

# Women's Literacy as a Women's Studies Issue

By Marylou Salvatore

To be a women's studies major, one must be prepared to read a substantial amount of books and articles. In addition, almost all classes come with the expectation to apply our own thought and analysis of feminist readings into extensive writing assignments. While we are buried in our studies, we may take for granted the very basic skills that allow us to participate in such a major: reading and writing. It may escape us that there are women's voices that are unwritten and unread—because let's face it, women's studies is exclusive to the highly literate. How are we to truly fight for gender equality if we live under the assumption that all women have the very basic skills to move up in the world? Our society is highly dependent on literacy and those without the skills to read and write often fall to the bottom of our class system. Low literate women remain marginalized and more vulnerable to oppression.

As a women's studies major, I personally never came across the topic of literacy and the effect it has on women's lives. While the issue of literacy was not discussed, women's education is a major topic. Feminist involvement in education has been great, and most professors would point to education as a necessity to obtaining social mobility and gender equality. However this assumes that all women have the basic skills needed to achieve in the educational system, when in actuality low-literate women do not have the proper training to excel and, in many ways, the educational system has failed them. The National Adult Literacy Survey states that 50% of women in the United States have a reading level lower than a high school graduate (as cited in Miller, 2003, p. 45). Wider Opportunities for Women also reported that 23% of American women have "severely limited literacy skills" while 17% of American men are at the same level (as cited in Laubach Literacy Action [LLA], 1995, p. 1). The statistics show that women have higher rates of low-literacy, and shockingly half of women in the

United States do not have skills that reach past the high school level.

One might ask why is literacy a women's issue? The problem is that women generally do worse than their equally-educated male counterparts. Lindsey (2005) explains that "at all educational levels males still out earn females" (p. 283). This means that while all low literate people will struggle, the men will still succeed over the women and the women are more likely to live in poverty. For example, Wider Opportunities for Women reports that "seventy-five percent of female heads of households with less than a high school diploma live in poverty, compared with the 34 percent of men who are in the same situation" (LLA, 1995, p. 1). Education is in fact imperative to improving a woman's status, therefore literacy needs to enter the discussion and be considered as issue for feminists to address.

## What is literacy?

Literacy is generally defined as the "neutral skill" of reading and writing, however New Literacy Studies (NLS) created an alternative definition. Rather than seeing literacy as skill that is universally the same for all, NLS argues that there are multiple literacies called "literacy practices." Literacy practices "refers to both behavior and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing" (Street cited in Lee, 2004, p. 30). In other words, literacy is not just about the reading and writing of words, but understanding and applying meaning to them which is also socially and culturally based. Cultures can vary in their uses of literacies, as well as applying various meanings to the words. It is important to understand that literacy is not the same for everyone, therefore can cause confusion and a misunderstanding when one is outside of their cultural practices. Low-level literate people are often stereotyped as being stupid. However, it is more likely that the person with limited literacy is not stupid but rather does not understand the

ways of certain literacy practices. Therefore, in communication, one must be aware that what is said may not be understood in the way it is meant. People with limited literacy are often differently smart.

### **Why do women fall behind in the first place? What holds them back now?**

Falling behind in literacy training starts when women are young. Girls generally drop out of school due to “issues of marriage, pregnancy, family violence, and abuse.... They are systematically under represented in the identification for learning disability services. Lack of a diagnosis means lack of needed services, which often lead to low self esteem, frustration and hopelessness—all factors that contribute to dropping out of school” (Greenberg, 2004, p. 3). Cultural values may also push women away from education. Some cultures only see the value in educating boys or that women are less marriageable if educated (Nansubuga, 2004).

As women get older, obtaining literacy training can only get harder. Many literacy programs find that there are many barriers for their female students to continue their education. The barriers include children, transportation, women’s work, violence, male attitudes, attitudes of friends and family, culture and tradition, class differences, self-esteem and fear of change and isolation (LLA, 1995). Women with families typically have trouble finding time in the day for their own needs. Women generally work a “double shift,” balancing their time between jobs and domestic work. Not only do literacy learners need to find time and energy for their training but they need to be able to find suitable child care and a source of transportation. Childcare is not as easy as passing children off to the father as “many males refuse to supervise their children. They may feel believe that the mother should not leave her children with anyone else because their care is her responsibility” (LLA, 1995, p. 2). Learners must also deal with the lack of support from the people around them. Aside from conflicting cultural values, friends and family may feel like they are being abandoned or afraid that the learner will change. Husbands and boyfriends may also feel

threatened and become manipulative. A man may somehow block a woman from attending class or studying, such as refusing to take care of the kids, as a way to maintain power and control over the relationship (LLA, 1995). The control and power can also be played out in abuse as well. Abuse prevents women from attending class because of fear and/or embarrassment of bruises. Abuse victims are also setback psychologically; they lack a sense of control, connection and meaning in life (Horsman, 2004).

The Welfare Reform Act in 1996 has also caused barriers for women literacy learners. After the reform, “small percentages of TANF (Temporary Aid for Needy Families) recipients are allowed to finish high school or pursue one or (on an exception basis) two years of vocational education; the majority of recipients are forced to take the first job offered to them, even though low-skill, low-income jobs rarely enable families to escape poverty” (Blum, 2004, p. 163). Despite the fact that education is key to finding a better paying job, especially for women, welfare is discouraging education and forcing women to take the first job offered to them. In a study done by Steve Rueys, it was reported that Massachusetts literacy programs’ enrollments dropped after the new law was passed (cited in Rivera, 2004, p. 6). The study shows that literacy learners depended significantly on welfare to obtain their training and the reform has now created yet another barrier to stop women from getting the education they need.

### **How does limited literacy hurt women?**

Limited literacy proficiency has a huge significance on women’s lives and it is hard to pick out where it hurts women most. Low literacy is obviously linked with poverty, which inevitably leads to more problems such as addiction, sex work and incarceration. A woman’s literacy can also affect her family. Literacy levels of children are often linked to the mother’s own literacy skills, therefore some believe that a child’s academic success depends on the mother’s education (LLA, 1995). Also “higher educated women have been said to provide better prenatal care, produce more full-term babies, provide

better post-natal care and produce higher participation rates in their children's schooling" (Greenberg, 2004, p. 3). While children's well-being is important, these arguments may also neglect the need for women to obtain literacy training for their own well-being.

One of the more frightening aspects to low literacy is its effect on health care. Health Literacy is an issue that many can sympathize with as "less than half of the adult population understands many commonly used medical terms" (WE LEARN, 2009). Health literacy is a completely different literacy practice for those with low literacy skills. Patients have difficulty understanding instructions, consent forms, insurance forms, etc. Patients typically only remember half of what their doctors tell them, and doctors do not always assess how much information was understood. Often, directions are written down which may not help a low literate person at all. Instead low literate patients make due with as much as they can understand. For instance, they may memorize the shape, color or first letter of their medications, however, their system is thrown off when medications are switched to generic (Kennen, Martin & Davis, 2004). Health Literacy affects women more because they interact with the system more; women are more likely develop chronic health problems or need reproductive health care. Women are also more likely to be caretakers of children, parents, etc., therefore their understanding of health literacy is important to a wider community (WE LEARN, 2009).

As college students we may not realize how much our literacy skills have developed. Reading and writing are privileges taken for granted. These skills will take us to new heights in the future. It is dramatically different for those who struggle with literacy everyday. So as you graduate from college and move onto careers, hopefully working with women, keep in mind this privilege that you have, and the fact that others are disadvantaged. Lack of developed literacy proficiency or access to basic educational services are the roots of many issues involving women, so it may be likely that you will come across it. The point of this paper is to raise your awareness so that when you do come across a

woman in need, you may be able to help her or work with her more effectively. As you meet them, remember, women with limited literacy proficiencies are *not* stereotypically stupid. In fact, due to their own experiences, they may have come up with new ideas and creative strategies for coping with or challenging everyday oppression. Like many inequalities, the lack of literacy is connected with institutions and systems that deny access to women. As women's studies graduates and future feminist activists, it's important for us to be more aware and understanding that limited literacy is a consequence related to multiple inequities. We must consider the realities and impacts of basic literacy and education as we address women's issues and solutions towards equity.

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