervisors and the beneficiaries in every local community. Men from the two model groups were interviewed. The support of the local community was evaluated through intensive discussion groups and interviews of some model local groups.

Qualitative Indicators :

- Skills acquisition: alphabet and word recognition, the ability to sound out words, take dictation, read and write new text.
- Increased interest in life-long learning and women's education.
- Empowerment indicators included: learner and teacher self-confidence, improvements in family attitudes towards learners, initiation of community health projects.

Ensuring Sustainability

- **Participatory approach:** Local trainers trained the teachers for the second phase of the experimental group. There was no need for the assistance of foreign consultants in expanding the initiative activities.

- **Reducing cost:** The cost of a single beneficiary amounted to US\$ 45,000 in the first phase and to US\$ 33,000 in the second one.

- Encouraging continuation: The beneficiaries received copies of the ‘books’ they created in class. Each one of them was given additional book gifts to encourage them to continue reading.

Contribution to Social Transformations

- Men and women participated in the management of the spaces opened within the framework of the initiative, thus reducing the gender gap.
- The participation of opinion leaders such as religious figures and dignitaries in the debate on discriminatory practices contributed to diffusing the social tension about the literacy programme.
- The beneficiaries expressed their satisfaction with the programme and requested an additional study year. They showed a new interest in the education of their daughters, guided by what they learned in the lessons on the importance of girls’ education.
- The beneficiaries acquired the skills for asking questions and debating important issues.
- In the experimental local communities, men started to call for women’s education in their families when they recognized the positive results at the adult education level.
- All beneficiaries reported that their families started to show them more respect.

Lessons for Replication

The possibility of lessons for replication is very high in the Arab region provided there is an awareness that the high rate of illiteracy among women dangerously impacts on development, especially in light of the emergence of increasingly conservative movements seeking to isolate and disempower women. The whole region has distinctive oral traditions that can be used to reverse such tendencies, empower women, and develop their mental and critical skills. The main lessons for replication are:

- Adopting a participatory approach;
- Identifying the real needs of the target group and their centres of interest;
- Local capacity building to lead the initiative activities after completion;
- Developing the initiative implementation operation so that the local resources and society adapt to the change that the project aims to achieve; and
- Adopting the appropriate methodologies for overcoming challenges.