CHAPTER 5

Adult Learning and Education for Poverty Alleviation in Africa. Challenges and Opportunities for Women

Stella Chioma Nwizu, Mejai Bola M. Avoseh

Abstract:

This chapter examines the contributions of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) towards empowerment and poverty reduction amongst women in Africa. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasise the need for countries of the world to ensure that poverty in all its forms is ended everywhere. SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 10 especially connect to the focus of this chapter. Despite the implementation of various programmes by African governments towards SDGs attainment, a substantial number of African women still live in poverty in many countries. ALE as an instrument for poverty alleviation has the potentials to provide inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for women. However, ALE in its efforts to empower women for development is confronted with numerous challenges. The chapter highlights the opportunities provided by ALE in facilitating poverty alleviation and promoting active citizenship among African women. The chapter concludes with a brief acknowledgement of the role of Lalage Bown in the history of women empowerment in Africa.

Keywords: Adult Education; Adult Learning; Poverty Alleviation; Women's Empowerment

1. ALE and the African Context

We use the social context of Africa to highlight the challenges of poverty among women and the opportunities that ALE provides to address these challenges. Bown encouraged adult educators to place importance on historical context in their work. According to her, «history teaches the adult educator to set his (her) work in a social context» (1981, 166).

UNESCO made a bold statement on ALE as a significant component of lifelong learning. It confirms that ALE «cater to the learning needs of young people, adults and older people. [And] Adult learning and education cover a broad range of content – general issues, vocational matters, family literacy, and family education, citizenship [...] with priorities depending on the specific needs of individual countries» (UNESCO 2009, 6). More recently, UNESCO

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reaffirmed ALE as a key component of lifelong learning noting that «ALE policies and practices apply to a wide range of ages, education levels, learning spaces and modalities» (2022, 2). Similarly, the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) stated the core values which inform ICAE's understanding of ALE. These include «education as a fundamental human right, a common good and a collective endeavor». And that ALE is «participatory, inclusive, and emancipatory» (2022, 5) encompassing a diversity of groups including race, ethnicity, disability, gender, poverty, and a host of others.

Official and unofficial figures indicate that the map of poverty in Africa coincides with the map of other barriers and challenges. For women, those barriers and challenges include cultural and religious oppression, and economic manipulation. We argue that empowering women to address these barriers depends to a large extent on improved access to ALE. In identifying ALE as the source of breaking barriers and transforming unpleasant conditions for women, we subscribe to UNESCO (2016):

> The aim of adult learning and education is to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realize their rights and take control of their destinies. It promotes personal and professional development, thereby supporting more active engagement by adults with their societies, communities, and environments. It fosters sustainable and inclusive economic growth and decent work prospects for individuals. It is therefore a crucial tool in alleviating poverty, improving health and well-being and contributing to sustainable learning societies (quoted in UNESCO 2022a, 32).

Furthermore, UNESCO in the *Marrakech Framework for Action* (MFA) stresses the role of ALE in empowering adults and older citizens through «community learning and citizenship education» which are «key factors for sustainable development, including rural development, and to raise awareness of the impact of climate change» (2022b, 6, paragraph 17). Finally, UNESCO in the MFA confirms that despite efforts, reaching adequate literacy level is becoming an intractable problem including in women's literacy. Paragraph 16 of the MFA sums up succinctly the gap in literacy education and the need to cover that gap. It is worth quoting the section in detail:

> In spite of remarkable progress during the past decades, including in women's literacy, many countries still struggle to reach adequate literacy levels, including digital literacy, and to bridge the considerable gender gap. In 2021, more than 770 million adults were lacking basic literacy skills, three out of five of whom were women (UIS). The benefits of literacy for individuals, families, communities, societies, and the planet are well documented, and adult literacy must receive sufficient policy attention and financial support (UNESCO 2022b, 5).

Given these statements about women in Africa, it is expected they should be given better access to ALE and be empowered to play more significant roles in the development of the continent. This chapter therefore aligns with UNESCO

and other agencies that believe that ALE can make significant contributions to poverty alleviation among African women.

2. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Poverty Eradication in Africa

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to help actualize this goal. The 17 SDGs are all connected to SDG 1 – 'No Poverty'. The United Nations (UN) «recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth» (2015, 1). UNESCO reiterated its commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the MFA and reemphasized the connections of the SDGs. Paragraph 40 of MFA reaffirms:

> Quality education and lifelong learning are important mechanisms for implementing SDG 4 and are also prerequisites for poverty reduction (SDG 1), health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), gainful employment and decent jobs (SDG 8), inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities (SDG 11), just, peaceful, inclusive, violence-free societies (SDG 16) and climate action (SDG 13). Furthermore, adult education is part of the right to education (UNESCO 2022b, 15).

Consequently, SDG 1's focus to end poverty in all its forms everywhere must embrace the energy and cohesion of the «multifaceted goals of ALE for the years to come» (UNESCO 2022b, 15). What is true at the global level is especially true of Africa, and more so for the challenges that confront women in fighting poverty.

Therefore, for African women to be empowered to effectively carry out their responsibilities as active citizens – such as contributing to the welfare of their families or participation in decision making at home or larger society – there must be an eclectic embrace of the 17 SDGs using ALE as the 'glue'. Hence, the urgent need to establish more educational programmes for which ALE is a nucleus to provide safe and inclusive learning environment for African women. Such a learning environment aligns with Mauch's (2014) depiction of Adult Education as a catalyst to promote competencies which are associated with sustainable development. ALE incorporates formal, non-formal and informal aspects thus making it possible for African women to acquire relevant skills needed to enhance their personal, socio and economic life.

In concluding this section, we must acknowledge the obvious fact that the number of African women living in poverty is staggering. The UN (2020) notes that in sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority of the world's poorest live, the number of women and girls living in extremely poor households is expected to increase from 249 million to 283 million between 2021 and 2030. It further observed that the number of African women living in poverty has risen by 50% over the last decade. Similarly, Chant (2011) notes that women are prone to be particularly exposed to time poverty as a result of multiple labour burdens, which

impact heavily on their scope to exit poverty through engaging in activities with higher returns. McFerson (2010) identified gender and globalization, gender property rights, gender and time, gender and governance and gender as the root of poverty among African women. The Borgen Project (2021) found that although the literacy rate among African women is steadily improving in some African countries, attaining universal literacy remains a significant challenge. It further reported that in 2000, the literacy rate of adult females in sub-Saharan Africa was 46.8% as against 58.8% in 2019. Statista (2020) reports that apart from Cabo Verde, Ghana, Nigeria, and Togo which have their female adult literacy rates above 50%, other West African Countries have theirs below 50%. It specifically reported the following as the female adult literacy rate in West Africa in 2018, by country: Cabo Verde, 82%; Ghana, 74%; Nigeria, 53%; Togo, 51%; Mauritania, 43%; Gambia, 42%; Cote d'Ivoire, 40%; Senegal, 40%; Sierra Leone, 35% ; Liberia, 34% ; Burkina Faso, 33% and Guinea-Bissau, 31%. The data above explains part of the reason women are the poorest of the poor in Africa.

3. Poverty Level and Some Alleviation Efforts in Nigeria

The new extreme poverty line announced by the World Bank (2022a) is $2.15 per person per day. The new figure was an upgrade on the old figure of $1.90 in 2017. A similar release by the World Bank on Nigeria confirms that «as many as 4 in 10 Nigerians live below the national poverty» (World Bank 2022b). What is true of Nigerians generally is truer of women who often bear the brunt harsh economic, cultural, social, and religious downturns. We must clarify at this point that poverty alleviation especially for women goes beyond helping the poor. It is a refusal to acknowledge the human rights of others. It is in this regard that the theme for the 2022 International Day of Poverty alleviation is aptly titled «Dignity for All in Practice» focused on the broader issues of «social justice, peace, and the planet» (UN 2022). This universal conceptualisation of poverty is more fitting in the Nigerian situation where most especially women lack access to education and basic infrastructure. The 2022 World Bank poverty assessment of Nigeria highlights the fact that the devastating effects of climate and conflicts which disproportionately affect women and the poor generally are «multiplying, and their effects have been compounded by COVID-19» (2022b).

The current figures and fortunes seem to be worse than some previous periods, for example: USAID (2010) reported that 27.2% of Nigerians were living below poverty line in 1980 whereas by 1996 the poverty incidence had surged to 65%. This was a time when economic growth in Nigeria reached its lowest point at 2.5% in 1995. The high incidence of poverty in the five year period of 1995-99 could be attributed to the political instability that characterized that period. The 2022 World Bank report argues that most households in Nigeria have adopted 'dangerous' survival strategies – including reducing food consumption and classifying education as a luxury. These strategies are inimical to their 'humanization' which Freire describes as «humankind's central problem». Poverty has forced most Nigerian and African women to the zone of marginalization which forces

an individual to «ask if humanization is a viable possibility» . Poverty alleviation should therefore be about humanization. As Freire puts it, «concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization» (2018, 43).

From 1999 to date, there have been many poverty-alleviation and women-empowering programs. The most recent include the National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP). Its major components are Mandatory Attachment Programme (MAP); Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES); Capacity Credit Programme; Keke NAPEP; and Capacity Acquisition Programme (CAP); other poverty alleviation programs include Universal Basic Education; Free School Feeding Scheme; and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). Prior to these later efforts were programs in the 1990s that sought to empower women to overcome poverty. Two prominent programs were the Better Life for Rural Women (BLRW) and the Family Support Programme (FSP) led by Maryam Babangida and First Lady, Sani Abacha respectively. Avoseh noted that both programmes like the ones before them failed because «political showmanship took precedence over the real problem of women's education» (1999a, 96). He listed other problems and barriers, including lack of political will, lack of funding, and poor attention to literacy matters. In addition, he acknowledged that women face many challenges including «early marriage, insensitivity and lack of commitment by governments, and inappropriate male-biased curriculum» (Avoseh 1999a, 96). In a similar argument on women's empowerment in Namibia, Avoseh (1999b) identified the almost fatalistic attitude of women, and violence as major challenges to women's empowerment. He argued that most Namibian women (and indeed most African women) have, as Freire would put it, «internalized and rationalize the oppressive, male-dominated status quo» as what should be. He contends that the attitudinal challenge is compounded by the fact that «most people believe that the gender issue is women's problem» and that this negative attitude «negates the necessary psychological foundation for women empowerment» (Avoseh 1999b, 5). These challenges and barriers undermine what Lalage Bown is quoted as calling women's «self-worth and confidence». Our argument is that the challenges facing poverty alleviation in Nigeria and indeed most of Africa, have increased and poverty alleviation remains an intractable problem.

These programs and projects on poverty alleviation in Nigeria have achieved little success relative to the amount of money invested on them. Several reasons have been identified as being responsible for the failure of poverty eradication in Nigeria. One major cause of failure of poverty eradication in Nigeria is lack of community participation or citizens' participation in the identification, formulation, execution and evaluation of these programmes and projects. There is also the problem of accountability and transparency in the implementation of the schemes (in other words corruption). Poverty alleviation is a challenge for countries in the developing world like Nigeria, where the majority of the population are considered poor. Poverty eradication programs or projects can succeed fully if the affected poor are involved in every development stage of the programmes. The influence of adult education and learning on the development

of African women can be enormous if properly harnessed with the correct mindset. And the danger of poverty and illiteracy can be very alarming. Adult Learning and Education has the potential to provide an all-inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for women. One sure step towards addressing the problem is the genuine embrace of literacy with the type of conviction that Lalage Bown had about empowerment through literacy. According, to her «I was left with the huge conviction that even the simplest acquisition of literacy can have a profoundly empowering effect personally, socially and politically. When it comes to women, there is a huge change in their self-worth and confidence» (Hamilton 2022). This type of mindset and conviction is what the Nigerian situation, and by extension, the African case needs to make poverty alleviation among women an accomplishable task.

4. Challenges and Opportunities of ALE for Active Citizenship among African Women

In Africa, loss of lives, especially with the onset of HIV/AIDS and the COVID-19 pandemic is expensive and reduces the productivity of African women leading to low development. However, though adult education programmes, African women could be helped to become less vulnerable – and also help their children to become more alert to potential dangers. The World Bank has recognized the striking body of empirical evidence that demonstrates strong benefit of educating girls and women which span across a wide range of areas including:

- Increase in wage earning for themselves and their families and improvement in the non-market and market productivity;
- Reduction in infant mortality and morbidity through improvements in children's health by applying hygiene and nutritional practices.

The skills, knowledge and vocation provided through Adult Education programmes can facilitate the attainment of the above development indices thereby leading to a reduction in poverty and non-literacy rates among African women.

Good health is an important development indicator for poverty alleviation. Adult education programmes provide skills and knowledge for better nutrition to African women and their families. Better health for a nation implies better quality of life, more productivity and less likelihood of young women giving birth during adolescence (early pregnancies). Furthermore, non-literate women are relegated to low productivity occupations with limited income and growth potential. There is no gainsaying about the importance of adult education and the priority that should be accorded to adult education programmes for the growth of African women because of the overwhelming evidence and multiplier effects that come with adult education. The more African women that participate in adult education programmes the better for the development of African nations at large especially in poverty reduction amongst women. The health challenges faced by African women would more easily be managed if the women are educated to benefit from reproductive health programmes provided through adult education.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that ALE has a significant role to play in poverty alleviation through improved literacy level and vocational skills for African women. However, much needs to be done to improve the welfare of African women through adult education which is one of the keys to unlock development fortunes. However, there is little evidence to indicate that literacy education in Africa has gone beyond the methods of colonization. Avoseh (1999b) argued for the need to open up adult education beyond the *status quo* that currently puts women in Africa under oppression. Citing another source, Avoseh suggests that literacy tied to the status quo «continuously reinforces women's traditional domestic reproductive, and community helper role» (Leach 1998 quoted in Avoseh 1999b, 5).

To reach the level of achieving the objectives of the SDGs in Africa, literacy education that intends to empower women and alleviate poverty must embrace literacy as «reading the word and the world» (Freire and Macedo 1987). This literacy means that «there would be a real respect for those learners who have not yet become familiar with saying the word to read it. This respect involves the understanding and appreciation of the many contributions nonreaders make to society in general» (Freire and Macedo 1987, 56). This is the type of opening up to the liberating powers of ALE which according to Freire (2018) equips women as oppressed and their oppressors to gain awareness of their dehumanizing situation. It means, «a way of empowering women to reveal and make conscious efforts to eliminate the underlying features of oppression within their community's and nation's decision-making and power structures» (Avoseh 1999b, 5). This is the crux of the matter of ALE for poverty reduction and active citizenship among African women. This is a condition without which women in Africa cannot be active citizens who can upturn some of the tighter that poverty has used to hold African women down. In thinking of African women as active citizens, we align with UNESCO who in the *5th Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* cited a previous UNESCO publication to define active citizenship thus:

> active citizenship means engaging with social issues such as poverty, gender, intergenerational solidarity, social mobility, justice, equity, exclusion, violence, unemployment, environmental protection, and climate change. It also helps people to lead a decent life, in terms of health and well-being, culture, spirituality, and in all other ways that contribute to personal development and dignity (2022a, 32).

This is the crux of the challenges and opportunities of ALE for poverty reduction and active citizenship among African women. Poverty alleviation is just a subset of being an active citizen – and individual who Freire (2018) describes as being «in the world» and «with the world». For African women, it means refusal to read the chauvinistic words chosen by the male-dominated society. It is, according to Freire and Macedo contention that «the realization on the part of the student [woman] that […] she is making a decision not to accept what is perceived as violating […] her world» (1987, 123). This was the standard and

model that Lalage Bown set at the inchoate stage of her career when she had the 'audacity' to confront colonial curricula in African education when she was just 22 in the early 1950s. Her push for 'Africanisation' of the curriculum (Hamilton 2022) makes her a vanguard of the pedagogy of the oppressed which Freire describes as a «task for radicals» (2018, 39).

5. Lalage Bown: Decoloniser and Vanguard of Women Empowerment in Africa

We conclude this chapter by acknowledging the colossus and trailblazer of an adult educator, Lalage Bown, who «dedicated much of her career in Africa to helping adult women learn to read and write» (Hamilton 2022). So many things make her stand out as a vanguard of women empowerment in Africa. Her advocacy for and insistence on 'Africanisation' of the curriculum falls within Freire and Macedo literacy must flow from the students' reading of the world. They insist that «words should be laden with the meaning of the people's existential experience, and not of the teacher's experience» (1987, 35). Lalage Bown's insistence on 'Africanisation' of the content of adult literacy in those days puts her in the same category as Bishop N.S.F. Grundtvig who advocated then for the Danish language to be the medium of instruction as a way of decolonizing learning which was in the nineteenth century mostly in Latin. Bown's courage in insisting on Africanising content was a way of opening up adult education for women empowerment. This would qualify Lalage Bown as a cultural-humanist who believed that active citizenship is best encouraged when people locate learning within the realities of their world. By that singular stance, Lalage broke away from the mechanical reinforcement of didactic learning and took the risk of stimulating Africans (especially women) to doubt instead of suffocating their curiosity. Freire and Macedo enjoined that «educators should stimulate risk taking, without which there is no creativity» (1987, 57). It is worth quoting Freire and Macedo extensively in order to put Lalage Bown's decolonizing and empowering commitment to education and especially adult education in clearer perspective. Freire and Macedo in their argument for a new society have this to say:

> to be consistent with the plan to construct a new society in these ex-colonies free from the vestiges of colonialism, a literacy program should be based on the rationale that such a program must be rooted in the cultural capital subordinate Africans and have as its point of departure the native language (1987, 151).

Freire and Macedo were advocating the above more than three decades after Lalage Bown had brazed the trail and 'stood her ground' in defence of humanistic adult education that uses the meaning-making schemes of African women to empower them to be active citizens.

As our last word, we want to acknowledge and celebrate Lalage Bown as that adult educator who changed society by taking adult education as a vocation. In her chapter on history and adult education, Bown mentioned Socrates, Jesus, Mohammed who changed society through their commitment to the ed-

ucation of adults. Little did Lalage Bown know then that she belonged in the class of individuals with indelible footprints in history. This was what Lalage wrote in 1981:

> although history helps to restrain over-optimism, it ought to give the adult educator inspiration. It provides sufficient examples of persons who took the education of adults as a vocation and who did change society thereby [...] to give any aspirant adult educator a sense of pride and mission and a broad vision (Bown 1981, 167).

Lalage Bown changed her society, that of Africans in adult education, and especially in empowering African women to be active citizens who can speak their own words.

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