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WORKSHOPS

Literacy and the Liberation of Women

Chair: Sharon Robinson, Vice-chair, WUS(UK)

Lalage Bown, Professor in Adult and Continuing Education, University of Glasgow:

'As long as we have unequal access to education, technology and other assets affecting productivity, the 'unequal exchange' which many commentators see as characterising North-South relations will, in a not wholly dissimilar way, obtain between men and women.' Brandt Commission Report, 1980.

When the colonial relationship comes to an end, does that necessarily lead to the liberation of women? Experience shows that women often play a key part in the liberation struggle, but, after independence from the external power has been regained, somehow women never seem to achieve political equality.

No political system today automatically assures the equal status of women. Production-oriented societies generally tend to undervalue their contribution. Statistical methods still largely ignore the contribution of women when it takes place within the household rather than in the labour market. They also tend to ignore the economic contribution of women because their employment is often concentrated in the so-called informal sector or is seasonal, and thus difficult to measure.

UN statistics also underestimate the number of households in which the woman is the de facto economic head because they use biased definitions of head of household instead of criteria reflecting actual economic contributions. Thus, women remain statistically invisible.

Women still have problems gaining access to education. They have very little spare time or leisure in which to participate in such activities. Unless women are given the space and time to take part in literacy programmes they will not get anywhere.

Questions for discussion:

- How far does existing provision for women's education reinforce their subordination?
- Should more expenditure be devoted to women's non-formal education?
- How can educated women assist



Women's workshop

UK: it's not just an issue for 'over there'. In the UK, English as a Second Language classes can improve women's access by, for example, scheduling classes for times when children are in school and by providing childcare facilities.

- The Freirean model can be seen as problematic in that there tends to be an over-emphasis on process, without recognition of the need for content which engenders better access to knowledge about the world, the community and one's place in it.
- Access to education is not just access to study, but also to shaping education. Being a woman in one culture may have very different meaning than in another. The concept of subordination may also differ. Literacy may overcome this across the board, or are all literacy programmes ideologically bound? Who controls and structures literacy schemes?
- Women from the First World cannot decide on behalf of illiterate women whether or not literacy is in their interests. It's not a question of 'producing' literate women, but rather of empowering women. Education is an active, not a passive, process.

Recommendations:

- Any literacy programme has to take into account women's reproductive and productive responsibilities.
- Any literacy programme has to take into account the cultural context.
- Men need to be involved in literacy classes too, because they need them and because it may discourage them from obstructing women's attendance as a result of feeling threatened.

uneducated women to gain access to education without exerting control over programmes?

- What can we do to inform and educate the British public on the effects of structural adjustment on women, and the other issues raised here?
- How can we influence international agencies to devote more resources to transformative education for women (not just aimed at women as mothers)?
- How can we influence British aid policy so that more aid is directed to such education?

Marilyn Thomson, WUS women's campaign officer:

Since the early 1980s WUS International — the network of WUS committees in 43 countries around the world — has adopted policies to promote women in relation to:

- WUS structures;
- scholarship programmes;
- new projects.

WUS (UK) has been very active on these issues. It has:

- organised campaigns and produced reports and briefing papers;
- developed a proposal for a women's scholarship programme, which was turned down in its original form by the Overseas Development Administration;
- lobbied over women's issues, particularly through the National Alliance of Women's Organisations.

There is a need for further lobbying and support work on the question of appropriate education programmes for women and ways of supporting projects.

Group discussion — issues raised:

- Remember the problems of literacy and education programmes in the

Education for All - a realistic target for the year 2000?

Chair: Dr Teame Mehbratu, School
of Education, University of Bristol

The countries represented at this workshop included Chile, England, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Holland, India, Ireland, Kenya, Namibia, Norway, Poland, Scotland, Sudan, Sri Lanka and the USA.

Sarah Graham-Brown, researcher, journalist and author of the forthcoming book, *Education in Crisis*:

The goal of basic education as a right for all has been on the agenda of governments and agencies for many years. But it is very far from being achieved in many countries. Why is this? Why are there education crises in so many countries? There are crises in many countries in the North, in terms of goals and what education is intended to achieve. There are crises

in many of the poorest countries in terms of giving people, either as children or as adults, access to any education at all. The context in which education and other social provision is taking place, particularly in the South and in the past decade, is one of economic crisis, debt and structural adjustment. The crisis in education within any nation state is part of a wider set of problems which are not confined within the boundaries of that state.

Debt:

Debt is often treated as a natural disaster or blamed on incompetence or corruption. In fact, the debt crisis is the result of unequal power relations between the economically dominant countries of the North and the poorest countries of the South. As a result, when talking about education, one has to take into account the room for manoeuvre open to any particular state.

Both the debt crisis and the solutions imposed by the large international agencies, in which the strongest influence is wielded by the powerful industrialised countries of the North, have put enormous pressure on national economies. In turn, this has put pressure on governments' ability to spend money on a variety of social and infrastructural services. Within

this context individual governments are sometimes faced with a very narrow range of choices. As a result, in some of the poorest countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of school-age children going to school is actually falling.

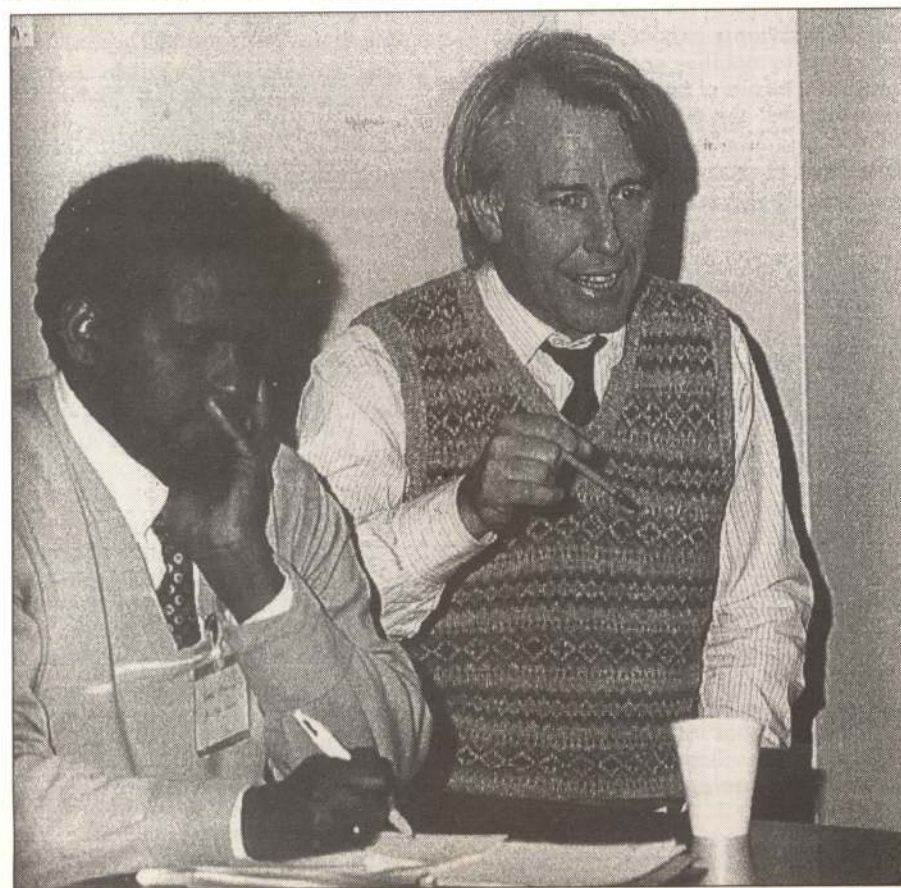
Also, it is difficult for people to learn when facilities are so poor and if children are hungry and sick when they get to school.

Teachers have also suffered: the real wages of teachers in many poor countries have fallen drastically in recent years. Many have to do second jobs and are not able to put into their teaching what they otherwise would.

There are also major inequalities within individual societies, which are not just the result of the crisis, but have been exacerbated by the crisis. So, in much of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, the lowest 20% of the population can barely manage at subsistence level. In some countries in Central America, some 45 — 50% is considered to be in extreme poverty, which means they can barely eat, let alone worry about schooling. They want education but it has gone over the horizon of their possibilities.

There are other inequalities too: particularly gender, and in some countries ethnic groups are excluded from education for political reasons. The most extreme example of political (rather than just economic) exclusion from education is to be found in South Africa. A whole section of the population is deliberately deprived of education or given an education designed to fit them for an inferior position in society. So when we talk about education for all, we have to look also at the content of that education. This applies equally to the issue of gender.

Teame Mehbratu(left) and Kenneth King in the workshop on Education for All by the year 2000 - a realistic target?



Kenneth King, of Edinburgh University, a member of the steering committee of the World Conference on 'Education for All' of March 1990:

The figures on literacy rates are very shaky. The definitions of literacy vary between countries and political considerations enter into the definitions, as with unemployment figures. The 900 million people who are reckoned to be illiterate are highly gendered: two-thirds are women according to all the measures we have.

There are incredible differences between countries, even in the so-called Third World. In Chile official literacy rates are 97% for men and 96% for women, and anyone who