

Basic Education to Empower Rural Women: The 'Mantloane' programmes in Lesotho

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Abstract

Adult education is one of the most effective ways to teach women how to cope with the socio-economic challenges of life. A lot of women in Lesotho have been forced to become the head of their families because of the migrant labour system which takes men away from their homes. Since the 1990s thousands of Basotho men have been retrenched from South African mines leading to the loss of a major source of income and remittances to the families of the ex-miners. Because of soil erosion and land degradation, some households are no longer able to depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. As a result of this coupled with persistent drought and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the levels of poverty have increased in rural areas. Women are being empowered through adult education to ensure that they are able to engage in sustainable livelihoods. One of the adult education programmes that empower rural women to tackle poverty and hunger in most Basotho villages is the making of vegetable gardens called 'mantloane' in Sesotho. The term refers to the way children use stones to build play houses imitating the way adults do things. Rural women in Lesotho have been taught to use stones to build these vegetable farms as well as conserving water which is helping a lot of families with the vegetables they use in the house throughout most of the year. The author argues that this programme can be adapted in other rural communities in African countries to combat poverty and hunger. This investigation is a case study which employs the qualitative approach to do in-depth study of two rural communities; Mount Tabor and Ha 'Ngoe-in the Mafeteng district of Lesotho. Thirty women from the two villages were interviewed on the impact of this adult education project on their lives. Over 96% of the respondents indicated that the education programme which started about six years ago has helped their families to deal with the problems of hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

Introduction

Adult education is one of the most effective ways by which women have been taught to cope with the challenges of life. A lot of women in Lesotho have been forced to head families because of the migrant labour system which takes their men away to work in South African mines. Since the early 1990s a lot of the Basotho miners have been retrenched leading to the loss of one of the major sources of income to the families of the ex-miners. The pass laws of the apartheid regime prohibited women from accompanying their husbands to where they worked. The women had to head households in the absence of their men who remitted money home regularly to their spouses. In recent years, soil erosion and land degradation have made agriculture less productive for most rural Basotho women. As a result of persistent drought, rural Basotho communities are being discouraged from keeping large herds of cattle because there is little vegetation for the animals to graze. These farmers are unable to afford animal feed for large herds of cattle. As a result of the above mentioned problems coupled with persistent drought and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the levels of poverty have increased in the rural areas. Women are being empowered through adult education programmes to ensure that they are able to have sustainable livelihoods by engaging in vegetable farming and other non-agricultural activities. One of the adult education programmes that empower rural women to tackle poverty and hunger in most Basotho villages is the erection of vegetable gardens around the homestead which is referred to as Homestead gardening. The general name that is given to such projects which are sponsored by the Lesotho government, NGOs and the other agencies is normally referred to as 'mantloane' in Sesotho. The term refers to the way children use stones to build houses when playing. Women are taught to use stones to make small plots of about one and half meters high which they fill with soil, and manure around the house to make vegetable gardens. The homestead gardening concept has been implemented in a lot of countries across the world to ensure food security in vulnerable communities. Weimer (2008:7) reports that homestead gardening is based on the principles of permaculture and organic gardening which the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Caritas and other partners have adopted to assist poor and vulnerable communities to ensure sustainable livelihoods. The author argues that this programme can be adapted in parts of Africa rural communities where there is inadequate land for farming and soil is highly depleted due to drought and land is being over used. The programme needs very little effort for the initial erection and maintenance of the plots as perishable household waste and water that have been used for washing and animal manure are dumped into the plots to increase their fertility. Weimer (2008:4) points out that the homestead gardening initiative contributes to food security, reduces malnutrition as well as ensuring that households are able to increase food production and income generating activities. This is a case study that uses the qualitative approach of interviews to explore the impact of the project on the two rural communities, Mount Tabor and Ha 'Ngoe in the Mafeteng district in Lesotho. Thirty women who are involved in the mantloane project were interviewed on the impact of the adult education through the 'mantloane' programmes on their lives. Over 96% of the respondents indicated that the education programme which started about six years ago has helped their families to deal with the problems of hunger, malnutrition and poverty.

Theoretical framework

As alluded to in the introduction to this paper, household incomes in Lesotho have been curtailed due to the retrenchment of mine workers. This means that new ways have to be found to sustain families and communities that previously relied on this source of livelihood. Understanding the local culture in dealing with the reality of hunger and poverty in the face of the drying up of one of the main source of livelihood merits understanding the actors (women) who bear the brunt of the challenges these problems bring. Engberg-Perdersen (1998) cited in Ansoglegang (2006:34) notes that understanding the culture in dealing with a complex situation with different actors provides opportunities while others are ruled out in an unequal manner.

This study is underpinned by the actor-oriented approach which points to the importance of the agency of individuals in the face of structural constraints. The theory is credited to Norman Long and the Wageningen Schools according to McGregor (1998) cited in Ansoglenang (2006:35). The actor-oriented approach suggests that poor people have power and agency. Despite the fact that they appear to be subordinates; one should understand the societal structures where they are located. The actors find means to deal with situation they face. The social actors have the knowledge and the capacity to deal with their circumstances as they have the power to confront their situation. Gardner and Lewis (1996) cited in Ansoglenang (2006:35) allude that the concept of human agency refers to the ability of people to get involved in shaping their own world rather than their situations being dictated to in advance by capital, the state or an external body. This theory is applicable to the study as the rural women here are the actors who have to find a way of dealing with poverty, malnutrition and hunger which have been aggravated by the retrenchment of their husbands from the South African mines, persistent drought and land degradation which have all affected their livelihoods. There are various initiatives from the government and other bodies which bring programmes that are imposed on communities without their involvement to a larger extent. The 'mantlone' concept is a way of knowing and communicating success stories about the Basotho way of life Tsepa (2008: ii). The concept can be applied in addressing the socio-economic challenges most poor and rural households face in Lesotho and elsewhere in the developing world.

Rural women and sustainable livelihoods

Women have been regarded in most traditional societies in Africa as minors and have been prevented from participating fully in some of the most important socio-economic, political and decision-making processes in their communities. This perception has created serious and unintended consequences on the quality of life of women in general and for rural women in particular. The roles of women in most societies have been gender (socially) and sex (biologically) determined according to UNESCO (2000) cited in Akinsolu (2006:66). He explains that men's sex role is to impregnate women and that of women are to become pregnant, bear children and breast-feed children. On social roles, men are supposed to be breadwinners and head families, protect family and clan, be strong, vigilant and adventurous, be land owners, take part in village council and governance and engage in male games such as wrestling. As a result of the retrenchments that have been taking place in the South African mines and the lack

of arable land for the cultivation of crops and rearing of animals which have been men's work traditionally, rural women are compelled to shoulder most of these roles and responsibilities of men in their absence and when they are retrenched from the mines in South Africa.

Some of the biological/sex as well as societal and culturally determined factors disadvantage a lot of women in developing societies. These are perpetuated through the denial of basic education to the girl-child as she is supposed to be taking care of the house and marry and go out. Where resources are inadequate, it is the norm in most traditional societies to sacrifice the girl's education for the boy who is expected to inherit and continue the family line. The (UN Millennium Campaign) 2004 points out that 46% of girls in the world's poorest countries have no access to primary education. It adds that one in four adults cannot read or write and of that number two thirds are women. The denial of education and training to women and girls has contributed to serious unintended consequences like high poverty levels amongst women, high unemployment, ignorance, low self-esteem and exposure to simple preventable diseases etc. just to name a few.

Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) is seen as a vehicle that can be used to equip African women with the skills and the knowledge they require to enable them to take care of themselves and their families and also participate in the socio-economic development of their communities. Areas in which basic education can make a difference in the lives of rural women include birth control and family planning, nutrition (infant mortality), hygiene, water treatment, sustainable livelihoods, sustainable land use, food production and conservation, knowing their rights and responsibilities etc. McKay (1995: 77) intimates that studies have shown that children whose mothers have basic education have a better chance of living up to five years of age.

A lot of households in some countries in the Southern African region are women headed as a result of men usually migrating to towns and cities in search of work. The women who remain in the marital homes mostly engaged in subsistence agriculture and social reproduction. Momsen (1991:23) points out that two thirds of households are female headed and for those who have spouses working in the mines only half sent remittances. Education as has been indicated above can serve as a catalyst in the empowerment and emancipation of women.

ABET can help in reducing some of the socio-economic challenges Basotho women face by teaching them some basic life skills in planting vegetables and basic business management skills which can empower them to take care of themselves and their families. Adults can also learn how to use simple technologies to prepare safe drinking water which is one of the causes of death among children. Women in ABET also learn how to preserve food which most often go waste during harvesting seasons whereas during the lean seasons they have nothing to eat with their families. Again women learn preventative health measures regarding when they have to immunize their children. Reading and writing skills ABET empower rural women again to have access to a lot of information which contribute in diverse ways to their emancipation. The Alma Ata Declaration – 1978 cited in Kendall (2008:171) for example identifies some of roles basic education plays in health the health of people as:

- Preventing and controlling health problems
- Promoting food supply and proper nutrition
- A way of getting adequate supply of safe water and ensuring basic sanitation
- Ensuring maternal health care
- Ensuring immunization against the major infectious diseases.

ABET does not only teach people literacy and numeracy but also life skills that adult learners are able to use to engage in other socio-economic activities that provide them with livelihood. Gittinger, Chernick, Horenstein and Saito (1990:3) allude that in many African countries women do all the food processing, fetch most of the water and firewood, produce 70% of the food, handle 60% of the marketing and also do at least half of the tasks involved in the storing of food and raising animals. Despite all their efforts, rural women are still not able to make ends meet as they lack the education, skills, the appropriate technology as well as the sustainable use of use of the land, soil conservation and basic technology for food processing and preservation. ABET can play a leading role in empowering rural women by teaching them how to address these challenges they spend all their time and energy on (which goes to waste most of the times). The teaching of soil conservation and proper land use will enable rural women to take care of the marginal lands they have and also make use of energy saving cooking methods and the establishment of wood lots.

There is a need to put women empowerment at the centre of the development agenda at all levels of decision making rather than the tokenism and the talk shops that take place at international conferences on women emancipation and empowerment. Snyder (1991:6) indicates that community development workers define empowerment as 'The state of persons (women and men) being enabled to take their destinies into their own hands'. She adds that personal autonomy or self-reliance is at the core of it all because, women and the poor who are numerous in the developing world have limited abilities to exercise autonomy by making choices in political, social and economic arenas. She identified three elements in empowerment which are:

- Economic which relates to access to productive assets like, land, credit and technologies that can produce income
- Human development augmented by access to basic needs such as education, health services, pure water, fuel and shelter
- Participation in decision making.

On the reduction of poverty which is the centre of women's empowerment, Yunus (2006:3) shows how access to resources can emancipate women from 'slavery' and disempowerment. A classic example is how the Grameen Bank through micro credit has been able to make nearly 60% of poor women in Bangladesh cross the poverty line in 30 years. Through access to micro credit the village women have been able to build 640 000 houses. The women are now able to take care of their families through collateral free loans and are now shareholders in an international cell phone business through the Bank. In the same breath teaching adults through the 'mantloane' concept in food production and food security can go a long way in reducing poverty, hunger and ensure food security in vulnerable communities.

Research design and methodology

In this exploratory study the researcher employed the phenomenological approach to gather data from rural women on the 'mantloane' project in the Mount Tabor and Ha 'Ngoe villages. The phenomenological approach was used because it allows the respondents to describe and

interpret experiences of the phenomenon as being lived. The phenomenological study attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understanding of a particular situation (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005:139).

Population

A population is defined as the aggregate of cases with a common assigned criterion and features as subjects for a study. The target population for this study was all the women in the two villages (Mount Tabor and Ha 'Ngoe) who are part of the 'mantloane' programme, 120 in total.

Data collection

The researcher spent one week at Mount Tabor in the second week of January 2012. With the help of a local teacher, in-depth interviews were held with 30 women from the 'mantloane' project in the two villages of Mt Tabor and 'Ngoe in the Thabana Morena area. The purposeful sampling technique was used to solicit the views of the respondents on the 'mantloane' food garden project. Purposeful sampling is a technique in which particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected in order to provide information that cannot be obtained from other choices (Wilson 2010:199). In this study the participants are not all the women in the villages but those involved in the 'mantloane' project that were able to offer rich information for the study. The interviews took place at the homes of the participants at times that they had indicated were convenient to them. The teacher facilitated the entry and served as the interpreter as the researcher is not Sotho speaking. The teacher advised on who could be helpful for our intended interviews.

Results and discussions

Almost all the women interviewed 28 of the 30 (i.e. 93.3%) from the two villages indicated that the 'mantloane' programme has empowered them with the skills to produce vegetables for most parts of the year. This, they claimed, has saved them money and prevented their families from experiencing hunger. Half of the respondents said they were from time-to-time able to sell some of their vegetables to neighbours to buy some necessities like paraffin, cooking oil, candles, salt etc. when they have surpluses. One woman from Ha 'Ngoe village remarked, 'For me my dignity has been restored as I used to go to neighbours borrowing all the time to buy some things but since this programme came to this village my family is able to sell vegetables all year round, for me it is business'. Another forty five year old woman from Mount Tabor remarked, 'Since my husband came back home from the mines we could not afford to buy most of the vegetables we needed and this affected the health of my family but with 'mantloane' I have learnt how basic education has changed our lives for the better'. In all only two women indicated that the vegetables they got from their plots were not sufficient for their homes but they agreed that what they got from the fields saved them some money.

Conclusion

There is a great awareness of the need to attend to women's problems in the world today as it has been realized that women in the developing countries, particularly in Africa face serious challenges that have contributed to their enslavement and disempowerment. Some of the causes are socially created. One of the main causes of women's disempowerment is the lack of basic education. The consequences are the abject poverty the majority of rural African women live in which affects their health and that of their families. The study of the 'mantloane' project has shown that Adult Basic Education and Training can play a major role in equipping women with the skills and knowledge needed for survival. The results of the study indicate that rural women can be taught how to 'fish' rather than being given fish.

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