Adult Literacy and Women in Egypt

The Effect of Literacy Acquisition on Adult Women in Egypt

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study which aims to uncover the effects of literacy acquisition on adult women in Egypt from their perspective. The author conducted focus groups with current learners, graduates and educators associated with the Freiran-based, Caritas Egypt Adult Basic Literacy Program. All participants were adult female and mostly from the lower socio-economic class residing in Assiut and Alexandria, Egypt. Writings by learners and graduates were also examined. Findings include the following: the second year learners and graduates mastered reading and writing and continued using it on a daily basis. Most reported improved self-perception and assertiveness. The women were better able to take care of the health of their families and find their way. Mothers were able to support their children's education. A few graduates were able to pursue formal education. Family relations improved with more equitable gender relations. Some women became more active in their communities. A few were able to improve their income. The women were more willing to try new activities and accept new ideas. They agreed that the benefits extended beyond just learning to read and write.

Résumé

Ceci est une étude qualitative visant à découvrir les effets de l'acquisition de l'alphabétisation sur les femmes adultes en Égypte d'après leur propre point de vue. L'auteure a mené des entrevues de groupes d'apprenantes actuelles, de diplômées et d'éducateurs associés à Caritas Égypte, un Programme d'alphabétisation d'adultes a référence de la pédagogie de Freire. Toutes les participantes étaient des femmes adultes principalement de la basse classe socio-économique résidantes à Assiout et à Alexandrie, en Égypte. Les écrits des apprenantes et des diplômées ont également été examinés. Les apprenantes et diplômées de deuxième année maîtrisent la lecture et l'écriture et continuent de les utiliser sur une base quotidienne. La plupart ont amélioré la perception et confiance de soi. Les femmes étaient d'avantage en mesure de prendre soin de la santé de leurs familles et de récupérer leur autonomie; les mères de soutenir l'éducation de leurs enfants. Peu de diplômées étaient aptes de poursuivre l'éducation formelle. Les relations familiales se sont améliorées par des relations plus équitables entre les sexes. Certaines femmes sont devenues plus actives, d'autres ont pu augmenter leurs revenus. Les femmes adoptaient de nouvelles idées et activités. Elles ont conclues que les avantages dépassaient le fait de lire et d'écrire.

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Introduction

According to the UNESCO Education For All Global Monitoring Report of 2010, there are still 759 million non-literates in the world, 17 million of them living in Egypt, my country of origin (UNESCO, 2010). The latest published literacy rates in Egypt for adults who are defined as being 15 years or over is 74.7%. In agreement with global trends, literacy rates are higher for Egyptian men, 83.3%, than for women, 65.7 % (UIS, 2010).

Many have observed that the map of illiteracy often coincides with the map of poverty (Agnaou, 2004; Graff, 2011; Oxenham, 1980, Wagner, 1993). That correlation not only holds true between countries, but between regions in the same country as well (Agnaou, 2004; Oxenham, 1980; UNESCO, 2005). Literacy is assumed to bring about all kinds of benefits to non-literates and the society as a whole. This is belief is well expressed in the UN Literacy Decade Resolution:

> Literacy is at the heart of basic education for all and creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality, and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 17)

In other words, literacy is thought to alleviate poverty by creating a teachable skilled workforce that would enhance the economy. Literate people are supposedly more capable of reasoning and accepting the opinions of others. Thus, they are more inclined towards peace and democracy. Literacy is presumably especially beneficial for women. Literate women are expected to have fewer children, take better care of them, send them to school and keep them there (King & Hill, 1993). Literacy helps women gain access to further education, skills training

and jobs. It is said to empower, emancipate and help them achieve equity with men. Hence, literacy of women is thought to have enormous economic, social and political ramifications (UNESCO, 2005).

Inherent in the above quote is the belief that literacy is the initiator and driving force of development, modernization, prosperity, social justice, democracy and peace. Graff (1987, 2011) calls this belief the "Literacy Myth." He argues that there is little historical evidence to substantiate the belief that high rates of literacy lead to economic advances or modernization. Likewise, literacy does not necessarily promote democracy and freedom. In fact, it is can also be used to oppress and subjugate (Freire, 2010; Graff, 2001). Moreover, literacy does not grant its recipient logic and rationality rendering him more civilized and scientific (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Graff, 2011; Street, 1984). Literacy does not secure peace, either, as history tells us that the two World Wars started in countries that had some of the highest literacy rates at the time.

It has been reported that female literacy is strongly linked with lower fertility rates, infant mortality and higher rates of children enrollment in school (UNESCO, 2005; King & Hill, 1993). However, these statistical correlations have often prompted literacy campaigns to focus on women's reproductive role, neglecting gender equity and the promotion of the status of women. In fact, some programs reinforce submission and traditional female roles (Agnaou, 2004; Robinson-Pant, 2004). In addition, the mechanisms of these correlations often go unexplained. Little is known as to how literacy influences the behavior of those who acquire it (UNESCO, 2005; St. Clair, 2010). Some studies have been done to view the effects of literacy from the perspective of the newly literate (Kagitcibasi, Gosken & Gulgoz, 2005; Prins, 2009; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). So far, none of these studies have been conducted in Egypt.

The studies that have addressed adult literacy in Egypt have tended to be quantitative, highlighting the rates of illiteracy, enrollment and drop-out by gender and region (Adult Education Agency [AEA], 2008; National Council for Women [NCW], American University in Cairo [AUC], 2005). These studies often rely on available data from the national population censuses which include information on the educational levels of citizens. Therefore, quantitative information as to literacy levels by gender and region can be easily deduced and updated with each new census. Qualitative studies have explored the causes of illiteracy, reasons for drop-out, reluctance of non-literates to enroll (AEA, 2008; Iskander, 2005; NCW, AUC 2005) and diglossic needs of illiterate adult women (Khachan, 2009). They also included case studies (Al Minawi, 1996), the effectiveness of television literacy programs (AlShukry, 2005) and an ethnographic study (Dale, 2012).

The purpose of this study is to uncover the effects of literacy acquisition on adult Egyptian women from their perspective. My main research questions are: How do they use literacy? How did literacy acquisition affect their domestic and public lives? What change did it bring about?

There are several reasons I was interested in the topic. First, I hoped to conduct a study that would benefit the poor in Egypt who are often non-literate as well. This was soon after the 25th January 2011 revolution in which calls for social justice were loud and clear. At the time, there were many debates among the educated of the ability of the non-literates to make good decisions when voting. I disagreed with those who believed that non-literates should not to be allowed to vote. My interest was sparked further during a graduate course on literacy. I started wondering about the effects of literacy acquisition on people's lives. Does it solve their problems? Is it as empowering and enlightening as we assume it is? If so, then why are non-

literates so reluctant to enroll in literacy courses? I decided to work with Egyptian women for obvious reasons. I wanted to hear their side of the story. I believe that this research could shed light on the actual uses and practices of literacy as expressed by the women themselves. It could also reveal their needs and interests. This information could improve the effectiveness and relevancy of literacy programs. In addition, it could also raise awareness of women's issues in the community and hopefully help establish the structures that would promote equity.

Literature Review

Literacy

Literacy in Translation. The presumably simple word literacy is actually very hard to define. In fact, it does not translate easily into French, Japanese, Greek, Danish or Arabic (Barton, 2007). Whereas the Arabic word for illiteracy is widely known and used, there is no common word for literacy. The fall from grace of the word "illiteracy" has meant that adult literacy providers in Egypt have had to change their Arabic names from "eradication of adult illiteracy" to "basic adult education" or "teaching adults reading and writing." However, people still tend to refer to the programs with their former name.

Measuring Literacy. Literacy is also difficult to measure. Each country defines a literate person differently. While some countries use a minimum number of years of schooling as a criterion, others define it as a minimum level of ability. For example, in Egypt, "a person is defined as literate if he/she can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his/her everyday life" (UNESCO, 2012). In addition, statistical data often rely on self-declaration and studies have shown that people tend to overestimate their literacy abilities (Agnaou, 2004; UNESCO, 2005). This leads us to question the practise of classifying people as either literate or illiterate. Wagner (1993) believes that there should be acknowledgment of different levels of literacy and adds that,

> Thus, it is important to emphasize yet again that literacy is neither a unitary nor unidimensional phenomenon that is either present or absent. Rather, literacy must be understood as a cultural practice that is subject to a wide variety of social and cultural forces that may increase or decrease the level of skill evidenced in any individual at a particular point in time. (p. 232)

Defining Literacy. St. Clair (2010) acknowledges that it is difficult to define literacy. He says that it is often used nowadays to mean "understanding of," but that generally results in broadening its scope too much. Instead, he restricts the definition of literacy to "engagement with language in textual form" (p. 7).

In more simplistic terms, we can say it has to do with reading and writing. However, that still raises many questions. For example, does reading and writing without understanding still count as literacy? Is the ability to read a simple children's story considered equal to the ability to read a play by Shakespeare? Is reading a sports magazine similar to reading a medical report? What does writing a shopping list have in common with writing a research study? How are reading and writing related to speaking and listening? Does the ability to read and write affect the way we think?

Prominent academic studies on literacy. In response to this last question, the psychologists Scribner and Cole (1981) conducted a landmark study on the cognitive effects of literacy among the Vai people in Liberia. As literacy is often learnt in schools, its effect was often confused with that of schooling. The researchers found an exception to the rule among the Vai people who had their own unique script that was not taught in school. Rather, the prospective learner asked a friend to teach him. Furthermore, there were members of the community who were literate in English, which they learnt in school, and others who were literate in Arabic, which they learnt at the traditional Quranic schools. Each type of literacy was associated with a different domain and activities. While Arabic literacy was useful in religious domains, Vai literacy was primarily used for personal affairs with the main activity being letter writing. English literacy mirrored some of the uses of Vai, but offered its literates access to information from the rest of the world and the chance to be hired in a government job. The researchers

compared and contrasted the cognitive effects of the three different kinds of literacy. What they found out astonished them. Halfway through the study, they stated:

> There is no evidence in these data to support the construct of a general 'literacy' phenomenon. Although many writers discuss literacy and its social and psychological implications as though literacy entails the same knowledge and skills whenever people read or write, our experimental outcomes support our social analysis in demonstrating that literacies are highly differentiated. (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 132)

In other words, the researchers failed to find a common attribute or outcome of literacy among the different groups. What they found was that cognitive gains were highly localised with improved performance in skills practiced repeatedly in a literacy activity.

In their last chapter, they introduced the term *literacy practice*, which they define as "a recurrent goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge" (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236) and abandoned the idea that literacy is a technology with predictable consequences. In fact, contrary to contemporary thought, they admit that Vai literacy did not trigger social change or a drive towards modernization. It did not lead towards increased intellectualism or interest in the arts and sciences.

In an ethnographic study, Heath (1983) compared the different ways of speaking and knowing of three communities living in close proximity in the southern United States with the purpose of discovering the effect of different backgrounds on children's subsequent performance at school. Both Roadville and Trackton belonged to the low socio-economic class, but differed in racial makeup. The former was predominantly white while the other was black. She called the third community mainstream as it represented the dominant middle class. Among other things,

Heath compared how the three communities interacted around storytelling. The Roadville community had a designated storyteller who recounted real or biblical stories that ended with a moral. The children were expected to listen passively and apply. In Trackton, anybody could tell a story which might have been based on factual events, but since the purpose was to entertain and amuse, imagination, creativity and humor were encouraged. Mainstream parents and children interacted with the story. They would sometimes pause at a particular scene and discuss it. They elaborated, described and sometimes changed parts of it. Since their everyday practices resembled those of school, mainstream children naturally performed better at school. Heath's study showed that there are multiple ways of knowing which are intricately connected to the way people have with words. She also refuted the strict dichotomization between orality and literacy – that is, the distinction made between spoken and written language, and the valuing of the latter over the former.

Literacy Myths. Graff (2011) also rejected binaries in literacy such us those presumed to be between orality and literacy or literate and illiterate. As a historian, he investigated what he termed the literacy myth.

> The literacy myth refers to the belief articulated in educational, civic, religious and other settings contemporary and historical that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement and upward social mobility. (p.35)

He emphasized three main literacy myths. The first myth, often propagated by popular media and public opinion, is that of literacy's decline. Because the value of literacy is exaggerated, fear of its decline is likewise exaggerated. This myth does not recognize that language is constantly

evolving and that while old forms of literacy maybe on the decline, others are being created. The second myth is the myth of the alphabet, which posits that the learning of the alphabet turns a savage into a civilised person. The individual is transformed into a logical, intelligent human being who is able to accept opinions other than his own and is thus democratic. This myth is also sometimes referred to as the "Great Divide". It is particularly resilient as it was used to justify colonization in the 19th century and is one I hear often repeated in conversations among the elites in Egypt. The third myth is that literacy inevitably leads to economic development that is manifest in increased productivity and prosperity, a drive towards modernization and technological advancement. However, there is little empirical evidence to support that. In fact, we see the opposite of that in history. While Scotland and Sweden attained mass literacy in the nineteenth century, they continued to be poor (Graff, 1987; Oxenham, 1980). In England, the industrial revolution actually caused children to drop out of school in order to go work. It was the economic development resulting from the industrial revolution that positively affected education and literacy and not vice-versa. Graff (1987) carefully examined the relation between education on one hand and employment and remuneration in 19th century Ontario, Canada. He found that literacy was one factor among others that included ethnicity, age, personality and even chance. "Literacy did not benefit all who possessed it nor handicap many who did not" (Graff, 1987, p. 172).

The "ideological" and "autonomous" model. Street (1984) cited all the above studies in support of the "ideological" model versus the "autonomous' model of literacy. The autonomous model is based on the assumption of the Great Divide. In it, literacy is reduced to a skill or a set of skills that one either has or doesn't have. Literacy is seen as superior to orality. The proponents of this model cite the permanence of the written word. While oral

communication occurs at a given time, texts continue to exist even after their authors have died and the context they were written in ceases to be. The meanings they relate are timeless and unchanging. Literacy is thought to develop people cognitively and intellectually. Since it is considered neutral and independent of context, it is bound to bring about the same results in any person or society. Because the individual can more easily distance himself from his context while writing, he is more neutral, logical, truthful and scientific. He is more critically aware and therefore more skeptical. He is better equipped to grapple with ideas and accept other points of view so is therefore more democratic. This assumption is well expressed by Oxenham (1980) who says,

> There is a clear belief that the skills of literacy have much to do with transforming a person from a passive object of history to an autonomous subject aware of the nature of his society and able to assist in changing it. (p. 12)

Literacy in this model also correlates with the readiness to adopt modernity. Anderson and Bowmen (1966) even claimed that a threshold of 40% of adult literacy is necessary for economic development. Therefore, societies who have higher literacy rates are considered more civilized, modern, advanced, democratic, prosperous and autonomous.

Street (1984) could not help but notice that the type of text depicted in the autonomous model is the academic text. It was no surprise then that academics adopted this model as it glorified their work and status. He pointed out that there are many other forms of text and that literacy was initially invented for record keeping.

In the ideological model, literacy is seen as complementary and equal to orality. In some civilisations, the spoken word is more trustworthy than the written text. In fact, texts can just as

easily be written to record falsehood or legends as to record truth or a scientific fact. Their meanings are not necessarily fixed either because meaning is constantly being negotiated between reader and text (Street, 1984). Education and literacy are never neutral, but transmit the ideas of those in hegemony. In fact, some would argue that mass schooling was offered to instill the values that those in power thought important, such as punctuality, hard work, order, acceptance of hierarchy and obedience to those in authority (Graff, 1987; Street, 1984). Finally, as evidenced earlier by Graff (1987, 2011), literacy did not always lead to the expected consequences.

Instead, the ideological model focuses on the uses of literacy and stresses its social nature. Literacy is a form of communication that is influenced by its context. It has its roots in people's ways of knowing and has a world view that it is promoting. Because it is social, it is fraught with power issues. Patterns of literacy are often imposed by powerful institutions or structures in society. That is why some forms of literacy are regarded as more important than others. These forms cannot all be grouped under the title *literacy* but in fact constitute multiple literacies. Each is used to address a specific audience to achieve a particular purpose and adheres to accepted conventions (Barton, 2007; Rogers & Street, 2012; Street, 1984; Street, 2003). In summary, the ideological model "posits: that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles and that it takes multiple forms" (Rogers & Street, 2012, pp. 12-13).

Multiple Literacies. Street (1984) used examples from his time in Iran to illustrate these multiple forms of literacy. First, there was the "Maktab" literacy, which was imparted by the traditional Quranic schools and was religious in nature. Some of the people who had gone to these schools were able to transfer some of the skills learnt there and apply them in commercial

enterprises, thus creating a second form of literacy which he referred to as "commercial" literacy. Finally, there was the "school" literacy practiced by the youths who went to regular schools. Each of these literacies was practiced in a different domain to achieve different purposes and was embedded in a certain ideology. Each followed accepted patterns and employed a different set of skills.

Freire's Contribution. Another person who greatly influenced the field of literacy studies is Paulo Freire (2010), who absolutely rejected the neutrality of education and emphasized its political nature. He thought that literacy education could be used to either oppress or to liberate people. The oppressor wishes to maintain the status quo as that is in his interest and thus seeks to suppress the people by feeding them his myths, treating them as subhuman inferiors and stressing submission. In order to emancipate themselves, people must first gain confidence in their abilities and regain their humanity. They also need to see their reality for what it is. The prime purpose of emancipatory education is to raise critical awareness, or what Freire terms "conscientization."

Freire used the metaphor of banking education to describe oppressive pedagogy. In this model, the teacher deposits the knowledge in the students who are like empty containers waiting to receive passively. The knowledge imparted is nothing other than the myths and lies the hegemonic class hope the oppressed will believe. The students are treated as objects that need help. They are expected only to listen quietly, receive and submit, thus adopting a "culture of silence" (Shaull, 2010, p. 30). Freire contrasted this type of education with problem-posing education. In the latter model, the students are expected to uncover their reality, identify their problems and their roots. They are encouraged to think critically and be creative. As they reflect and act, they themselves are transformed and also transform their reality.

Unlike the banking education which is teacher-centered, problem-posing education is student-centered. It relies heavily on dialogue. As the students speak, they gradually learn to "name the world" or in other words describe it as it is. "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education" (Freire, 2010, p.92-93). The teacher in this model is equal to his students and not superior to them. He is learning along with them and together they are uncovering reality from their point of view and creating knowledge. "No one knows nothing and no one is ignorant of everything" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.41). He is expected to be loving, humble and believe in his students.

Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) elaborated further on the idea of naming the world in the book, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. He pointed to the ongoing connection between reading text and knowing the world. Reading is not just decoding letters. He described how he first learnt to read the signs of the sky to determine the time of day and predict the weather, the color of the fruit to see if it was ripe enough to eat and finally the behavior of his cat to discover its mood. We use words to describe and critically examine our world. The words we use are important to us because they are derived from our experience and from our surroundings. Similarly, as we write, we are not just expressing ourselves, but we are describing our world as we see it now or transforming it by stating how we imagine it to be. Freire believed that the words used in literacy programs need to be meaningful and relevant to the learners' lived experience. One way of doing that is to encourage learners to write their own authentic texts and later use these texts as a resource for other learners from the same community.

Freire's emphasis on raising critical awareness was the starting point for critical literacy, which emphasizes the injustices resulting from the inequalities in power and resources. It also

seeks to empower the people by raising their awareness and motivating them to act to gain their rights. The term has since evolved and has lost some of its political overtones to mean critically analyzing text to see how it can be used to affect and persuade readers (Barton, 2007).

New Literacy Studies. All of the above mentioned works marked a shift from a psychological paradigm to a social paradigm and the birth of New Literacy Studies (NLS). Literacy is no longer just seen as an activity an individual carries out in isolation with personal cognitive consequences. It involves more than just reading and writing and cannot be reduced to the acquisition of a set of skills. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) approach emphasizes the ideological and social nature of literacy. Literacy is not learnt individually but usually in a group situation. People use it to communicate to one another and often engage with text together. NLS also acknowledges the existence of multiple literacies, which are practiced in specific contexts and adhere to accepted conventions with particular purposes in mind. Literacy is affected by the social, economic, political and the cultural context it is in. Its effect will also vary according to the context. In short, literacy is thought to be communicative, ideological, social, contextual, purposeful and collaborative. Finally, NLS does not elevate one form of literacy over another but instead focuses on their uses. The units of examination often used are practices and literacy events. Practices refer to socially accepted patterns used in reading and writing (Barton, 2007; Street, 2003) and events "include any activity that involves the written word" (Barton, 2007, p. 35).

Everyday Literacy Practices. NLS is interested in how people use literacy on a daily basis. An interesting study was carried out in Lancaster, England, on people's everyday literacy practices. It was found that people use literacy in six key areas in their daily lives: "organizing life, personal communication, private leisure, documenting life, sense making and social

participation" (Barton, 2007, p. 57). Unlike dominant literacy practices that are often supported by institutions, vernacular literacies were learnt informally. They were embedded in people's lives and had practical applications. They were self-generated and more creative. The data also pointed to the importance of social networks in literacy. Not only was literacy used for communication, but it was often practiced in groups. In addition, people often relied on each other for help with particular literacy practices.

New London Group. Closely aligned to the NLS is the proposed New London Group (1996) literacy pedagogy. Members of the group were concerned with the ever increasing widening disparities in academic achievement and life chances. They agreed that the reliance on new technologies today for communication and the increasing interaction between diverse groups calls for a new literacy pedagogy. Unlike traditional pedagogy, which usually restricts literacy to a formal rule-governed use of one language, this pedagogy recognizes the existence of "multiliteracies" that not only include other forms of language but other modes of communication such as visual, audio, gestural and spatial which are often combined. This pedagogy would not only allow students to use existing designs of meaning-making, but hopefully motivate students to transform these designs in order to create new ones that would eventually bring about a new social future with more equitable chances of success. The pedagogy relies on four components: Situated Practice, which is based on previous experience with existing meaning-making designs, Overt Instruction, where students learn to talk about language, Critical Framing, in which students examine the familiar in a wider context and, finally, Transformed Practice, where students are able to reflectively design a new practice.

Functional literacy. Another term that merits mention is functional literacy. It was first coined by Gray (1956), who defined a functionally literate person as one who, "has acquired the

knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group" (Gray, 1956, p. 21). This definition was perhaps the first to emphasize the importance of context and that no set standard can be imposed on measuring literacy. It also hinted at its social nature. This definition was later elaborated upon by UNESCO (2005):

> A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community's development. (p.22)

This definition ties literacy with activity - or work - and with development. The underlying assumption is that literacy is for achievement. Presently, the term functional literacy is often used with programs that teach basic literacy and a vocational skill concurrently (Rogers, Patkar & Saraswathi, 2004).

In summary, it is my view that literacy is not simply reading and writing but a social practice that is often embedded in another application and follows accepted conventions. It has a purpose and is contextual. It is used to convey meaning between persons. Rogers and Street (2012) explain that well by stating that,

> All literacy is embedded in some other practice; literacy does not exist on its own. One can never just 'write', one only writes *something*; that something is for a particular purpose at a particular time and between particular persons and these purposes, time, contexts and persons give the writing its meaning. (p.81)

Arabic Literacy

Diglossia. The Arabic language has unique characteristics that need to be taken into consideration with regards to literacy. There are at least three types of Arabic. First, there is the classical Arabic (CA), which is the language of the Quran. Second, there is the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is the type taught in school and used in any formal setting such as newspapers, news broadcast, conferences, legal documents, novels, etc. As the name suggests, this form is highly standardized and is virtually the same across the Arab world. However, it is very different from the last form, which is the colloquial spoken Arabic (CSA), which varies by region (Haeri, 2003; UNESCO, 2005). In fact, the latter type can be subdivided into hundreds of regional dialects that have different accents and often use very different vocabulary. This linguistic phenomenon is called diglossia, which can be defined as the differentiation "between two codes of the same language, High (H) and Low (L). The High code is a formal one, mainly written. On the other side of the diglossic continuum, the Low code is informal, mostly spoken" (Khachan, 2009, p.649).

It is obvious that diglossia complicates the learning of reading and writing of Arabic. Not only are the learners expected to learn to encode and decode the language, but they must also learn the formal vocabulary and master the complicated grammar rules. In a sense, they are constantly translating from spoken Arabic to standard Arabic (Agnaou, 2004; Khachan, 2009; UNESCO, 2005). In her book, *Sacred Language, Ordinary People* (2003), Haeri investigated the relation between Egyptians and the Arabic language. She reported that, "the distance between the mother tongue of the students and the language of education is seen by some as one of the causes of persistently low literacy rates" (Haeri, 2003, p. p.117). Diglossia was also blamed by publishers for the relatively low rates of book sales. She also found that most people expressed

their dislike for Arabic lessons in school. They hated having to memorize the complicated grammar rules and writing in a language that is unfamiliar to them. However, that is not to say that speaking Arabic does not aid in the learning of Arabic literacy. Two studies conducted in Morocco found that Arabic speakers consistently outperformed Berber speakers in Arabic literacy acquisition (Agnaou, 2004; Wagner 1993).

Factors in learning Arabic. There are other factors that complicate the learning of Arabic. First, only long vowels are written. Short vowels are only sometimes indicated by diacritics which are small signs written above the letter. As some words have the same spelling but different pronunciation, the reader must rely on the context to tell which word it is (Wagner, 1993). Second, the letters look similar and are often differentiated by the number or position of dots. Third, each letter has a different form depending on its position in the word (Abadzi, 2003; Wagner, 1993). Finally, Arabic has many different calligraphy styles, of which two are normally taught at Egyptian schools: naskh and ruq'a. Students first learn to write naskh which is the form used in most publications and then learn the abbreviated ruq'a. Many literacy learners struggle with reading handwritten notes which are usually written in ruq'a (Abadzi, 2003).

While the above illustrates the difficulty of mastering Arabic literacy, there is one facilitating factor. The root of almost any Arabic word is the three-letter verb conjugated in the present tense. Related words are formed by adding vowels or certain consonants in a specific pattern. This makes it easy to guess the meaning of any word (Barton, 2007).

Middle-eastern beliefs about learning. Traditionally in the Middle East, literacy was learnt in Quranic schools. This has affected the attitudes Arabs have towards learning and text. As the students used to learn to read and write by memorizing the Quran, memorization is still

considered the ideal way to acquire knowledge. As they were tested by reciting the Quran, recitation is still the method most commonly used to check one's knowledge. Text is considered to be the highest authority. It is not to be argued with, added to or subtracted from. Wagner (1993) observed that, "Memorization is the personal tactic for learning lessons and oral recitation is the method by which the student checks his or her knowledge" (p.58). He described Moroccan students strolling up and down on their own during exam seasons holding a book and quietly reciting to themselves. As odd as this seemed to him, it sounded perfectly normal to me since it reminded me of my own schooldays. Dale (2012) also described a scene of a man at a government office in Egypt. When asked if he could read and write, he replied that he had memorized the Quran. In addition, text is often venerated and expressed artistically either visually as calligraphy or orally as melodic recitation of the Quran.

Adult Literacy

Global trends in literacy rates. Literacy rates follow some global trends. They tend to be higher in urban areas than in rural areas, among males than females and among the young than the old. As mentioned before, illiteracy correlates with poverty. It is then no surprise that the statistics show that the highest rates of illiteracy are among poor rural adult women (UNESCO, 2005). A plausible explanation for these trends could be that the demand for literacy is driven by the need for it. A peasant who farms and lives in a predominantly oral community has very little need for literacy in his daily life (Oxenham, 1980). In other words, the environment has a great deal to do with encouraging or discouraging literacy.

Literacy Environment. A literacy environment is often described in terms of the amount of written text that is publically displayed or present in the home. Mention must also be made of

the presence of literacy-promoting institutions such as schools, bookshops, libraries and government offices. Naturally, urban centers are considered richer literacy environments (UNESCO, 2005). Indeed, the two studies conducted in Morocco showed that urban dwelling significantly correlated with literacy acquisition for both children and adult women and that the effect did not dissipate over time (Agnaou, 2004; Wagner,1993). However, a study of the literacy environment should also take into account the literacy practices that are there. In a study of thirteen communities in the Philippines, it was found that adults acquired literacy more easily in environments that were rich in literacy practices (Rogers & Street, 2012).

Non-literates' coping strategies. It is also important to note that illiteracy does not render a person helpless. In fact, for non-literates, literacy is just one resource among many missing in their lives. It is a deficit they learn to deal with. They develop coping strategies such as relying on others as literacy mediators. They also count on contextual and visual clues. Wagner (1993) recounted the story of Oum Fatima, a non-literate Moroccan woman, who worked as a domestic helper. She was able to deliver the mail to the right addressee simply by recognizing the script used. Even though she could not do arithmetic on paper, she was skilled at mental math. In addition, many non-literates develop "hidden" or "invisible" literacies. In other words, they develop their own form of writing to achieve their own purposes. Others learn just enough reading and writing to meet their daily needs (Rogers & Street, 2012; Street, 2004).

Low priority. Adult literacy programs are usually ascribed low priority among educational programs. They often receive less than 1% of the educational budget in many countries (UNESCO, 2005). In addition, donor agencies are generally reluctant to fund adult literacy programs (AEA, 2005). Even the World Bank, an institution whose mission is to promote development and to eradicate poverty, openly declared in 1995 that it will not support

such programs as they have largely been ineffective. Thankfully, the Bank changed its stance in 1997 (Oxenham, 2004). The fact that programs are usually housed in inadequate venues is another sign of their low status. Moreover, the appointed adult literacy educators are generally poorly trained and remunertated. As the majority have no job security, they generally move on to more stable jobs resulting in the constant drainage of valuable experience (Abadzi, 2003; Rogers & Street, 2012).

Return on investment. Contrary to long held beliefs, recent data on returns on investment show that the cost of literacy training per adult learner is less than that for primary school and that they do have a positive effect on earning (UNESCO, 2005). However, as Wagner (1993) pointed out,

> The ultra-poor may profit more from even small increments in education than the ordinary poor. Though not necessarily the case with additional units of income, additional units of education for the poorest sectors of society may succeed in breaking the cycle of ultra-poverty. (p. 254)

In other words, even if the poor do not earn more money, their increased health awareness and ability to access information and services would help improve the quality of their lives. Indeed, Abadzi (2003), a cognitive psychologist specialized in the education of the poor, made a similar argument saying that the poor often did not make use of the services that could help them because they did not understand the messages directed at them.

Reasons for offering adult literacy classes. Besides the above, there are several reasons to offer adult literacy classes. First and foremost, literacy is now recognized as a human right that should be offered to all. In this modern print-oriented world, literacy provides access to

information and services and thus serves as a mechanism to achieve other rights. In addition, literacy education offers some the opportunity to pursue formal education, better employment and increased income. Since we cannot predict who will make full use of it, we should offer it to all. Finally, literacy does seem to raise the status of individuals in society and provides them with a new identity (Oxenham, 1980; Rogers & Street, 2012; UNESCO, 2005).

In spite of these advantages, adult literacy programs in developing countries seem to be struggling to attract students, to keep them from dropping out, to get them to pass the literacy test and to prevent them from reverting to illiteracy. The poor non-literates are often blamed for these failures (Agnaou, 2004; Oxenham,1980; Rogers & Street, 2012; Street, 1984). Their ignorance and backwardness supposedly prevent them from knowing what's good for them. Teachers, who are poorly trained and paid, are often blamed as well (Rogers & Street, 2012).

Reasons for ineffectiveness of programs. However, there are many reasons that could be cited for the ineffectiveness of the programs. For starters, adult literacy programs often mirror primary school programs. Adults are taught like school children and are given school literacy (Barton, 2007; Rogers & Street, 2012). However, adults come to class with a great deal of experience. Not only do they have more experience but it is also qualitatively different from that of children. The fact that adults had not gone to formal schools does not mean that they have never learnt. On the contrary, they have all acquired knowledge and mastered skills in real life. Adults will learn what they are motivated to learn and not what is imposed on them. Moreover, they are able to distinguish the ideology of a program and will only adopt it if they are sympathetic to it. In addition, adults have much less time than children as they have many other responsibilities to attend to. All these factors have to be taken into consideration when setting up a literacy program for adults. The program must be relevant to their daily lives. It should respect

their experience and build on what they already know. Adult students should also be involved in the decision making in the class (Street, 1984; Rogers & Street, 2012).

Abadzi (2003, 2005) agreed that adult literacy programs should not resemble children's but cited different reasons for that. She asserted than non-literate adults' brains are wired differently from schooled adults. Schooling affects the neuronal connections between different parts of the brain which relate to "memory, attention span, data use and ultimately decision making" (Abadzi, 2003, p. 17). Some of the benefits of education include the expansion of vocabulary, improvement in the understanding of abstract concepts, development of computational skills, ability to recognize shapes and patterns, improved categorization skills and the ability to follow a logical argument. Non-literates are less likely to understand decontextualized and abstract language, but that generally improves with literacy training. Finally, non-literates have less phonological awareness and a shorter short term memory which ultimately affect their ability to read. Reading requires first decoding the word and then storing it in the short term memory until the sentence is finished. If decoding takes up too much time, the reader will have forgotten the first few words and will not be able to grasp the meaning of the whole sentence. Increasing phonological awareness improves reading skills and helps learners gain reading automaticity, which in turn is the best guarantee that the learner does not revert into illiteracy. "Once automatized, a behavior cannot be easily forgotten" (Abadzi, 2003, p.29). Interestingly, Freire's generative words are a form of phonological awareness drills. Moreover, Abadzi recommended direct teaching of perceptual discrimination strategies so adults can better distinguish letters from one another. Clearly, as a cognitive psychologist she is exclusively focused on the skills needed for reading and writing.

Another way adult literacy programs resemble those of primary school is in their preference for formal school-based literacy. Whereas that type of literacy is important for those learners hoping to pursue formal education, it does not necessarily address the needs or interest of all adult learners. In addition, there is an assumption that skills learnt in school-based literacies will be transferred to other kinds of literacy, which is not necessarily the case. In an experiment held in Morocco, school children aged 11-14 were asked to extract information from an envelope, newspaper, advertisement or bill. Most were unable to do it. Everyday literacy skills often need to be taught explicitly (Wagner, 1993).

In truth, the preference for school-based literacy is not always due to program coordinators. Literacy learners sometimes demand it because they believe that it is the highest form of literacy and feel cheated when it is not given. Some learners also go to literacy classes because they want to experience the school life that they did not experience as children. Furthermore, adult literacy educators often resort to school based literacy as it resembles the only form of education they know (Ghose, 2001; Millican, 2004).

In an attempt to rectify this situation, many organizations set up “functional” literacy programs where literacy is combined with vocational training or community development projects. However, since the literacy given does not address a need in the learners’ lives and is not connected to the functional element of the program that drew learners in the first place, learners often do not bother to learn it (Rogers & Street, 2012).

But then, this raises the question of what type of literacy should be taught. NLS proponents would recommend first finding out the literacy practices that do exist in the communities and teaching those. These may include home, religious, leisure and consumer based

literacies. In addition, they would recommend finding out the particular interests and needs of the individuals in each group of learners and trying to accommodate those (Rogers & Street, 2012). Many programs fail because they are too prescriptive and ignore the needs and interests of students.

Needs and interests. At this point, it may be useful to distinguish between the different kinds of literacy needs. Often programs are set up to satisfy needs the program designers assume are there. For example, a program would be set up to introduce women to family planning or increase their civic awareness. These could be referred to as "ascribed" needs (Agnaou, 2004). The fact that they are ascribed does not necessarily mean they are manipulative. Then, there are the "stated" (Agnaou, 2004) or "instrumental" (Rogers & Street, 2012) needs which are given by the learners. These may include the need to help children with homework or to administer medicine. However, there is another set of needs which often go undeclared either because the learner is too shy to admit them or because he himself is unaware they are there. Most of the time, these have to do with desires for a new identity, a higher status in their communities or as rescue from a sense of deprivation suffered in the past. Rogers and Street (2012) called those needs "symbolic" needs. For example, a group of elderly retirees in South Africa joined a literacy program stating that they needed literacy to help grandchildren with homework, read the bible and deal with government pension documents. However, it became apparent later that what they really wanted was to live the long held dream of going to school. They also enjoyed getting together and being part of a group (Millican, 2004). A successful program should be flexible enough to address both stated and symbolic needs of learners (Agnaou, 2004; Rogers & Street 2012).

Programs should also address learners' interests. In a literacy program in India, the learners complained that they found the content of the primer boring. They were not interested in learning words related to cooking, such as fire and water. The educator invited them to bring material they would like to read. Many of the learners brought cinema notices. The educator then used the themes of movies and cinemas to teach the learners. Not only was the educator able to maintain the interest of the learners, but she also attracted new students to her class (Rogers & Street, 2012).

Literacy and development. Finally, adult literacy is often tied to development. Unfortunately, it is usually viewed from a deficit perspective. Non-literates are thought of as victims of ignorance who need rescuing. Not only are they hurting themselves but they are retarding the progress of the whole nation. Rectifying this situation requires depositing the right kind of knowledge into their lives. It is reminiscent of the banking education Freire (2010) talked about. The sad thing is that the non-literates internalize these messages, believe that they are failures and that literacy will solve all their problems (AEA, 2008; Agnaou, 2004; Rogers & Street 2012). Their lack of confidence in themselves actually hinders them from learning.

The other perspective is the disadvantage perspective promoted by the likes of Freire. It asserts that education is often used to reinforce inequality and that the non-literates should be empowered with the right kind of skills in order to fight back and gain their equality. Ironically, many programs that are set up to empower and liberate are often initiated by intellectuals and do not get much input from the beneficiaries (Rogers & Street, 2012).

Proponents of NLS promote a diversity perspective. They do not deny that education can sometimes foster inequality and that people lack useful knowledge. However, they advocate

looking for what is there rather than what is missing. That would include researching existing literacy practices and teaching those. This perspective also rejects the "one size fits all" approach to development and instead endorses local solutions. They cite the fact that the most successful adult literacy programs were small-scale and local and that most large-scale programs have failed (Rogers & Street, 2012).

Literacy Outcomes:

The effect of literacy is a highly contested issue. As discussed before, academics have debated for a long time the cognitive, social, economic and political benefits. The debate is not purely for academic reasons but is often fueled by economic concerns. The failure of the large scale literacy campaigns has been interpreted as a waste of financial resources and caused governments and donor organizations to wonder if adult literacy education is cost effective.

Measuring the outcomes is complicated by the fact that variables cannot be separated in real life. For example, the effect of literacy is often confounded with the effect of schooling and the effect of illiteracy with the effect of poverty (St. Clair, 2010).

However, it is agreed that the acquisition of literacy does provide the potential to meet needs and achieve benefits (UNESCO, 2005). As Oxenham (1980) said, "When humans use literacy critically, reflectively and creatively to achieving a practical purpose, there is potential – but only a potential – for achieving not only that purpose but other things as well" (p.41).

Capabilities and outcomes. St. Clair (2010) agreed that literacy grants people capabilities that they otherwise would not have. He defined capability as "the ability to achieve a desired purpose by applying appropriate skills in a specific situation of engagement with texts" (p. 33). In other words, the absence of these abilities stops people from achieving what they

want. He classified the outcomes into five categories which are: psychological, health, economic, family and finally social and political. He examined the available literature and research studies for evidence of outcomes.

Psychological outcomes. With regards to literacy's relationship with cognition, St. Clair concluded that**,** "there is very little evidence that literacy capabilities necessarily lead to changes in individual's cognitive structure" (p.92). He then examined literacy's relationship with self-perception. He identified and defined three constructs: self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy:

1. Confidence, meaning an emotional state based on the belief that an individual can achieve what they set out to achieve;
2. Self-esteem, meaning that a person values themselves; or
3. Self-efficacy, the belief that the individual can set their goals and control the process of getting to them. (St. Clair, 2010, p.93)

Studies confirmed the strong positive link between each of these constructs and literacy. This may not necessarily be due to the extraordinary benefits of reading and writing but more to do with alleviating the stigma of illiteracy and the sense of achievement one feels when accomplishing a desired goal (UNESCO, 2005; St. Clair, 2010). Furthermore, literacy education usually takes place in a supportive environment. Learners, who were often lonely and isolated, enjoy interacting with each other in the classroom. Many learners draw strength from the sense of group solidarity experienced (Kagitcibasi et al., 2005; Khandekar, 2004; Prins, 2009).

Economic outcomes. Many studies showed that literacy positively affected earnings and economic growth. However, the mechanism of the relation is not yet clear. In addition, it is

difficult to separate the effect of schooling from literacy. In fact, only a few studies have been conducted on adult literacy program graduates. The sparse evidence that is available does suggest that literacy training does raise the income of poor people (St. Clair, 2010; UNESCO, 2005).

A study conducted in Turkey found that functional literacy education did not improve the female graduates' prospects in the labor market. It was still considered shameful for women to work outside the home. Exceptions were made for highly-qualified women who were hired in prestigious jobs, which was obviously not the case of these women. In other words, literacy education alone is not enough to overcome social traditions (Kagitcibasi et al., 2005).

Health Outcomes. There is strong evidence linking literacy and health. Literate mothers are better able to take care of their health and that of their children. They also have fewer children. Similar results have been reported among women who had attended literacy programs. In Nicaragua, infant mortality was reduced significantly among children of mothers who had attended literacy training. Another study in Bolivia found that literacy training improved mothers' abilities to care for their own health and that of their children. They were more likely to seek medical advice, better able to explain health conditions and follow instructions (UNESCO, 2005). One of the outcomes of a functional literacy program in Ghana was increased health awareness (Aoki, 2005). It is important to note, however, that it is probably not literacy *per se* that has yielded these results but literacy combined with health-related information delivered in the literacy programs (St. Clair, 2010).

A study was conducted in Egypt to measure the effects of the Integrated Health and Literacy (IHL) curriculum, which emphasized maternal and child health, on adult literacy

teachers, female learners and their family members. It found that health knowledge increased by 197% for teachers, 92% for learners and 46% for household respondents. Both teachers and students overwhelmingly supported the inclusion of the new curriculum in literacy programs. It is interesting to note that learners tended to share knowledge gained with twice as many women in their household than men indicating lingering timidity between genders in discussing health issues. Modest attitudinal gains were also reported (American University in Cairo Social Research Center [AUC SRC] , 2003).

The above information raises important ethical and moral issues. Since literacy is proven to improve health and save lives, then it should be made available to all.

> Failure to provide people with literacy capabilities needed for engagement with health issues is not neglect; it is a form of violence against them and their children. To deny somebody the tools they need to attain a healthier life is to deny them life. (St. Clair, 2010, p.131)

Family values with regards to education "Parents who themselves are educated, whether through schooling or adult programs are more likely to send their children to school and more able to help the children in the course of their schooling" (UNESCO, 2005, p. 142). It is known that a highly literate home environment positively affects the child's learning. On the other hand, it was found that parents with limited literacy ability can still enhance that of their children by deliberately teaching them effective strategies (St. Clair, 2010).

Social Outcomes. The belief that literacy acquisition drives social transformation is at the heart of many development programs in spite of the lack of any supporting evidence (St. Clair, 2010). In fact, this allegation is reminiscent of the autonomous model. Literacy education

is neither neutral nor fair and its delivery often reflects the values and attitudes the society holds dear. As Stuckey (1991) said, "Literacy neither imprisons nor frees people; it merely embodies the enormous complexities of how why some people live comfortably and others do not" (p.68). Literacy is not a prerequisite to social justice, gender equity or community development. Yet, it is often assumed to be. That is not to say that it has no role. "Literacy education is a tool for social change within contexts promoting social change," (St. Clair, 2010, p. 163). One advantage of literacy programs is that they allow people to get together, exchange ideas and take collective action (St. Clair, 2010). They also often equip learners with the proficiency in the language of the dominant class which in turn helps them achieve their goals.

Mobility. This outcome was not included in St. Clair's list but is one that I suspect is of importance to Egyptian adult learners. A study conducted in Turkey on the effects of a functional literacy program a year after the program ended singled out increased mobility as one of the main benefits of the program. The ability to read signs enabled the women to take public transport and access services located outside their neighborhoods. Literacy in this case helped women overcome spatial exclusion (Kagitcibasi et al., 2005).

It is worth noting that this outcome is not often mentioned in reports on benefits of literacy. This may be due to its irrelevance to isolated communities or the overall lack of services in some developing countries. It may also be due to its lack of significance to policy planners.

Women, Literacy and Development

Literacy and the woman's reproductive role. "Higher levels of education tend to result in more knowledge and use of contraceptives" (Moghadem, 2003). Thus reads the opening sentence in a section entitled *Education and Women's Empowerment* in a book that is supposedly

on the modern Middle-eastern women. The author then continued to describe the effect of women's education on raising the age of marriage and reducing the fertility rate.

These statements are quite typical of most policy or research discourses on women's literacy. The expense of educational or literacy programs is justified on the grounds that it will reduce fertility rates, improve child and maternal health and provide increased support for children's education (Robinson-Pant, 2004). The focus is always on the woman's reproductive role as the following well-known quotation indicates:

> A better educated mother has fewer and better educated children. She is more productive at home and in the workplace. And she raises a healthier family since she can better apply improved hygiene and nutritional practices. (King & Hill, 1993, p. 12)

Whereas the inverse relation between literacy and fertility may be true, the mechanisms have not been explained. Graff (1987) pointed to the inconsistencies in measuring and reporting the data as women's employment, wages, literacy and schooling are used interchangeably. On the other hand, other factors such as the rise in the cost of children's education or the parents' socio-economic class were not taken into consideration.

This viewpoint is problematic to say the least. First, it ignores the role of the man as the father and lays all the responsibility on the woman as if she had all the decision-making power in the family which is far from being the case. Moreover, the literacy programs seem to be preaching conflicting messages. On one hand, they are reinforcing the woman's traditional domestic role as mother and wife. On the other, they are expecting her to challenge gender inequality and seek more assertive roles. Finally, this perspective has financial implications as well, as the majority of programs are primarily aimed at learners between the ages of fifteen and

thirty-five which typically coincides with the childbearing age (AEA, 2008; Dale, 2012; Rogers et al., 2004). Ironically, this also corresponds to the time when the woman is busiest and thus unable to commit to a learning activity (Dale, 2012). In addition, it has no academic basis as age does not seem to be a determining factor in literacy acquisition. In fact, Agnaou's study (2004) has actually shown that older women outperformed younger women in literacy classes.

Gendering. Gendering in literacy education is evident in content and vocational skills offered. While men are taught how to grow and market field crops, women are taught to raise small vegetable gardens and handicrafts. No mention of either marketing or women's rights is made (Rogers et al., 2004).

Perhaps, the most flagrant form of gendering is found in literacy primers. A literacy textbook in Egypt had a picture with every lesson. Only the lesson titled *Family Planning* had a picture of women in it and they were all pregnant or had children accompanying them. There was no recognition of the work Egyptian women actually perform on a daily basis at home, in the fields (see Figure 1 and 2)or in the paid labor force. Similar remarks were made on primers in India (UNESCO, 2005).

Agnaou (2004) conducted a thorough examination of basic literacy primers in Morocco. She found that 65% of the text was allotted to males while only 35% to females. Males were seldom referred to as fathers and were depicted as confident, courageous, competent and hard working. Women, on the other hand, were described as submissive, caring and self-sacrificing. While men were pictured occupying all kinds of jobs, women were usually confined to household management and childcare. The only jobs mentioned for women were extensions of their domestic roles such as nursing, needlework or food handling. Hardly any mention was

made of prominent Moroccan women such as cabinet ministers, authors or Olympic medalist winners. Literacy activities were portrayed as being performed exclusively by men. Not only were the primers sexist but they were unrealistic. They failed to recognize that in real life, both men and women were parents and workers. All of the above prompted Rogers et al. (2004) to remark that, "It is paradoxical that programmes designed specifically to overcome gender blindness and highlight women's special needs can be seen as adding to the general stigma of women" (p.125).

The image of the non-literate woman. Another image that often emerges from the predominant discourse is that of the helpless passive non-literate woman. Her inability to read and write causes her to be a victim of manipulation and oppression. These women may be suffering, but they "are not suffering primarily from the lack of reading and writing skills. Rather the sites of their struggle are those of poverty, scarcity and the forces of hegemony" (Betts, 2004, p. 81). Chopra (2004) challenged this image by presenting three Indian women. The first was non-literate but was running for elections and actively campaigning. The second was also non-literate but had been successfully managing her own shop for eighteen years. By contrast, the third was an undergraduate student, studying by correspondence, who lived in seclusion and was hardly ever allowed to leave the house. Education and literacy in these examples were not the determining factors in the women's independence or empowerment.

Not only are the non-literate women thought of as victims but they are also considered an obstacle to the nations' progress. This fits in with the deficit approach to development.

> Within this perspective, women are regarded as ignorant creatures that retard their country's socio-economic development. Thus they are cured through a "nutritionist"

> approach by learning the technical skills of reading and writing from texts that deal with good citizenship, patriotism and family planning. Such literacy training reproduces and reinforces the traditional values of society. (Agnaou, 2004, p. 18)

Thus, the programs target the women hoping to get them to change their behaviors and attitudes. Meanwhile, no attempt is made at addressing the women's personal needs, empowering the women or changing the social context that the women find themselves in (Agnaou, 2004).

Acceptable literacy practices. Likewise, women are expected to use literacy in specific ways. It is thought regrettable when they use literacy to read women's magazines, write cards or keep a diary, as these are not considered important uses of literacy. However, critics fail to note that these may be the ways the women find pleasure, express themselves and envision a new identity (Rogers & Street, 2012; Zubair, 2004). Policy planners and program developers often want to impose certain literacy practices on learners. This generally ends up in alienating the learners and causing them to reject the literacy program altogether (Street, 2004).

Women in Development (WID) versus Gender and Development(GAD). Another way of looking at it is through the perspectives of the two main approaches to women and development: Women in Development (WID) and Gender and development (GAD). In WID, the women are regarded as victims of illiteracy and poverty. Literacy education that focuses on the mechanical skills of reading and writing and income generation is offered to make up for what the women lack. These inputs will result in decreasing the fertility rates and will positively impact children's health and education. The goal is not to change the women's roles but to make them more efficient in their existing ones as mothers and wives. The onus is on the woman to improve her community. In contrast, GAD defines gender as a social construct and regards

women as victims of discrimination. In other words, the focus is on gender relations. Since the women lack justice, the solution is to create a more democratic and equitable society by raising men's and women's awareness of gender issues. Literacy education is offered among other inputs to empower the women. In addition to reading and writing skills, it aims to raise awareness and to encourage women to read their world. It is hoped that the women become more self-confident and independent, take part in decision making and have control over their own lives (Agnaou, 2004; Attwood, Castle, & Smythe, 2004; Robinson-Pant, 2004).

Tackling Gender inequity. Challenging gender inequity is a very delicate matter. On one hand, literacy program providers are expected to respect the culture they are in. On the other, they are expected to help transform it. In very practical terms, how can a literacy program convince husbands and fathers to allow their women kin to attend a literacy class where they are being taught to defy male patriarchy? The answer may be in having realistic expectations and not expecting miracle cures. McCaffery (2004) reported on training sessions for literacy facilitators she participated in Nigeria and Upper Egypt, two predominantly Islamic and patriarchal societies. Whereas there was no overtly gender element in the training, the issue of gender came up naturally. The ensuing discussions were critical in raising awareness and getting both male and female participants to question the status quo. She concluded that, "culturally inacceptable discourse maybe ineffective and have a negative impact" (McCaffery, 2004, p. 172). She recommended the hiring of female facilitators as a first step in starting the reflective process and raising local leaders to initiate the transformation.

In another program set in Lesotho, male and female participants were led in discussions on gender issues. The aim was to get them to realize that gender is a social construct and that gender roles could be negotiated. The authors reported the success of the program but cautioned

that it required a great deal of skill from the facilitator or the initiative could have backfired (Attwood et al., 2004). Unfortunately, most literacy programs target women only, which ultimately limit their ability to influence society (UNESCO, 2005).

The effect of household wealth. It is also important to note that while literacy rates are positively related to household wealth, the disparity is greater for women than for men. In other words, women living in wealthier homes are much more likely to have equal literacy abilities to their male relatives than women from poorer households. Financial limitations and social beliefs restrict the access of women to education (UNESCO, 2005). This only aggravates the phenomena of feminization of poverty and illiteracy.

Adult Literacy in Egypt

Statistics.

Table 1

Illiteracy Distribution by Gender and Place

Statement	Rural	Urban	Total
Male	3.9	1.7	5.6
	21%	10%	31%
Female	7.8	3.4	11.2
	42%	27%	69%
Total	11.7	5.1	16.8
	63%	37%	100%

Number in Millions

As Table 1 (AEA, 2008) shows, illiteracy in Egypt is more common in rural areas than urban areas and among females than males. The majority of Egypt's non-literates are poor, rural, adult women from Upper Egypt. Likewise, many of the urban non-literates are migrants from

Upper Egypt. While annual economic growth rates were high in urban centers and moderate in Lower Egypt between1995 - 2000, Upper Egypt's economy practically did not grow. Thus, we find a huge disparity between rural literacy levels in Lower Egypt where it is 62% and Upper Egypt where it is only 47% (Iskander, 2005).

It must also be noted that there is some discrepancy between statistics provided by different agencies in Egypt. That is due to different methods of calculation. While some agencies conduct their own regional mapping/census, others simply subtract the number of people who have received their literacy certificate from the total number of illiterates. However, this does not take into account those reverting to illiteracy or school drop-outs (NCW, AUC, 2005).

In fact, while the rates of illiteracy have dropped in Egypt, the actual numbers have risen. On average, only 35% of the annual set target is met. The situation is particularly critical for females. Whereas four governorates were able to exceed their set target in numbers of males receiving a literacy certificate in the years 2002-2003, eleven governorates only achieved 20% of the target female population (NCW, AUC, 2005).

Causes of illiteracy. The causes of the persistent high illiteracy rates could be divided into economic, social and logistical factors. Even though primary school education is free, hidden costs, which commonly include private tutoring, are prohibitive to the poor. Youths who do graduate from school often do not find jobs. This prompts some parents to pull their children out of school in order to earn an income and learn a trade. Limited financial resources lead some parents to decide to only send boys to school. There is a general belief that girls do not need schooling as their future roles are restricted to being mothers and homemakers. They are expected to help at home and in the field (see Figures 1 & 2). The quality of education is

generally low so even when children do go to school, they do not necessarily learn much. In addition, some teachers mistreat the pupils causing them to drop out. The distance from school to home is also another reason children do not go especially for females (AEA, 2005; Al Shukry, 2005; El Minawi, 1996; Iskander, 2005).

Reasons for low enrollment rates in adult literacy programs. Adults are similarly reluctant to attend literacy courses. Many complain that they do not have time. Mothers often request childcare. Besides, there is no incentive to learn as literacy is not likely to help them get a better job and their current work does not require literacy skills. Some would like to enroll, but cannot not find a class in close proximity to their homes or at convenient times. Others who did enroll dropped out as they found classes irrelevant and boring. Social restrictions that prevented girls from going to school also prevent women from enrolling. Finally, adults in Egypt often feel ashamed to admit that they are non-literate and so avoid being seen going to literacy classes (AEA, 2005; Al Shukry, 2005; El Minawi, 1996; Iskander, 2005; NCW, AUC, 2005).

Government Policies. The government had set some policies in place that included decentralization, increased co-ordination and partnership with NGOs and government agencies, diversification of programs offered to meet different needs and interests of learners, combining literacy training with vocational or life skills and creating programs specifically addressing women (AEA, 2008). Egypt had set a target in 2005 to reduce the number of illiterates by 50% by the years 2015/2016. Priority would be given to youths, females and residents of poor rural and urban areas (UNESCO, 2005). However, the January 2011 revolution and the subsequent political upheaval have probably slowed the momentum down and the target will not be met.

Women and Literacy in Egypt

Women, education and employment. It is paradoxical that women's literacy rates are so low in Egypt given that it was the first Arab county to open schools for girls. In fact, the first female school opened in 1832 to train midwives. Other primary and teacher training schools opened in 1873. In 1925, women were accepted in university. The feminist movement in Egypt is more than 180 years old. It was led by many prominent men and women such as, Refa'a el Tahtawi, Qassim Amin, Nabaweya Moussa, Malak Hefny, Hoda Sha'rawy and Saheir el Qalamawy who all called for the education of women and equal rights with men. Their writings and thought spread beyond the Egyptian borders and influenced many other feminist movements across the Middle East and the Islamic world. Feminist leaders were also known for their patriotism and were heavily involved in politics. They mobilized large numbers of women to take part in the 1919 revolution and often led the anti-colonial campaigns. The move towards gender parity was on the rise till the 1960s which are considered the golden age for women in Egypt. Many women went to university and joined the workforce (ElNaggar, 2011).

The situation for women has been deteriorating since then. The participation of women in the workforce is steadily on the decline in contrast to global trends. They currently represent only 23.9%, much lower than the average for developing countries, which is 39.8%. Before 2010, women only represented 2% of the members of parliament. This deterioration is largely due to the influence of ultra-conservative Islamic thought originating in Saudi Arabia which migrant Egyptian workers adopted (ElNaggar, 2011).

ElNaggar (2011) presented the social and economic cost resulting from the discrimination against women in Egypt. He relied heavily on statistics published by the World Bank, UN and CAPMAS (the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics).

He concluded that the dire economic situation in Egypt has affected women more than men. Limited resources forced parents to choose to only educate boys. The scarcity of jobs meant that employers generally gave preference to males. Women who were uneducated and unemployed were further marginalized. They were often subject to abuse at home and forced to work for free. The situation of single mothers is still particularly precarious. These conditions have led to the feminization of poverty and illiteracy.

An ethnographic study. Dale (2012) carried out an ethnographic study of adult literacy classes examining the practices and purposes of the women enrolled. She described and compared two classes she attended in poor suburbs of Cairo. The first was typical of most adult literacy classes and was mainly composed of young single women. The class was performance-based relying on rituals of repetition, drilling, rote, recitation, copying and dictation. The pedagogy was very teacher-centered with the teacher being the ultimate authority. She took all the main decisions and had the sole right to evaluate the students' performance. She asked the students for their opinions and stories but took the liberty of changing them so they fit her idea of what the proper narrative should be. Her main goal was to have the students pass the test. Correctness and proper pronunciation were more important than comprehension or self-expression. In fact, her teaching style resembled that of most school teachers in Egypt. She taught as she was taught.

The other class followed a domesticated version of Freiran ideology emphasizing personal empowerment rather than political emancipation. It was composed mainly of women in their fifties and the author described it as following a meaning-based pedagogy. The authority was shared in the classroom and literacy was linked to everyday life.

In comparing the two classes, Dale concluded that when meaning was imposed from above, as was the case in the first class, it remained superficial and was quickly forgotten. However, meaning that was negotiated and debated, as in the second class, was absorbed and had transformative power.

Dale asked both classes to describe and compare a literate and a non-literate woman. The first class, composed of young women, only had negative things to say about the non-literate woman. Interestingly, most of the characteristics they ascribed her had nothing to do with reading and writing but with social competence such as knowing how to dress tastefully and how to speak properly. The second class, composed of older women, described the non-literate women in compassionate terms. She was caring and self-sacrificing, prioritizing her family's needs above her own. Perhaps the difference in description was due to the difference in the average age of the students. However, it could also be attributed to the different pedagogies used in the courses. The performance based class emphasized the students' deficits while the other honored their life experiences.

Faith. Dale also pointed to the prominence of faith in Egyptians' lives. Everyone was identified as either Muslim or Christian. Learners often expressed the desire to read the Holy Books as one of the reasons that prompted them to join literacy class. Literacy classes, primers and facilitator training sessions were filled with Islamic references.

Tensions. Dale identified several sources of tensions in the community relating to literacy. The first is between the stigma of being non-literate and the stigma of going to adult literacy classes. In Egypt, there is a strongly held belief that school is only for children. Responsible adults should not be neglecting their duties by acting like children. There is also an assumption that adults cannot learn new skills. There is popular saying in Egypt that is often

used to mock older learners, which says, "With grey hair, he went to school." The non-literate person feels humiliated either way. However, since he has learnt to cope with the stigma of illiteracy, he is unwilling to deal with another type of mocking.

Furthermore, there is tension with regards to the benefits of literacy and education as a whole. Educated people do have more social prestige, but a literacy certificate is not enough to move a person up the social ladder. In addition, many secondary school and university graduates fail to find employment. The non-literate is reluctant to endure the mocking for being an adult learner when it does not promise social mobility or better income.

One tension that affects female learners specifically is due to the conflicting perceptions of the traditional role of the woman versus the modern role. Tradition states that the woman stays at home and takes care of the children and the household. Modernity advocates that the woman get an education and join the workforce. The modern Egyptian woman finds herself caught in between. At work, she is expected to fulfill all her duties like her male counterparts. At home, she is expected to assume all childcare and domestic chores and be the dutiful and self-sacrificing mother and wife. In the street, women are often harassed based on the belief that the woman's place is the home and she has no business being in the street anyway (ElNaggar, 2011; Dale, 2012; Henry, 2011).

Female adult learners are expected to always prioritize the needs of their homes and families. They are only allowed to go to class when they have completed all their domestic duties. If male kin or the mother-in-law disapproves of the classes, the woman will be forbidden from attending. Dale told of two cases of young women who started the class but had to drop out because of familial duties or disapproval of family members. Ironically, while the education of

the children was considered a priority, the education of the mother was optional. The children of the learners were allotted time and space to study at home, but the mothers had no such rights.

Mothering. In one of her concluding statements, Dale commented that, "Women's lives and literacies are predominantly determined by their social roles as mothers and nurturers" (p.516). All the mothers who attended literacy training were motivated by their desire to become better parents. Mothers of young children wanted to help them with homework. Mothers of older children wanted to be able to communicate with their offspring through letters when they travel.

Gender, identity and life span. Dale dismissed the dominant discourse that is fixated on low enrollment and high drop-out rates. She believed the problem is not motivation on the part of the non-literates. Rather, the debate failed to raise "larger questions of gendering and social roles of identity and life span" (Dale, 2012, p. 332). She advocated a more wholesome approach that would tackle social conceptions of gender. She criticized the preference given to younger women in literacy training as that is often the time the woman is busiest. It also ignored the fact that women in that time frame are under the control of their families. Advance in age grants women in Egypt more authority and control over their lives. Older women also have more spare time.

In summary, this review of the literature offers some key insights into literacy generally. Literacy education is not neutral but embodies an ideology and a particular world view, usually that of the dominant class. There is not one single form of literacy but rather multiple literacies. Context makes a difference in needs, uses and effects of literacy. Adult literacy, in general, has been ascribed low priority mostly because of doubts as to its effectiveness. That is due to the failure of most large scale programs that treated adult learners as children and were too prescriptive. Non-literate adults were often considered the source of the problems facing society

and thus needed to be fixed by a single dose of literacy. Moreover, the education of non-literate women tended to be justified on the grounds that they will become better mothers. In contrast, successful literacy programs respected the adult learners' prior experience and allowed them input in the program. Learners' needs and interests were addressed and the program was relevant to their lives.

In spite of long-standing efforts, literacy rates in Egypt are still low, especially among rural Upper Egyptian women. Poverty and the social restrictions on women have helped maintain that imbalance. Non-literate women are caught between several tensions. They are ridiculed for their illiteracy but criticized for acting like children when they attempt to get an education. Modernity expects them to work like their male counterparts in the workforce but tradition expects them to take up all childcare and household activities at home. Government policies prioritize literacy education to women between the ages of 15-35 even though that generally coincides with the period women are busiest and still require others' permission to attend. The desire to become better mothers is what prompted many adult Egyptian women to go to literacy classes.

That still leaves some questions unanswered. For example how do Egyptian women who have attained basic levels of literacy use literacy? What do they read and what do they write? What can they do now that they could not do before? Has literacy acquisition improved their life chances? Were they able to pursue formal education, get a job, or gain a better income? Has literacy acquisition improved their ability to tend to health issues? If yes, in what ways? How has literacy affected their roles as mothers, wives, community members and citizens? Did literacy improve their self-perception?

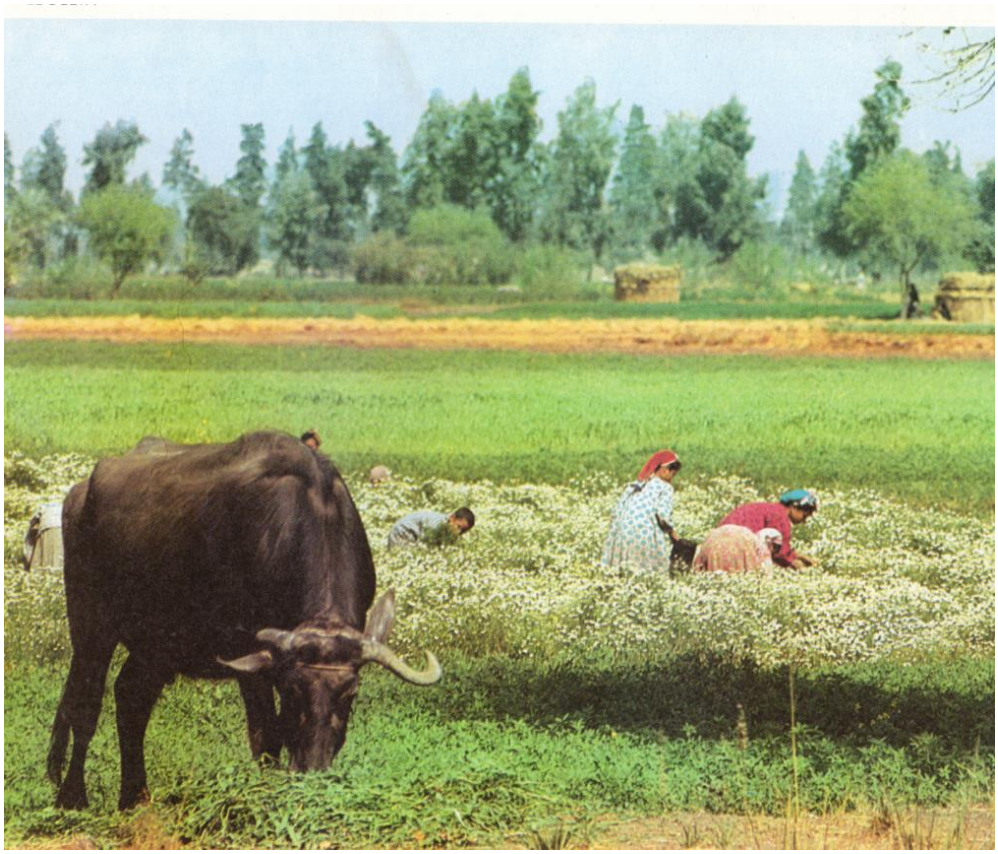

Figure 1: Girls work in the field (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 2: Some parents cannot afford to send their girls to school (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 3: A typical village street (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 4: The Village I visited in Assiut.

Figure 5: One of the libraries I visited in Alexandria. In the above picture that was taken in 2006, the red sheet hid the sign of the library due to local opposition by ultra-conservative residents (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 6: When I visited in 2012, the sign was completely removed. It was placed indoors instead.

Methodology

It is agreed that the research question determines the research method (Boudah, 2011; Creswell, 2009). If the topic to be investigated is new, which is the case in this study, it is best to rely on qualitative research which is exploratory and descriptive in nature (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is a thorough systematic study of the object of inquiry. Unlike quantitative research, which usually seeks to uncover a causal or correlational relation between variables, qualitative research seeks to give a thick description of the real day-to day realities of people with regards to the case or phenomena in question and the meaning they attach to it. It employs a set of practices to visibly represent the subject of study in its context (Boudah, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Creswell (2009, pp.175-176) lists the main characteristics of Qualitative Research:

- Data is collected in the natural setting in a location familiar to the participants where they normally live out and experience the subject of study.
- The researcher is the main instrument. He observes, interviews, examines relevant documents or sources of data. After analysing the information gathered, he begins to interpret and make visible the issue at hand. These interpretations will be influenced by the researcher's background, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic class.
- The researcher relies on multiple sources of data. He looks at the object of inquiry from different perspectives in order to present a rich description. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) liken it to examining a crystal from different facets. For example, he may interview different groups of people, examine pictures, documents, audio-visual records or spend a great deal of time observing and keeping field notes.

- Qualitative researchers employ inductive data analysis. They allow the data collected to determine the themes and concepts to be presented and discussed.
- Qualitative researchers are interested in the meaning that participants attach to the subject of study.
- While the researcher does start with an initial plan, he is willing to adapt it to the context and to change it as new data emerges. This is referred to as emergent design.
- The researcher often views the subject from a particular theoretical lens.
- Finally, the researcher presents a holistic and coherent account of the issue studied.

The Researcher

As the main research instrument, I realized that my background was bound to affect the assumptions I brought with me and the conclusions I drew from the field work. I did share a few things with the other participants in this study. As an Egyptian woman, I speak the language, understand the culture and humor and face the harassment a woman in Egypt faces simply for being a female. I am also a Christian and thus am in agreement with the foundational principles of the Catholic NGO that I ended up working with. I am also highly sensitive to inter-religious tensions in Egypt, but I am also a strong believer that harmony and coexistence are possible. I grew up in an urban environment and feel somewhat uncomfortable in rural areas. However, the major difference between me and the participants is that I belong to the elite of Egyptian society. I received an excellent education and speak two foreign languages: English and French. As a wife of a diplomat, I have lived in many different countries and am quite westernized. On the other hand, most of the participants I worked with hardly ever left their neighborhoods. In preparation for my field work, I read a great deal about literacy and its effects and arrived in Egypt feeling quite sceptical as to its benefits.

Method and Data Sources

As this was a new topic that had not been addressed before in Egypt, there were two methods most suited to answer the research questions: survey or interview. The survey was ruled out as most of the participants had just learnt to read and write and have probably never filled a survey form. In addition, designing a survey required sufficient background information about the effect of literacy on women in Egypt which was simply not available (Creswell, 2009). I thus decided to rely mainly on semi-structured open-ended questions in focus groups consisting of learners, graduates and educators. The purpose of these interviews was to capture "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Whereas an initial design was planned that included interview questions, it was altered to better address the research question.

Sato (2004) and Seidman (2006) both urged researchers to reflect on issues of power between them and the participants and to strive to be equitable. In my case, it was obvious that I belong to a higher socio-economic class, which is accentuated by the fact that I live and study abroad. Moreover, I gained access to them through the NGO that either employed or provided them with services. I realized that individual interviews would tip the balance of power in my favor. The respondents may have ended up saying what they think I want to hear or what they want to pass on to the administration.

Focus groups, on the other hand, seemed more suitable. The participants generally felt more at ease as they knew each other well and the interviews took place in locations familiar to them. They were spontaneous and shared their genuine thoughts and feelings. Finally, focus groups allowed me to interview more participants in less time (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, &

Leech, 2009). The disadvantage to this method though, was that some participants tended to dominate the conversation and not all had an equal chance to share.

Furthermore, I also examined samples of learners' writings found in the *Nashrat Al Amal* periodical that is published by Caritas Egypt, which is one of the largest adult literacy providers in Egypt and the NGO which I partnered with for the purpose of this study. More information on their basic literacy program will be presented later. The periodical contains short articles and drawings produced and written by learners and graduates. A typical issue contains short fictional stories, poems, interesting facts, a collection of famous sayings, short articles on current events and craft instructions. For obvious reasons, I have chosen to focus on articles that specifically addressed the effect of literacy on learners.

Other sources included the primer used, booklets and power points all provided by Caritas Egypt. I also took field notes during my visits, interviews and while attending the Caritas Egypt conference for literacy education supervisors. The multiple methods and sources and the thick description ensure the triangulation of data, thus enhancing internal validity.

Setting

All of the interviews were held in natural settings on sites associated with Caritas Egypt. Some interviews were conducted in their offices in Cairo and in the city of Assiut which is located in Upper Egypt, 360 km south of Cairo. At this point, it is important to note that in order to differentiate between the governorate of Assiut and its capital which is also called Assiut, I will refer to the latter as Assiut city.

A couple of interviews took place in a library in a small village around 30-40 minutes' drive from Assiut city. The village is typical of the poor rural south. The two to three storey

buildings overlook narrow, unpaved and unnamed roads (see Figures 3 & 4). The principal occupation is farming and farm animals roam about freely. In fact, as I was sitting outside the library during one of the interviews, I felt something brush by me. I turned around only to discover that it was a donkey. There was very little writing around and the only signs I saw were outside the primary school, the mosque and a doctor's clinic. Some walls had writing on them advertising stores and services located outside the village. Apparently, no newspapers or magazines were sold in the village.

I conducted the remaining interviews in Alexandria, which is a city 220 km northwest of Cairo overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. It is the second largest city in Egypt and the largest port. The Caritas libraries, where the interviews took place, were located in the poor neighborhoods of Alexandria around a half hour drive from the city center (see Figures 5 & 6). The narrow roads leading to the libraries were lined on either side with small shops that had big colourful signs displaying the name of the shop and advertising special promotions. There were many other signs indicating the name of the street, a doctor's clinic or advertising a consumer product. As in any major city, books, newspapers and magazines were widely available.

Caritas libraries are usually made up of three small rooms measuring around 3m wide and 4m long. One room serves as a reception area, the other is a classroom and the third has a bookshelf lining one wall and serves as the library (see Figure 11). The walls are often decorated with art work created by the learners, graduates and the ladies who frequent the library (see Figures 12 & 13).

Participants

The participants were all associated with Caritas Egypt as adult literacy educators, learners or graduates. As all were volunteers, this was a convenience sample. All the participants were female. Since poverty and illiteracy are closely linked, all learners and graduates belong to the low socio-economic class. I conducted a total of 12 focus groups. Unfortunately, I had no control on the size of the groups which ranged from two to fourteen participants. I did conduct one individual interview.

- **Second year adult literacy learners:** Twenty-eight learners participated in five interviews; six women from Assiut and twenty two from Alexandria. Two of interviews took place during a second year scheduled literacy class sessions. All were married with children and were Muslim. It is also worth noting that most Alexandrian learners and graduates had gone to school as children but still could not read and write.
- **Adult literacy graduates:** Twenty-one graduates participated in four interviews; fifteen women from Assiut and six from Alexandria. The Assiut sample was quite diverse. The first group was composed of eight women who had been selected by Caritas Egypt for their subsequent academic high achievements. They had all pursued formal education and one of them was even enrolled in an MA in international law. Three had graduated from university and the other four had all completed secondary school. It is worth noting that with the exception of one lady, all who had continued their schooling were single when they started taking literacy classes. Five of them were still single on the day of the interview. The second interview took place in the village with seven graduates (and many onlookers). Five of them were single young women in their late teens who had just graduated from the literacy program and had no plans to continue their education. The

other two were older married women who attended Caritas post literacy training and started their own income-generating projects. Six of the graduates were Christian, and fifteen were Muslim.

- **Adult Literacy Educators:** Twenty-six educators, with experience ranging from four to twenty years, participated in six interviews, twenty three working in Upper Egypt, one in Cairo and two in Alexandria. They were not all the same rank; some were supervisors and others were instructors but for the sake of this study, I will refer to them collectively as educators. Some of the educators were university graduates and belonged to the middle class in the nearby city. However, the majority had a secondary school certificate and belonged to the same community they worked in. Two were graduates of the literacy program themselves. At least half of these women were Christian.

Events

In April 2012, I contacted and personally visited a few NGOs in Egypt that provide adult literacy courses. I decided to work with Caritas Egypt as they are one of the largest and most reputable organizations in the field. I obtained the Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A) approval in October 2012 and travelled to Egypt in November 2012. The head of the adult basic literacy division in Caritas invited me to attend a conference held in Cairo for the adult literacy supervisors from all over Egypt the following week. Attending the three days helped familiarize me with all the programs Caritas Egypt offers to adults and was an excellent opportunity to network. I managed to conduct a couple of interviews with the supervisors during the conference.

Listening to the supervisors talk, it was apparent that the impact of the literacy programs was more powerful in the poorer rural south. This observation was confirmed by the head of the division who recommended I visit Assiut. I was also invited by the representatives from the Alexandria branch to visit. I eagerly accepted as it gave me an opportunity to compare a rural Upper Egyptian sample with an urban coastal one.

Interview procedure

All interviews were conducted in Arabic and were audiotaped. I transcribed and translated them myself. I began my interviews by explaining the purpose of my research. I then presented the informed consent form and had participants read and sign it. At this point, I must remark that most participants were puzzled by the need for a consent form. They were proud of their achievements and could not understand why their identities had to be concealed. One woman in Alexandria even told me, "Broadcast the tapes on the radio or even TV if you want. We want other women like us to know that it is still possible to learn." I always ended the interviews by thanking the participants.

In designing my interview questions (see Appendix B), I was inspired by St. Clair's (2010) literacy outcomes. I hoped to find out how literacy acquisition affected the women's daily lives, life chances, health awareness, civic awareness, their family roles, psychological wellbeing and income generation. I started my interviews with the learners and graduates by asking them their uses of reading and writing. My next question was on the effect of literacy on their lives and what change did it bring about. I let them talk and only intervened to ask for clarification or elaboration (Seidman, 2006). I noted the order in which they mentioned the effects, the amount of time they spent discussing each and how animated they got. They usually covered most of the

topics on their own. However, if towards the end of the interview a topic had not come up, I asked them the question directly.

As for my interviews with the educators, I also started by asking them about the learners' uses of reading and writing and the change they saw in their learners. I then followed the sequence of the questions I originally had in my plan.

Unfortunately, I was unable to control the number of participants in the focus groups. Sometimes too many turned up for a scheduled interview. Asking some to leave would have been considered rude. I especially had trouble on the village visit. While interviewing the married second year learners, some instructors walked in. While interviewing the young single graduates, older married graduates joined. People there are accustomed to participating in activities collectively and the concept of a private conversation is foreign to them. However, I just continued directing my questions to the original participants and made sure in my notes to identify the speaker as learner, graduate or instructor. I do not think it affected the trustworthiness of my data because even the intruders belonged to one of the categories I had planned to interview anyway. In addition, the women all belonged to the same community and know each other well.

Data Analysis Procedures

As mentioned before, I audiotaped the interviews and then later transcribed and translated them. I then checked them all again for accuracy and re-read them. By then, the major themes had already emerged. Most of the themes matched ones that were frequently mentioned in the literature and that I had identified while writing my interview questions. However, some new ones imposed themselves, such as the women's eagerness to try out new styles and activities and

improved interfaith relations. I was particularly surprised by the educators' frequent statements on the personal transformation they experienced due to their work in the adult literacy field.

I then coded the interviews by writing in the margin the main theme next to each section. I preferred not to cut and paste because I felt that the statements were best understood in context and in the sequence uttered in the conversation. Before writing up each theme, I re-read all the statements that belonged to it, broke it down to sub themes and looked for quotes that best expressed them.

The same procedure was applied to the texts in Nashrat el Amal. I read through the four issues I had and selected the articles that spoke of the effect of literacy. I translated them (see Appendix C) and coded them using the same themes and included them in the presentation of the uses and effects of literacy. However, I noticed that the texts shared some common features and relied more on the use of metaphors. I therefore decided to add another section in the findings on the texts.

Translation always has its limitations. As mentioned above, there is no common word for "literacy" in Arabic. Hence, literacy efforts are often referred to as eradicating illiteracy efforts. Likewise, there is no word for literate but only a word for illiterate. In addition, the Arabic word "muta'lem" (متعلم) can mean either educated, schooled or literate leaving the distinction quite hazy. Finally, some expressions and words in Arabic do not have an exact equivalent in English.

Figure 7: Many people are willing to host classes in their homes (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

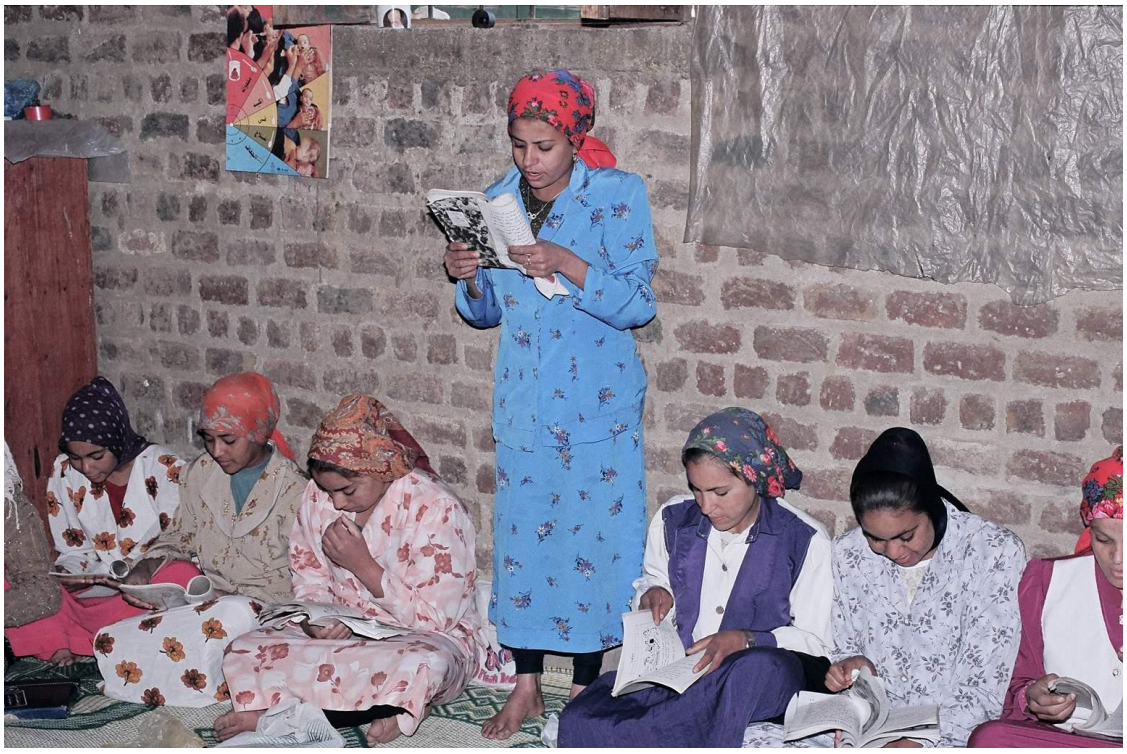

Figure 8: A class held in a home (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 9: Sometimes a class may be held outside (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

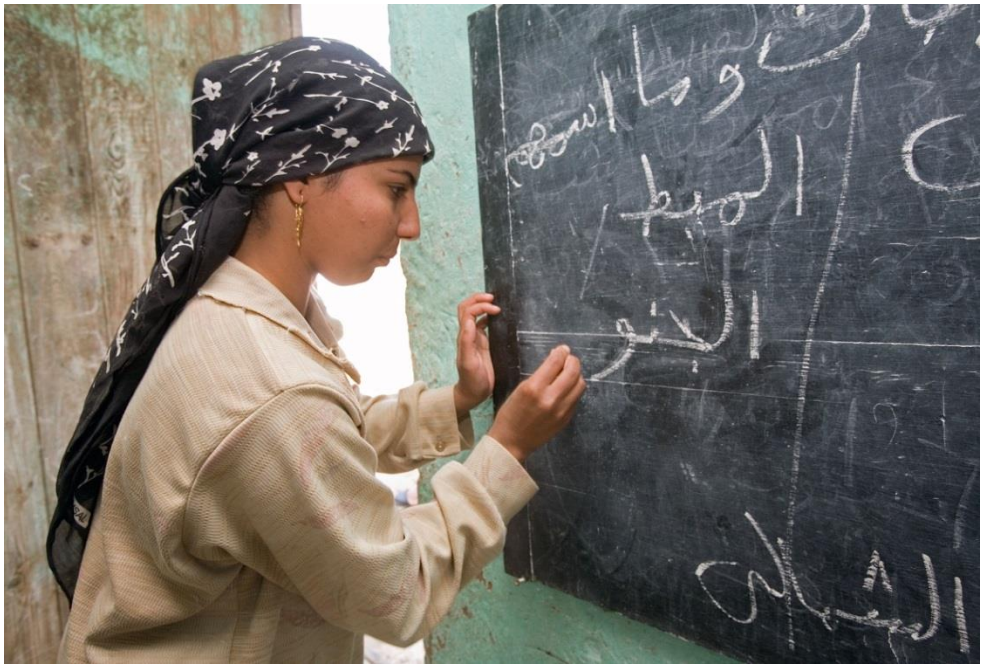

Figure 10: The only piece of equipment needed is a blackboard (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 11: A Library (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 12: Activities in the library (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 13: Handicrafts made by library visitors in the village I visited.

Figure 14: Simulating a polling station (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Results

In the focus groups, the learners and graduates related their uses of reading and writing and the changes they experienced due to the literacy program. They agreed that they became more confident and more assertive in expressing their needs and opinions. They talked about how literacy helped them to pursue their own education or support their children's education. They also credited literacy for improved health and family relations. Their ability to read signs meant that they could find their way on their own and not rely on others. They became more aware of their outward appearance and showed an eagerness to try new things. Some women were able to increase their income. The effects of literacy extended from the individuals to the community. These claims were substantiated in the writings of students and learners in *Nashrat el Amal*.

Literacy educators' observations generally were in agreement of those of the learners. Interestingly, the educators also reported personal transformation due to the engagement with the learners and content of the literacy program.

Before introducing the findings, it is important to give some background information as to the organization providing the literacy, its foundational principles, activities and the content of the course as these have a major impact on the learners.

Caritas Egypt Adult Basic Literacy Program:

Caritas Egypt was founded in 1967 by Caritas international "to establish social justice and serve the poorest of the poor" in Egypt (Caritas Egypt, 2011a, p. 3). Based on Freire's ideology, the adult basic literacy division has been offering courses in Egypt for the past forty years. They work in close partnership with the Ecumenical Committee to Fight Illiteracy, who

designs the program that is used by Caritas and other organizations. In 2006, it was recognized by UNESCO as one of the best nine adult literacy programs in the world (UNESCO, 2006).

Unlike other organizations, Caritas Egypt does not need to recruit learners as its programs are in high demand. Classes are often held in people's homes (see Figures 7 & 8), in Caritas' libraries (see Figure 11) or if the weather is nice they may be held in the outdoors (see Figure 9). The only piece of equipment required is a blackboard (see Figure 10). Caritas supplies the instructor and the primer entitled *Learn, Liberate Yourself*. Liberation is defined as "knowing one's rights and responsibilities and being empowered in order to positively participate in society" (Ecumenical Committee to Fight Illiteracy, 2012). The eighteen months basic literacy course is divided into two phases and meets four times a week with each session being three hours long. At the end of the course, the learners sit for the government exam and receive the highly valued literacy certificate, which is a pre-requisite for further access to education, most public and private sector jobs and even a driving licence.

A good part of the session is spent on dialogue and discussion. Learners are encouraged to reflect on their problems, express them, share experiences, discuss and suggest possible realistic solutions. It is in class that they practice how to articulate and express themselves. Apparently, the learners are at first reluctant to talk as they still feel timid, and think dialogue is a waste of time. However, they quickly change their minds. As one educator told me, "Once they open up, you cannot shut them up." In Alexandria, I was told about an instance when the learners complained because the substitute instructor did not let them talk as much as they were used to.

During the course, the students learn reading, writing and basic arithmetic. The Caritas educators are very proud of their method of teaching Arabic, which they believe is far superior to

the one used in public schools. It relies on phonics rather than using the name of the letter. The learner is introduced to the sound and different shapes of the letter. The letters are not presented in alphabetical order but according to frequency of use and ease of recognition. The educators also praised the method of teaching long division.

The program also introduces topics such as health awareness, family relations, general knowledge, human and civil rights (Caritas Egypt, 2011a) . The widely practiced tradition of female genital mutilation (FGM) is openly discussed and challenged.

Non-literates' neglect of obtaining official documents and certificates often causes them to miss out on rights and services. During the course, the learners are also familiarized with the format of the different official documents such as a birth certificate, marriage certificate, national ID, electricity bill, etc. They learn to read them and understand the purpose each one serves. Moreover, the instructors personally help the learners obtain any missing documents.

In response to the recent political upheaval, a political awareness component was added. Political terms such as *democracy*, *referendum*, *political party*, *ideology*, and *constitution* were introduced and discussed. Before the parliamentary and presidential elections, the learners were encouraged to obtain information on the different candidates and to vote. They were also familiarized with the voting procedures (see Figure 14) (Caritas Egypt, 2012).

Economic empowerment is also introduced. Sessions include advice on simple saving strategies and small income generating activities. Caritas Egypt instructors also help the poor access services and grants offered by the government that the underprivileged are usually unaware of.

Learners are encouraged to teach others who are unable to come to class through "The Friends program" (see Figure 17). As there are very few classes for men, many women teach their husbands (see Figure 18) (Caritas Egypt, 2011a) .

Learners also go on trips (see Figure 20). For most, this is the first time they leave their neighborhoods for non-familial reasons. In Assiut, Caritas Egypt organizes an annual human rights festival which is attended by the governor and other local prominent personalities. Each class gets to present a performance that they created (see Figure 16). Apparently, the women are always very excited, put a great deal of effort into perfecting their skit, and hardly ever miss the practice sessions that require a trip to Assiut city.

The Caritas Egypt libraries, whose motto is "A meeting point to launch into community service", are in charge of the post-literacy phase. They were launched in the year 2000 in villages or neighborhoods where Caritas was well established, to promote reading and writing in an effort to prevent graduates from reverting back into illiteracy. Sometimes, the women learn to do handicrafts (see Figures 12 & 13). They also provide further training and support for graduates in order to increase their capabilities so that they may become agents of change in their communities. The graduates are encouraged to conduct surveys in their communities and deduce the pressing needs and problems. Together, they try to think of realistic solutions. Sometimes that means holding seminars or activities that are of interest to the locals (see Figure 19). Other times, it means leading the community in service. Still other times, they start a petition and lobby the authorities for a service or a facility (Caritas Egypt, 2011b).

Furthermore, Caritas Egypt offers a post literacy course for the outstanding graduates called "The Cadres Program," where the learners receive further training in leadership,

communication and networking skills. They are also taught practical skills such as First Aid and the fundamentals of setting up a small income generating project (Caritas Egypt, 2011a).

Finally, it is important to note that whereas the founders and most of the workers of Caritas Egypt are Egyptian Christians, the beneficiaries are predominantly Muslim. Given the current tensions between the two religious groups, this has been both a challenge and a blessing; a challenge to overcome suspicions about the 'other' and a blessing when that same suspicion is shattered.

Uses of Reading

School Texts. The most frequently mentioned use of reading was for educational purposes. Indeed, many mothers enrolled in literacy classes in order to help their children with their homework and studies. One woman in the village in Assiut told me that her daughter used to cry every night because she could not do her homework. The teacher told the mother that it was the parents' responsibility to make sure the homework gets done. Another learner with a sense of humour in Alexandria said,

> Ever since I started literacy classes, I have been giving my kids a hard time. Before they would read to me and I could not tell whether they got it right or wrong. Now, I correct them and ask them to repeat till they get it right. Sometimes they tell me, 'Mom, don't go to literacy class anymore'.

Others who had older kids told stories of how they were unable to tell whether their children did their homework or not. Now, that they can read, they can check their children's books on a daily basis. Some women reported asking their children to help them with their

literacy homework. They proudly related how they all sat round the table at night and did their homework together.

In addition to mothers, all single graduates who pursued formal schooling naturally mentioned reading educational texts.

Medical instructions. The second most frequently cited use of reading had to do with administration of medicine. Over and over I listened to women telling stories of how they gave their child the wrong medicine, one that had expired, one that was inappropriate for their age, the wrong dosage or gave it for too long. As I reflected upon this, I discovered that this task involves many steps and requires a great deal of literacy. The first step is to read the label, determine if it is suitable for adult or child and check the expiry date. Next, one has to read the instructions that are written on the box, a prescription or the inside pamphlet and figure out the dosage and the times. Then, one has to keep track of the duration the medicine should be taken. Finally, special storage instructions need to be read and followed.

Signs. The women were all happy that they could read the signs on buses, in the streets outside clinics and in shops. An instructor recounted a phone call she had received from a learner who had only started attending the literacy course a month earlier. She went with her mother to Assiut University hospital, where the mother was scheduled for a surgery. They were running late, but the learner was able to follow the signs and get to the operating rooms on time. Another learner was pleased that she was able to read the sign outside an outpatient clinic and find out the paediatrician's scheduled times and phone number. A third woman who had just moved to Alexandria was happy she could read the signs on the bus. A learner in Alexandria was delighted that she could read price lists in the shops and buy from the cheapest store.

Religious texts. Egyptians are a religious people. In fact, many learners enroll in a literacy course in order to read the holy books. A few women also told me that they enjoy reading religious stories.

Other media.

Mobile phones. The women were all pleased that they could now retrieve and save names on their contacts list on their mobile phones. In Assiut, a woman offered to help her husband who is non-literate search for a number on his contact list. She had just started literacy classes and he did not believe that she could do it. At first, he mocked her, but when he could not find someone else to help, he let her try. He still did not believe her when she told him that she found it but dialled it anyway. He was so pleased when the right person answered that he decided to learn literacy too. Apparently, this man became one of the biggest champions of women's literacy in the village.

Another learner in Alexandria said that she was very pleased that she could now read her husband's text messages and guard her privacy. When the other women laughed and said "Why? Is he sending you romantic messages?" she blushed and said, "Yes, we send each other love messages."

Television. I was surprised by the number of women who told me that they read the running news ribbon at the bottom of the TV screen. With the current active political scene, Egyptians are all following the news avidly. Many check the news ribbon for breaking news. Only a week before I had visited the village in Assiut, a tragic accident had taken place in a nearby village in which at least fifty school children died. Some of the women found out about the accident by reading the news ribbon.

Official documents. A persistent fear non-literate women have is accidently throwing away an important document. They are pleased by the new ability to read any document they find lying around the house and deciding whether to keep or discard it. Another fear is being tricked into signing a document. They can now read before they sign but do admit that they do not always understand the bureaucratic terminology.

Books, magazines and newspapers. Several of the single young women like to read stories they borrow from the library. A graduate in Alexandria told me that she is fascinated with history and is always looking for new books to read. Another said that she has recently become interested in politics and reads the newspaper daily. A library supervisor told me that women come to the library to read women's magazines. They copy new recipes. Those who embroider look for new patterns and ideas. Finally, some women come searching for information on a topic of interest or to find out answers to their children' questions.

Maps. This skill proved essential to one woman in Alexandria. Her son had just been conscripted in the army and was stationed near the border with Libya. She used to be worried about him all the time. Now she checks the map and is relieved each time she finds out that he is far from danger.

Letters. Letters were only mentioned twice and each time they were preceded by the phrase "long ago". I asked if they received or sent letters and was told that nowadays people don't write letters anymore but rely on mobile phones.

Uses of writing

Signing. Virtually all the women agreed that signing was much more honorable than stamping a thumbprint.

Keeping track of household expenditures. Several women in both Assiut and Alexandria said that they recorded all their expenditures down and that helped them keep their home accounts in order.

Mobile phone. The women could now save new entries on their contact lists and write text messages.

Filling an Election ballot. A learner in Alexandria said, "I want to add an important thing. When the elections came around, we knew where to mark. Previously, we did not know how to fill the ballot."

Keeping a journal, writing real life stories and composing songs. Two women, one from Alexandria and another from Assiut, said they kept a journal. One said that this had always been her dream. A graduate from Assiut who had a particularly hard life and worked with handicapped children also told me that she liked to write stories from real life. She also composed Christian songs.

Copying recipes. Not only could the women watch a cooking show and copy the recipe, but they had also learnt how to measure ingredients. One woman said her husband liked the new dishes she was cooking and was thus more supportive of her attending literacy class.

Work related. Very few women held regular jobs, but those who did said they mostly used writing at work.

The Effects of Literacy

It is commonly assumed that the effect of literacy could only be positive. However, in embarking on this research, I was careful to stay neutral and expect to find both positive and

negative effects. However, all the women I spoke to only spoke of the benefits of literacy. In fact, they were all very surprised when I hinted that there may be negative effects.

Self-Perception. All women agreed that literacy helped them feel better about themselves. The graduates and learners often expressed feelings of shame at being non-literate in the interviews and in the articles in Nashrat el Amal. They felt deprived and lacking (Aly, 2011; Ishak, 2012; Kamal, 2012; Nageh, 2012).

It is interesting to note that these feelings were reported much more strongly by learners and graduates who were young and single when they started taking literacy classes and especially by those who continued with formal education. They felt like they were of less worth than schoolgirls and longed to be like them. One high achieving graduate expressed herself eloquently saying,

> I used to see the schoolgirls and each had a lot of friends. They were carrying books and could read and write. They knew how to talk to others well. We couldn't talk. We couldn't even answer some one back.

It is interesting that while she equates being literate with knowing how to read and write, she also longs to have friends like the schoolgirls she saw, carry books and talk like them.

In another interview, Hind and Amal, two young ladies who only just graduated from the literacy program and did not plan to continue with formal school, had the following exchange:

Hind: "When I saw a girl going to school, I felt I was missing something."

Amal: "I would look at the schoolgirls and long to dress like them, carry a school bag and books. I wanted to use what they were using."

Hind: “That was my dream, to be like them.”

These two young ladies do not mention anything to do with reading or writing. They seem to be more infatuated by the image of who a literate person is. Perhaps this explains why they never aspired for more than a literacy certificate. They had already achieved their ambition of looking like schoolgirls and now perceived themselves as being equal. Literacy increased their self-esteem.

Married women often reported feelings of shame and deprivation. Most blamed their parents for not sending them to school and vowed not to do the same with their children. Only a few reported being mocked by their husbands, but all felt ashamed. A number of them told stories about how embarrassed they felt at having to admit that they were non-literate. One of the women took the bill of her lab tests instead of the results to the doctor. Another was reprimanded by the school teacher for not responding to written messages from school. All had gotten lost at some point and had to ask for directions. In other words, learning how to read and write increased these women’s capabilities so that they became better able to deal with these everyday problems and not have to suffer with shame or embarrassment.

The instructors often described the women as timid when they first started attending. They were quite isolated and only interacted with immediate family members. As one instructor put it, “Her everyday life is a succession of chores. No one talks to her. You can say that the common factor among village women is fear. She is afraid to talk to her husband or mother-in-law”. This description was confirmed by the learners who said they were afraid to talk lest they say something stupid.

The instructors strove to create a space in the class where women felt safe to express themselves. The learners were encouraged to speak and discuss their problems. This was especially evident in the Alexandria class. One woman said, “Here, we all love each other”. Another added that she was now calmer at home because “Here, we have an opportunity to vent”. Another woman, who visits the library regularly said, “Our gathering here is useful. Each one tells her problem. We learn from each other. The discussions and life experiences broaden our horizon and understanding”. It is this solidarity and harmony that further empowered the women.

The interactions with others, the practice they received in articulating their thoughts and the knowledge they gained all helped the women gain confidence in expressing themselves. Abdel Fatah (2012) credited literacy classes with learning to express her opinion. One of the graduates said, “Before, I only left the house to go to church. I did not relate to other people. But at school, I met other people and communicated with them. That changes you and gives you self-confidence.” It is important to note that this confidence does not have much to do with reading and writing but the communication skills gained in the literacy course were just as important.

They evidently become more assertive. As one woman put it, “I have more confidence now. I am not embarrassed anymore. I am now able to speak up with my husband and other people. For example, when my son received a bad grade, I spoke to his teacher.” One other young lady said, “I now have an opinion.” One of the instructors gave an excellent example of this assertiveness. A few of her students had to quit the literacy course midway because they found jobs in a nearby factory. Once, their supervisor lost his temper and started yelling and cursing them. They replied back telling him that he had no right to speak to them that way and if he had comments about their work, he should make them quietly. He was surprised at their

boldness. They then explained to him that they had learnt about human rights in the literacy course and that they had the right to be respected. Apparently, he was impressed and not only apologized, but allowed them time off to attend class.

Moreover, the women also started to value themselves as independent individuals. They used phrases such as, "Now I know that I have worth", "I am my own entity" or "Previously, we did not matter. Now we feel like we matter. I am somebody." Literacy improved their self-esteem. It is as if they were beginning to realize that their worth was no longer in just fulfilling the role of a dutiful daughter, wife or mother but in being themselves. They told many stories but the following was interesting in its subtlety. One woman in Alexandria said that she woke her teenage son up before coming to literacy class.

> He asked me for breakfast, but I told him I had an appointment and did not want to miss it. I left him to do his thing and now I am doing my thing. I realize I am a person in my own right now. I have appointments just like him and I want to learn just like him.

This woman was not being a negligent mother, but felt that her time and needs were just as important as that of other family members. Literacy increased their self-esteem.

There is also an increased sense of self-efficacy. Nageh (2012) credited literacy with discovering that she had a role in the community. In her article, Halim (2012) introduced herself as a widow and praises literacy classes for helping her deal with her sorrows and getting a job. She concluded by saying "I can study with my kids with strength and I have courage to go anywhere. I even go to government offices to follow my paperwork and this makes me very very happy." Anyone who has had to deal with Egyptian bureaucracy realizes how nerve wrecking it can be and especially for widows who have their double share of it. Her repetition of the word

'very' portrays the extent of happiness. Finally, the phrase "study with strength" sounds as awkward in Arabic as it does in English, but it is indicative of the sense of self-efficacy that the author feels.

In the above examples, we find ample evidence of how literacy improved the three components of self-perception that St. Clair (2010) had identified as self-confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. The women also became bolder and more assertive in expressing their opinions.

Education.

Pursuing formal education. Of the 350,000 Caritas literacy graduates, 8000 have chosen to pursue formal education (Caritas Egypt, 2011a). This may seem like a small number, but is still a significant achievement considering the obstacles they face. The majority of the graduates of the literacy programs are considered too old to enroll in regular school and are expected to study on their own and sit for the test at the end of the year. Their families, who don't value education anyway, are too poor to afford private tutoring. Furthermore, the women are forced to endure the constant mocking of others in their community who tell them they are too old to get an education and that a woman's place is in the house. They often hear the well- known Egyptian proverb repeated disdainfully: "With grey hair, he went to school". As one young graduate put it, "Many told me, 'What is the point of continuing your education? Girls are to be married and stay at home.' But still, I insisted."

This determination was obvious in all the women who continued with formal education. One said, "You have a goal you want to achieve, you don't care what faces you." Another young lady, whose story was a series of triumphs over adversity, said, "Many people mocked us on the road. I faced many difficulties but with perseverance I faced them all."

These women were incredible role models for others in their communities. In fact Caritas hired most of them as adult literacy instructors. The young woman who is now an MA student boasted that, “My neighborhood is my class. I have taught my eight siblings, my mother, my sisters-in-law and all my neighbours. They all now have at least a basic literacy certificate.”

However, it is important to note that most of the graduates only completed vocational secondary school. Those who did go to university, enrolled in majors that accepted low grades. Several acknowledged that this was the best they could do with limited funds and no academic support.

Offspring Education. Whenever I asked mothers how literacy acquisition affected their lives, the first response always was, “Now I can help my children with their studies”. This was also evident in the articles written in Nashrat el Amal. (Nageh, 2012; Halim, 2012, Sayed, 2012, Kamal, 2012). Mothers of primary school children were now able to meet the expectations placed upon them by school and society to help their children with homework and studying for the frequent tests. Not only did the children’s academic level improve but the families were also able to save money they used to spend on private tutoring.

Even though mothers of older children could not help with homework, they could still supervise their children’s progress. One mother told me that previously her son would lie and say that he had finished his homework. She was pleased that she could now look at his books and check for herself.

Interestingly, the women also reported checking on their children’s school teachers. One asked the teacher why he did not mark the homework. Another went to the school principal and demanded her son’s exam be re-marked as she did not believe that her son received a fair grade.

She said, “They did as I asked and discovered he deserved a better grade. I learnt here to speak up and ask for our rights”.

Health Awareness.

General health awareness. In addition to the improved ability in administering medicine, the instructors said the women benefitted from lessons on hygiene, sanitation, disease prevention and nutrition. Apparently, the women would first come to class barefoot, smelly and dirty. The instructors would tell them they had to wash before class and put on clean clothes. They would also explain the relationship between disease and personal hygiene. Very soon, the women would be much more conscious of their appearance and that of their children. Indeed, the women I saw were all very neatly dressed. Several classes also organized neighborhood cleaning campaigns that will be mentioned later in the section on civic awareness.

It is worth noting that Caritas Egypt runs a parallel program for children suffering from malnutrition which is sometimes caused by bilharzia, a widespread but easily preventable disease in Egypt. The mothers would then receive advice on both healthy nutrition and prevention of bilharzia.

The women spoke a lot about how literacy acquisition facilitated the administration of medicine. They mentioned hygiene and sanitation briefly. This may imply that these topics did not impact them much, but it could also mean that they were too ashamed to admit that they were negligent and unclean before. It could also mean that they got so accustomed to practicing hygiene that they did not think it is worth mentioning.

Reproductive Health. The reproductive health sessions are especially popular as sex is considered a taboo topic and the women lack scientific knowledge. The educators told me that it

is not unusual to walk into class for such a session to find the class crowded with other women from the village who ask for permission to just sit and listen.

One young married woman in Assiut told me, "Before, when a girl started menstruating, she was too embarrassed to ask her mother. She would ask her friend who may give her a wrong answer. Now that I have been educated, I can tell my daughter." It was obvious that this woman was speaking from personal experience. Not only was she pleased that she now understood, but had already made up her mind that this was not going to be a taboo issue with her children.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Whereas FGM falls within the domain of reproductive health, I have chosen to introduce it on its own because of its prevalence in Egypt. In fact, the 2008 Demographic Health Survey reported that 91% of Egyptian women aged between 15 and 49 had been subjected to it (UNICEF, 2013). In 2008, the practice was declared illegal and the numbers are in the decline, but it is still major issue. (IRIN, 2010)

Instructors, graduates and learners all had something to say about this topic. Several instructors mentioned that they almost got kicked out of the village when they started addressing the topic. One instructor discovered - the hard way- that challenging the practice head on does not work. Instead, she now invites the learners to tell of their memories of the day they were subjected to it. As they explore their true feelings, they become convinced of the barbarity of the practice. Another instructor proudly recounted how she stood up to her own mother-in-law and even threatened to report her to the authorities if she circumcised her granddaughters. She then said that she now tries to convince other "open-minded" women saying, "Look at my girls. They are not circumcised and they never do anything wrong". It is interesting that while she was sincerely opposed to it, she still did not feel comfortable telling everyone that her daughters were not circumcised but only shared it with the open-minded ones.

In Alexandria, the learners spontaneously told me that their instructor, who was a very conservative Muslim, taught them that while the practice is wrong, there were some medical exceptions. I asked the instructor what those exceptions were. She responded defensively saying that only a good gynaecologist could decide.

Another graduate from Assiut told of the suffering she endured because of FGM. She vowed to fight the practice. She said, "I tell my relatives that I personally will report you to the authorities. Many people were angry with me. I also spoke to the girls and raised their awareness. I told them to notify me if they suspected their parents were planning it."

A very animated discussion took place in the literacy class in Alexandria. When the topic came up, one learner said that she would still subject her daughter to it because she wants her to be chaste. Several of her classmates disagreed with her. One shouted, "This is how God created her. You should not meddle with God's creation". Another cried, "Don't you remember this day?? It creates a psychological trauma. It is also a direct cause of divorce". Still another said, "This will harm her daughter in the future. It can cause problems in the marriage."

The instructors all declared that the practice is on the decline and had virtually disappeared in some villages. It must be noted that Caritas Egypt did not only rely on the educators' efforts in fighting this practice. They organized seminars for the whole community in which Muslim sheikhs, Christian priests and doctors all spoke against it. The educators all agreed that the men of religion had the most influence. They also added that the reported deaths of a few girls, as a result of complications after the procedure, scared many parents.

Mobility. This topic was frequently brought up by the learners and graduates. The ability to read signs had drastically changed their lives. Interestingly, it was most often associated with trips to medical facilities. Non-literate women do not venture out of their neighborhoods except

for an emergency. These journeys are often frustrating and tiresome. The woman would probably be dragging her children, walking around unfamiliar streets and asking for directions. When she finally gets to the hospital, she still needs to find the right clinic. Reading the signs meant that they are now independent and no longer need to rely on random strangers who sometimes give wrong directions.

Aly (2011), a first year literacy learner, compared the inability to read it to being blind. This may seem like an exaggeration, but her words are persuasive. She described a trip to the doctor's clinic with her mother and wrote, "We looked for it and it was right in front of us, but neither my mother nor I could read the sign". Thus, she felt blind. On that day, Aly discovered that she was "missing something" (p.6) and enrolled in literacy class.

One graduate, now a holder of BA, described her feelings at visiting the Assiut city for the first time.

> It was like visiting a foreign country. I felt like I was a stranger. I had a relative accompanying me. I couldn't imagine navigating these streets on my own. Now, I can walk anywhere in this city or any other place and not feel afraid or lost. I know I can read the signs. This is a big difference. You walk feeling confident knowing where you are heading, not having to rely on the person accompanying you.

This seemed to have made a bigger difference in Assiut than Alexandria. Curiously, while the women in Alexandria mentioned street signs and signs outsides clinics, they did not talk about bus signs. When I directly posed the question, I discovered that Alexandrians had a unique public transport sign language system with a special sign assigned to each major bus terminal. Instead of relying on bus signs, people would signal to the driver. If he nods back, they

get on the bus. Thus, the women were able to manage the public transport system without knowing how to read. Furthermore, Alexandrians had shorter distances to travel than women from villages in Assiut.

Family. Extended families in Egypt tend to live in close proximity of each other. The wife is not only expected to be submissive to the husband and other males in the household but also to her mother-in-law. This is especially true in Upper Egypt.

The Caritas Egypt program did not explicitly challenge these familial power structures, but instead stressed marriage as a partnership between two people. However, the women were provided with strategies and skills that would gradually help them gain more influence in the home. From a western point of view, these strategies seem to reinforce gender roles. Women are taught to be better home makers, to keep their houses clean and are given simple decoration and food presentation tips. They are told to speak with their husbands in a quiet gentle manner. The Caritas Egypt educators' justification for this was straight forward. The learner still needed her husband's and mother-in-law's permission to come to class and open defiance would be counter-productive. On the other hand, the learners were also taught that they were equal partners who had a right to express their opinion, but it was best to rely on intelligent and gentle persuasion. They were also encouraged to respect their mothers-in-law but to keep them from interfering in the marital relationship. It is also worth noting that women complained more of their mothers-in-law than husbands. Thus, familial power struggles could not simply be viewed as a gender issue. In fact, one educator kept repeating the phrase "the violence of women against women" in reference to the oppression the younger women felt from the older women in the family.

Relationship with husband. Understandably, most of the women I met said their husbands encouraged them to come to literacy class. Otherwise, they would probably not have been there. One woman whose husband is educated said," My husband encourages me a lot. He says, 'When you learn you benefit yourself and the children'". Another woman's husband, who was non-literate himself, encouraged his wife to attend literacy classes as he thought it was a good idea to have a literate family member. In fact, he was willing to babysit their children while she was in class.

Not all the husbands were supportive. Some of the women interviewed made sure they finished all their chores before coming to class, so their husbands would not use this as an excuse to forbid them from attending. Kamal (2012) described herself as a desperate girl. Her educated husband used to ignore her, which increased her determination to attend literacy class. She concluded by saying that now her husband and others respect her and view her as "an educated mature person" (p.7).

Some women taught their husbands to read and write through The Friends Program. Apparently this often led to improving their relationship. Abdel Menem (2012) recounted how her husband first opposed her desire to attend literacy class and even threatened to divorce her. When she insisted, he agreed on one condition, that she teach him all she learns. She said he was embarrassed at first, presumably at being his wife's student, but soon became relaxed. He expressed his gratitude by buying her gifts.

Most women said that they were better able to form an opinion and express it at home. One Alexandrian woman said,

> I talk calmly and reason with him. If he is convinced, he follows my advice. I did not talk before. It is here that I learnt to talk and express my opinion. Even my husband jokes about it and says, 'You learnt to talk there.'

At that point all the women chuckled in agreement. However, educators admitted that some women were too oppressed or too weak to change the status quo at home.

Relationship with children. The mothers credited the literacy classes with improving communication with their children. They said they were more willing to listen and discuss. They were also more able to answer their kids' questions. One woman in Assiut said that previously, when her child asked a hard question, she would tell him to shut up. Now, she attempts to answer and if she does not know the answer, she tries to find out.

The Alexandria branch had organized seminars to counter domestic violence that had a huge impact on the ladies. Several of the women told me that they have now stopped hitting their children. One mother recounted her experience with her six-year-old,

> I used to beat my daughter to the point that she used to wet herself involuntarily. One time, she did something wrong and then came up to me and said, 'Come on! Hit me'. That broke my heart. The child psychologist told me that I should talk to her gently and punish her by depriving her from something she likes for a short time. This has been much more effective. Now when she does something wrong, she comes to say sorry and gives me a hug. She even taught her younger sister to say sorry. I am very pleased with the result. This is the best thing I learnt here.

Another mother of a teenage girl admitted that she used to yell at her daughter and beat her especially when she was late coming from school. "I don't do that anymore. I ask her to call.

My daughter tells me I have changed a lot. Even the neighbours noticed. They said, 'You are a lot calmer, we hardly hear your voice anymore'".

> ***Gender equity in the family.*** The above-mentioned woman went on to say,
>
> My husband used to tell my son, 'You are the man in the house when I am not home. You rule over your sister and mother.' After attending a seminar, I told my husband, 'This kind of talk is wrong. He is not the man of the house. We are all equal in this house.'

This leads us to an important change gradually taking place in the family, that of gender relations. In most Egyptian homes, women are expected to serve and submit to their male relatives. A few of the women I spoke to, instructors as well as learners, started to question that tradition. They strove to achieve more equitable relations within the home. One woman even went as far as saying that she wanted her daughter to be better than her sons.

In a moving short article, Abdel Kareem (2012) described her sense of shame at only giving birth to girls. Whereas her husband did not complain, her mother-in-law was constantly mocking her. One specific lesson in literacy class had an incredible impact on her life. She said,

> There was a lesson called 'The Baby'. The instructor said that there is no difference between a girl or a boy and that sometimes the boy may fail and the daughter may do better than him. What is important is how you raise them. (p.8)

She went on to say that she also discovered that the woman was not responsible for the gender of the baby, but the man was. Not only was she released her from the stigma, but it probably caused her to treat her daughters with an appreciation she did not have before.

Choosing a life partner. The single young women all expressed awareness of marriage as a partnership. They said that they wished to marry a literate man and that they were adamant about their right to choose. One graduate said, "When you get educated, your mind develops and you are better able to choose. If you are illiterate, your family will choose for you". Another graduate gave a moving testimony of how her parents forced her to get engaged twice against her will. She said she did not feel like her fiancé cared for her. This is quite a revolutionary idea for an Upper Egyptian young lady where marriage is generally arranged and not necessarily based on love. Her parents and brothers were so angry with her that they ganged up on her and beat her until she ended up in hospital. It was the doctors and nurses who intervened on her behalf and convinced the parents to allow her to break the engagement. Even though this story has a happy ending, it is a sad reminder of how little control the women have over their own lives and futures.

Income Generation. Only a few graduates or learners found regular jobs. Two of the graduates who wrote in Nashrat el Amal were delighted they found jobs in a nursery (Halim, 2012; Wadie, 2012). However, several women received vocational training in the post-literacy programs. In Assiut, the women were trained as beauticians, to make and sell popular snacks, run a small village shop or raise poultry. In the village, I met one woman who had opened a small shop and another who had a small but successful business raising poultry and rabbits. She was full of praises for the training she received saying that it was easy to apply and more productive than traditional methods. A young graduate, who continued with formal schooling, funded her education by making and selling snacks and embroidering table clothes. In Alexandria, as there is a large garment industry, the women were mostly taught handicrafts such as embroidery, sewing or making accessories. Recently, training in bamboo crafts was added. The women said

that literacy helped them follow instructions and measure accurately. However, most women said they wished they could work more as they could really use an extra income.

On the other hand, one of the learners in the village told me that she supported her family of seven children for a few years when her husband was in prison. At the time, she could not read or write but managed to set up a small business selling electrical supplies. Now, she is literate but no longer works as her husband is out of prison, and he is supporting the family. This runs counter to the argument that literacy is a pre-requisite for income generation.

Overall, it did not seem that literacy classes improved the economic situation of learners significantly. A literacy certificate is still a relatively low qualification to guarantee employment. It did provide those who wished with a supplementary income.

Civic Engagement

Community Development. First, it is important to note that some of the changes mentioned above such as decline in the practice of FGM or domestic violence not only affected the learners but extended to the whole community. In addition, classes sometimes participated in community projects. One, that seems particularly popular, is neighborhood cleaning campaigns. This is hardly a surprise as Egypt has been suffering lately from a chronic rubbish collection problem. An instructor in Alexandria told me that when the women first started cleaning the street and planting trees, some onlookers made fun of them but soon after, other women joined in. This later prompted the men to help collect the rubbish, call the municipality and demand they send a truck to remove it.

However, most community projects were initiated by the libraries. The best example I heard took place in a village in Upper Egypt. The women conducted a survey and found out that

most of the villagers wanted the road to the village fixed as there had been too many serious car accidents. The women started a petition and collected signatures. Mohammed, a minibus driver and a brother of one of the women, first ridiculed the women saying that they were only fit to cook and clean. Eventually, he changed his mind and even offered to drive the women to the capital of the province to meet the governor. The women succeeded on their mission and even appeared on TV. A few weeks later, Mohammed came to the library and presented the women with another community problem and asked for their help.

One woman in the above mentioned group later used her newly acquired community mobilization skills at her son's school. The headmaster demanded that each family donate a certain sum of money to the school. The woman contacted the other mothers and they collectively refused to pay.

Other community projects included building a shady area, setting up a market place, naming village streets, arranging for proper disposal of rubbish, etc.

Political Engagement. After the January 2011 revolution in Egypt, everyone became interested in politics. Most of the women said they watched the news regularly and some said they read the political section in the newspaper. In one of the interviews in Alexandria, the women started directing questions at me. They wanted to know my opinion on current events and the upcoming referendum on the constitution.

As mentioned before, Caritas had started a political awareness campaign with the purpose of introducing the learners to the main political concepts and informing them of their rights and responsibilities. The people's eagerness for this awareness is evidenced by the following story. A young lady used to sometimes attend seminars in the library behind her

father's back. The father found out and was angry and asked her what they taught her there. She recounted what she learnt in the political awareness seminar. The father admitted that he himself did not understand the political terminology mentioned in the news. Not only did he encourage his daughter to attend the political awareness seminars, but asked her to take notes so she can later explain things to the rest of the family at home.

The educators encouraged the learners to vote while stressing the fact that they should make independent informed decisions. The women were all proud that they had voted. One woman in Alexandria said that she had to travel a great distance to vote, but neither that nor the winter rain stopped her from going. "But I went three times because my voice is important for Egypt and the whole world."

Relationship between Muslims and Christians. This is a topic that imposed itself. It was mentioned often enough by educators that it merited attention. Perhaps being an Egyptian Christian myself, I was personally interested in it. As mentioned above, Caritas Egypt is a Christian based NGO and many of its employees are Christian. Most of the communities they serve are predominantly Muslim.

Assiut has a large percentage of Christian residents and has been a hotbed of inter-religious tensions and sporadic violent incidents for the past thirty years. While the two communities co-exist, they tend to mistrust and avoid each other especially in the villages. The interaction in the classroom and the library provide an opportunity for women from different faiths to meet and discover that they have more in common than they imagined. They learn to respect, love and trust one another.

On my village visit, I was introduced to one of the adult literacy supervisors, a veiled Muslim woman from the community. The first thing she said to me was,

> Even though Caritas is a Christian organization and we are Muslims, they are willing to serve us. They really care for the poor and show their love in very practical ways. They treat everyone with love, humility and respect. It makes me want to work for them.

Many of the villagers expressed their gratitude to Caritas Egypt with one woman saying, "No one cares for us except God and Caritas".

The educators recounted a number of interesting stories of which I have only picked two that sounded fairly typical. One Christian instructor recounted how she was harassed and called an 'infidel' on her way to class in a Muslim village, but the moment she started yelling, she found all the men of the village ganging up on the perpetrator telling him not to dare bother Abla (a respectful title used for educators) Nancy as she has served the community diligently for a number of years.

In another story, one of the learners, a Muslim woman, needed to run an important errand in the city but had no one to look after her toddlers. The instructor, who happened to be a Christian, offered to help her by contacting a relative of hers who lived in the city. The relative agreed to babysit but asked the mother to meet her at the church as she would have just finished attending mass. A few months earlier, this mother would not have entrusted the care of her children to a Christian and would have refused to enter a church. However, the relationship of trust that had evolved between instructor and learner caused her to overcome her fears and suspicions.

Trying out new things. This too was a topic that came up. Educators and learners often spoke of learners and graduates trying out new styles, new recipes and new activities.

Outward Appearance. One thing educators and learners consistently mentioned was the change in outward appearance of learners. One of the educators who worked in poor rural villages said,

> Their outward appearance changes. When the learner first comes, her hair is messy. She is barefoot and her dress is dirty. We tell her before you come to class, wash your hands, face and feet. Brush your hair and put on a clean dress.

Instructors also explain the relation between personal hygiene and health. Soon, the learners adopt the new habits.

They are not only cleaner but better dressed. One young graduate in the village told me that she used to look forward to class and as it gave her an opportunity to dress-up and look pretty. Indeed, what I saw, confirmed what she was saying. All the young ladies were neatly dressed in coordinated bright-coloured clothes. They had obviously paid a great deal of attention to detail as their scarves and shoes matched their outfits. The older married women were all also very neat looking but were dressed in plainer dresses. In Alexandria, one learner told me, “We even changed the way we dress. Now I have clothes for staying home and clothes for going out”. Her colleague added, “Now we think about colours, new styles and try different ways to wrap the scarf around our hair”.

New activities. As mentioned before women were eager to try new recipes and were confident enough to go to the city on their own. In Alexandria, a group of learners and graduates

said they no longer relied on their husbands or handymen to fix things at home. They painted their own homes and fixed electric and plumbing problems, three traditionally male chores.

Learners and Graduates writings.

Reference was made above to the writings of learners and graduates whenever it was relevant. However, the writings did have some unique characteristics that merit further examination (see Appendix C). Most of the writings by learners and graduates on the effect of literacy on their lives have common features. Most are very short ranging from four to 10 lines which is understandable considering that the authors have just learnt to write. They often start by introducing themselves, the reasons for their illiteracy. Some mention a specific incident in which they realized their need for literacy. They, then, move on to say what they could do now that they couldn't do before. It is interesting that not all authors mention reading or writing in the list of things learnt. A few mentioned improved oral communication skills and boldness (Abdel Fattah, 2012; Halim, 2012; Sayed, 2012; Wadie, 2012) while others mentioned awareness of rights and duties (Abdel Fattah, 2012, Nageh, 2012), handicrafts and practical skills (Ahmed, 2011; Sayed, 2012). Many conclude by exhorting others to learn. They always express strong emotions employing expressions such as: "desperate", "hope renewed", "very happy" or "very sad". With the exception of one article by Aly (2012) that was written in classical Arabic, the rest were written in a mixture of classical and spoken Egyptian Arabic. The shortness of the articles, the mixture of classical and spoken Arabic and the unique experiences recounted are all proof of the genuineness of the articles. In fact, they struck me as written records of people's spoken words. All were beautiful in their spontaneity. Some authors were more creative and attempted to get phrases to rhyme or used interesting metaphors.

Some of the most frequently used metaphors were ones that likened illiteracy and ignorance to blindness, darkness and even death. In contrast, literacy and education were light and life. These metaphors were also mentioned by the learners in the interviews. When asked to elaborate and give examples of why literacy was light or life, the women often looked puzzled and would just repeat the metaphor. In fact, these metaphors are very common in Egypt and have been for a long time. A TV program that aimed to teach literacy in the late 1960s and 1970s was called *Education is Light*. The program and primer designed by GALAE (General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education) is called *Learn and Be Enlightened*. Egyptians often repeat the famous quote by Taha Hussein, an Egyptian and Arab pioneer in education, which states that "Education is like water and air," meaning that education is indispensable to life.

Ahmed (2011) presented her ideas differently. Instead of writing a personal testimony she wrote the following poem:

We, in literacy class	Are full of perseverance and determination.
We came to literacy.	We came to the light; we came to the ideas.
After gloom, we found the sun.	After darkness, we saw light.
After joking, we found seriousness.	After playing, we found work.
Education, sewing and knitting	Handicrafts and ideas
With our hands we build our future.	With our hands we can choose.
With our hands we can produce	Instead of sitting idly by the door.
But when we learnt	All ideas were changed.

When one of us answers correctly, We are all happy for her.

Because we are one And wish the best for each other

The poem is not artistically significant. The rhyming, which is very important in Arabic poetry, is poor and the word 'ideas' is repeated too often. However, she does portray a sharp contrast between literacy and illiteracy. Literacy is not only light, but it is the sun, the source of light in the world. It is associated with perseverance, determination, ideas, work, production and camaraderie. Illiteracy is gloom, darkness, play and being idle and dull. The phrases, that start with the words "With our hands", indicate a sense of agency and self- efficacy. The author now feels like she can control her future because she can now choose, build and produce.

It is hard to explain the exaggeration expressed in the above metaphors. Perhaps the learners have internalized the messages dominant in society about the importance of education. Perhaps it reflects the great sense of achievement they feel as they crossed over from the illiterate side to the literate one. It may also have cultural roots as Arabic is a flowery language and speakers generally lean towards exaggeration and rhetoric. However, it would be unfair of us to belittle the impact of literacy on the women's lives

Instructors' Perspective on Effects of Literacy on Learners.

Since I believe that literacy is ideological and not autonomous, I was interested in finding out the adult literacy educators' beliefs about teaching literacy and its benefits as this was bound to affect the way they teach. The educators generally did not understand my question and the response I often got had more to do with methods of teaching than beliefs on teaching. The question did not translate well in Arabic, and was probably too conceptual. However, their beliefs emerged as they were speaking.

The educators were all adamant that there is much more to literacy than just teaching reading and writing. The influence of Freire was obvious in many of their statements such as the following quote by one of the supervisors:

> Our purpose is not just to teach reading and writing but transformation. I do start with reading and writing but I want her to rediscover her reality. I want her to discover the problems and how to participate actively in her community.

The educators hoped to raise awareness, stimulate the mind and develop critical thinking, which they defined as not believing everything one hears. Dialogue was encouraged in class as it helped the learner clarify her thinking, articulate her thoughts and express herself. Eventually, she would learn to speak for herself, be assertive and "break the culture of silence", an expression they used a lot. They believed that the newly imparted knowledge, interaction with others and engaging with new ideas helped dislodge traditions such as inequitable gender practices, FGM and early marriage. They also preferred a more holistic approach to teaching. As one educator put it,

> As for me, I like to work with the whole person, his feelings, his sentiments, his problems. Yes, I do care to a degree about reading and writing. But I care more how he thinks, how he makes a decision, how he takes a stand and not be apathetic. This is the thought that dominates our literacy program. I want him to end up as a fully aware and conscious person.

The educators described the non-literate women using words such as: timid, fearful, marginalized, passive and suppressed. Yet, the educators saw great potential in the learners and respected their experience, insight, prior knowledge and skills. One young instructor told me that she usually showed up early at the library because she enjoyed talking to the women. She then said, "I learn a lot from them." When a learner brought up a problem she was facing, the

educator would encourage the other learners to share their experience and give an opinion or advice. One instructor said she often used the example of baking Betaw bread, an Upper Egyptian specialty which is traditionally made at home by village women. She sometimes visited the women as they were baking and asked them to show her how. They would respond by telling her that it is difficult to make, that it took them years of practice and that being a city girl, she would not know how. She would tell them, "You know something I don't know. You can teach me and with practice I will get better. I know something you don't know. I will teach you and with practice you will get better." The educators also often remarked on the hunger for knowledge on the part of the learners.

The educators also believed in establishing a relationship of trust between them and the learner. If a learner missed class, the educator would visit her at home and offer help when needed. "The people feel that the Caritas instructor is Mrs. Everything. She can do anything. She teaches, solves problems, helps with issuing official documents, helps them get a loan, organizes seminars, etc." In fact, the instructors drew a lot of moral satisfaction from their jobs. They described it as producing fruit on a daily basis, influencing others and making a difference in people's lives. As one of them said, "The more people I taught, the happier I became. This is my reward." They were also pleased with the relationships they formed with the learners who continued to call them and consult them even after the course was over.

There were a few interesting surprises in my interviews with the educators. First, they always classified their work as development and not education. As far as they were concerned, working in education meant working as a teacher in a regular school. They saw their role as helping to develop a community and not just teach. I was also intrigued by their consistent use of

the masculine word for learner even though all their learners were females. I asked them why on a couple of occasions but did not get a satisfactory reply.

The most remarkable revelation though was the report by several educators of the transformation they too experienced as a result of being involved in the literacy program. Several said that they used to be timid and shy but are now confident and assertive. They benefitted from interactions with a greater variety of people such as learners, colleagues and government employees. An instructor in Alexandria compared herself to her two sisters who had received similar education to her, but did not work. She said that she is bolder, more resourceful and has more friends. The instructors also benefitted from the topics that are presented in the program that are often of relevance to all Egyptian women. One instructor in Assiut told me,

> I went to school. I could read and write, but that's it. Here they taught me about culture, important knowledge, how to relate to people and evaluate them. I used to have no idea. I formed many new relations. It is not just reading and writing but also development.

Another instructor said her work helped her discover and develop skills and talents she did not even know she had. The educators in Assiut were particularly challenged as they often had to travel longer distances to work in closed communities that are suspicious of strangers and live in remote isolated hamlets. Confronting and overcoming these difficulties provided them with a great sense of achievement. They were bolder and were more willing to tackle new challenges.

In conclusion, this chapter presented and described the uses and effects of literacy from the perspective of the participants. The information was directly derived from the interviews, the short articles written by learners and graduates and the various material provided by Caritas Egypt. The findings were grouped into major themes which included uses of reading, uses of

writing, effect of literacy on: self-perception, education, health awareness, family relations, mobility, income generation, civic engagement and trying out new things.

Figure 15: Learning about healthcare and making their own visual aids (Caritas Egypt 2006).

Figure 16: They create their own performances (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 17: They sometimes teach their peers (Caritas Egypt, 2006)

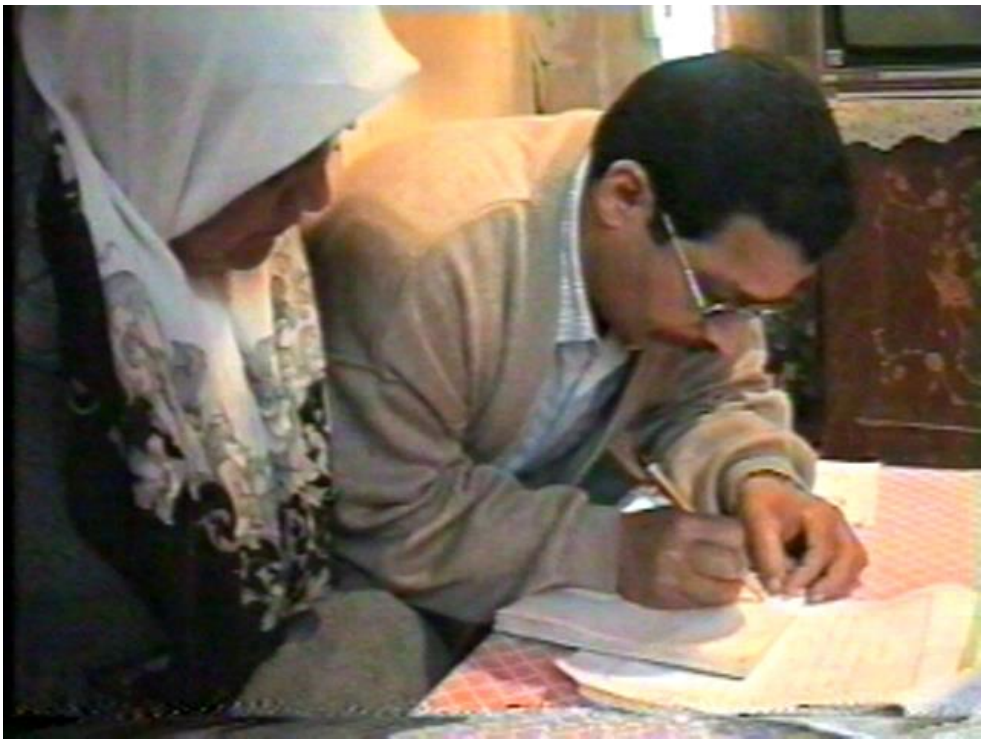

Figure 18: Women often teach their husbands (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

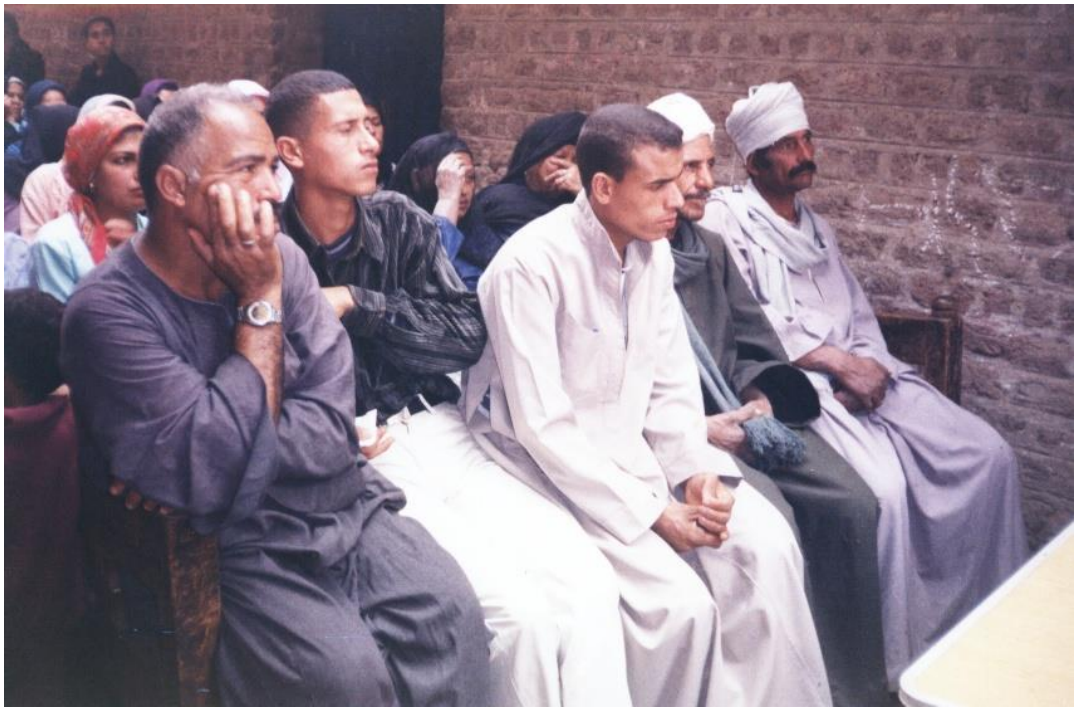

Figure 19: Men are invited to participate in the seminars and other events (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Figure 20: On a trip (Caritas Egypt, 2006).

Discussion

In this final chapter, I would like to present some general deductions based on the key findings from the last chapter, my reflections and theoretical and research statements mentioned earlier in the literature review.

Uses of Literacy

In agreement with NLS, the majority of uses of literacy by learners and graduates were very practical, embedded in everyday life practices and aiming to achieve specific purposes. The women used literacy to administer medicine, find their way, communicate using their mobile phones and keep track of their finances. Even reading school texts was also approached as an everyday task that needs to be accomplished with the purpose of getting good grades and passing. Sometimes the women used literacy to improve their performance on an everyday task, like when they copied recipes and looked for new handicraft ideas. Literacy was also sometimes used for obtaining information when learners read the newspaper, the news ribbon or looked for a book on a particular topic of interest. Less frequent uses included reading for leisure or creative uses such as writing poetry or songs, or keeping a journal. The women adapted the skills they learnt to new uses that relied on modern technologies such as texting on their mobile phones or reading the news ribbon on the television. On the whole, it seemed that reading was more frequently used than writing.

Moreover, the respondents showed an intuitive awareness of the existence of the multiple literacies as evidenced by their mention of the different uses. They realized that each use had a different purpose, followed different conventions, occurred in a certain context and between

different groups of people. Finally, the increased interest in politics on the part of the women is evidence that literacy is contextual and is affected by the historical moment it is in.

Rural versus Urban

All learners and graduates benefitted from the literacy program, but it seemed to have had more of an impact on rural dwellers than their urban counterparts. This is in agreement with the remarks made by the head of the adult literacy division in Caritas Egypt. While both groups of women placed equal importance on literacy for educational purposes, Assiut women spoke much more about its importance for health related issues and mobility. Living in an urban environment, the Alexandrian women had easier access to literacy mediators. They usually had someone living nearby who could read a prescription for them. One Alexandrian woman said that when in doubt, she used to walk to the nearby pharmacy. That is not an option for a woman living in a village in Assiut where there may be no literate persons around or a pharmacy within walking distance. As for mobility, Alexandrian women relied mostly on their unique system of hand signals and had much shorter distances to travel than Assiut women. Once again, we find that context matters. In conclusion, the Upper Egyptian women benefitted more from literacy because they had more needs to meet and less support.

This may first seem to be in contradiction to studies that state that urban dwelling facilitates acquisition of literacy. However, it is important to make a distinction here between acquisition and impact. This study is not concerned with factors facilitating acquisition of literacy. Rather it is focused on what difference this acquisition makes in the lives of the learners and their communities.

Mothering

"We are here for the sake of our children," declared a learner as I stepped into the classroom in the village and before I even asked any questions. That response was fairly typical of all the mothers I met and in agreement with what Dale (2012) stated in her ethnographic study of literacy classes in Egypt. The women's desire to be better mothers is what motivated them to attend literacy classes in the first place. Their subsequent uses of literacy also reflected the priority of motherhood in their lives and to their identities. They used literacy to study with their children, take them to the doctor and to give them medicine. The women in Alexandria requested seminars on child rearing and applied what they learnt straight away. The learners and graduates often said that they wanted their kids to be better than them and have better opportunities.

On the other hand, single women saw the significance of literacy in improving their own life prospects. It is well known that being literate improves a young woman's chances of marrying a literate man. Some young women thought of continuing their education. In fact, of all the graduates who pursued formal education, only one was married with children when she started literacy courses. All the others were single and remained so till they completed their education. That is not to say that single learners did not care about others. Most of them taught others literacy or helped siblings and parents with literacy needs. Some volunteered to do community work. However, when they talked about the effect of literacy, they generally talked about how it affected them personally.

Not Just Reading or Writing

Educators and learners would both agree that the benefit of the program extended beyond just learning to read and write. A graduate in Alexandria explained that, "Literacy is not only

about reading and writing. Some people can read and write but are illiterate in other ways". In fact, in the texts written by graduates and learners, a few do not even mention reading and writing among things learnt; others mention it at the bottom of the list. Moreover, some of the benefits mentioned by the interviewees such as increased assertiveness, improved relationships within the family, decline in the practice of FGM, and change in outward appearance, are not a direct product of reading and writing but increased openness and awareness.

Perhaps the most insightful finding was the assertions of the educators of the effect of the program on them as well. Even though they could read and write, they too reported being transformed. It is, thus, obvious that the impact is not due to reading and writing alone. A lot of it had to do with the content of the course that is relevant to all Egyptian women. The reliance on dialogue led the women - educators and learners alike - to question traditional beliefs and practices, to reflect on issues important to them all, to exchange ideas and experiences, to improve their communication skills and to strive to bring about change.

This is consistent with the ideological model in a number of ways. First, orality is regarded as complementary and equal to literacy. It also shows that text is not neutral. People are able to discern the values and world view that is embodied in the text and will only respond favourably if they are sympathetic to those values and world view. People are not transformed by the power of the alphabet (Graff, 2010) but through critical engagement with text and others. Literacy is social in nature. The women learned literacy together, discussed the texts and then used literacy to communicate with others.

Gender Equity

As mentioned before, the program caused the women, educators and learners, to question gender roles, rights and responsibilities and attempt to have more equitable relations in the home. The ability to read and write and the improved communication skills granted the women more capabilities that rendered them more independent and assertive. The libraries were also able to mobilize women in the post-literacy phase to lead community service. This not only improved the living conditions of the community but also elevated the local status of women. Furthermore, Caritas Egypt usually hired women from the community as instructors. This was a deliberate policy intending to nurture local female role models and leaders. Finally, mention should also be made of the few women in Alexandria who took on traditional male chores such as plumbing and painting. They were a small group indeed and their action was not grand. However, it does show a readiness to question gender roles.

General comments on the program

The influence of Freire is very obvious on the Caritas Egypt adult literacy program. It was particularly evident in the beliefs of the educators and the expressions they used. They stressed the importance of critical awareness, dialogue, getting students to discover their reality and finally transformation.

Effort was also put into creating a supportive environment. In fact, Caritas Egypt stressed establishing a relationship of trust between teachers and learners. Interestingly, this "care factor" was not mentioned in the literature on adult literacy which generally stops at requiring mutual respect. The emphasis on it in this case is probably a reflection of both the Catholic foundational principles of the organization and Freire's teaching.

However, the program departed from Freire's ideology in a couple of aspects. It relied on a primer whereas Freire favored Learner Generated Material (Freire & Macedo, 1987). More importantly, unlike Freire, Caritas Egypt program does not tackle the issues from a political standpoint but from a cultural one. It presents a more domesticated version of emancipation to mean freedom from fear of expressing oneself and demanding one's rights, freedom from ignorance and subjugation to harmful traditions such as FGM.

The Caritas Egypt adult literacy program did succeed to a large extent in positively impacting the learners' lives. The effectiveness is due to several factors. It is a program that is designed specifically for adults. The topics presented are those relevant and of interest to Egyptian adults from the low socio-economic class. The teaching pedagogy is also very adult oriented. Not only are learners respected, but they also have a great deal of input in the program. The instructors listen to the learners and adapt the program to their needs and interests. This is consistent with the recommendations of Rogers and Street (2012) with regards to the characteristics of a successful adult literacy program.

The program is also to be commended for addressing the different aspects of womanhood and not primarily focusing on the reproductive role. In fact, the main purpose of the program is to raise the awareness of the learners of their identity, surroundings, communities, rights, responsibilities, problems, and their solutions. Reproductive health issues are presented but as one aspect among many.

That is not to say that the program is perfect. One major drawback is that it is much more effective in addressing women than men. This limits the impact especially on issues such as gender equity. It places the onus on the woman to transform her community, which is not

realistically possible. Men are not drawn to the program mostly because of a sense of shame. Going to adult literacy is an admission of a deficit that may shake their masculine image. They also don't feel they need literacy, as their jobs do not require it and their status as men assures them a sense of power. In addition, the program seems to be more focused on the rural poor than the urban poor. Nevertheless, the instructors do try to adapt the program to the particular group of learners.

Limitations

This study focused on one adult literacy program in Egypt. The results reflect the influence of the Caritas Egypt literacy program and cannot be generalized to participants of other programs in Egypt. Both samples in Assiut and Alexandria were composed of women who were not gainfully employed. I suspect that the effect of literacy on women who are employed full time may be different as their awareness, needs and circumstances are very different. It is also limited by the relatively small sample and the short duration spent on the field.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study aimed to identify and describe some of the uses of literacy and effects of acquisition literacy on adult women. Each of these themes could be studied in much more depth. For example, a study on the effect of literacy on gender equity or on the practice of FGM would be very worthwhile. In addition, a detailed study on literacy practices by the lower-socio economic classes in Egypt could be useful to adult literacy program designers. I also noticed a lack of literature on adult literacy educators and an eagerness on their part to tell their teacher stories.

Conclusion

Literacy acquisition did have a positive impact on the lives of the adult women who attended Caritas Egypt basic literacy course. They did learn to read and write, and continued to use literacy in their daily lives. Their increased capabilities enhanced their autonomy and their self-perception. Most became more assertive at home and outside. Their improved communication skills encouraged them to express their opinions. As a result, family relations improved and progress was made in achieving more equitable gender relations within the home. They also became more capable of taking care of their own health and that of their family. They gained awareness of good hygienic practices and generally abided by them. They were all especially pleased that they could follow medical instructions and administer medicine properly. They were eager to learn about reproductive health and started to question practices such as FGM. The women also appreciated the sense of independence that came with the ability to read signs, use public transport and find their way. Mothers were better able to support their children's education. A few graduates were able to continue their education. A few were also able to generate an extra income, though most longed for more opportunities. The outward appearance of the women changed as they opened up and showed willingness to try new trends and activities. Some graduates of the program become more active in community service. The interactions between Muslims and Christians in the class helped dispel unfounded suspicions and improved the relationship between the two communities. There was definitely an increase in political awareness, but this also had to do with the political unrest in Egypt at the time.

It is important to note that the impact of the program extended beyond just learning how to read and write. The learners and graduates also improved their communication skills and

became more critically aware. Interestingly, the educators, too, reported experiencing similar personal transformation as a result of engaging with the learners and the material presented.

The program obviously did not have the same effect on all women. The educators believe that impact depended a great deal on the individual's needs, motivation and aptitude. One educator wisely explained, "Maybe they do not benefit from all the ideas and topics presented. But maybe one thing made a huge difference." I think the mother who learnt to value daughters as much as sons, the other who stopped hitting her child and the learner who could now read the map would all agree.

The fact that literacy does not have the same effect on every person is in itself a rejection of the autonomous model. In fact, the findings of this study are in agreement with those of NLS. Literacy is social and ideological in nature. There is not one form of literacy, but multiple literacies. Literacy uses, needs and effects depend on the context. Literacy is always embedded in another practice, for a specific purpose between particular persons and follows certain conventions.

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Appendix A
Research Ethics Board Approval

McGill

Research Ethics Board Office
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Research Ethics Board II
Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans

REB File #: 156-1012

Project Title: Effect of literacy acquisition on women in Egypt

Principal Investigator: Mona Makramalla

Supervisor: Prof. A. Pare

Status: Master's student

Department: ISE

This project was reviewed by delegated review.

Deanna Collin, Ethics Review Administrator, on behalf of:

Charles Boberg, Ph.D.
Delegated Reviewer, REB II

Approval Period: 24 Oct. 2012 **to** 23 Oct. 2013

This project was reviewed and approved in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Subjects and with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

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* All research involving human participants requires review on an annual basis. A Request for Renewal form should be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
* When a project has been completed or terminated a Study Closure form must be submitted.
* Should any modification or other unanticipated development occur before the next required review, the REB must be informed and any modification can't be initiated until approval is received.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Learners and graduates:

1. *How do you use literacy?* What do you read? What do you write?
2. *How did literacy affect your daily life? What can you do now that you couldn't do before?* Did the ability to read signs improve your mobility? Do you jot down notes and phone numbers?
3. *How did literacy affect your awareness of health issues?* Did you gain a better understanding of good hygiene? Are you better able to follow medical advice?
4. *How did literacy affect your life circumstances*? For example, did you decide to continue your education? Did literacy help you get a job? Did it improve your marriage prospects?
5. *How did it affect your role as a mother?* Did it influence you to have fewer children? If in school, do you help them with homework? Are you able to discuss their progress with the teacher? Would you subject your daughters to FGM? What age do you think is appropriate for your daughter to marry?
6. *How did it affect your role as a wife?* Do you have more say in the decision making at home? Is your husband more willing to share in domestic duties?
7. *How did it affect you professionally and economically?* Did literacy help you get a job/ a better job? Did it help you gain an income?
8. *How did it affect you psychologically?* Do you feel more self-confident, more independent?

9. *How did literacy affect you civically?* Did you vote in the last elections? How did you pick the candidate to vote for? Did involvement in literacy classes help you think of ways to help the community? Give examples

Interview questions for educators:

1. What are your beliefs concerning the benefits of literacy on women?
2. How does your program address the needs of women in the literacy classes? How does it seek to improve their lives?
3. What is the most frequent feedback you hear from women who have passed the literacy course?
4. Without mentioning names, can you give examples of how literacy changed the lives of individual women?
5. How did it affect the community? Can you give examples?

Appendix C

Translation of Texts Written by Learners and Graduates

Articles Appearing in Nashrat El Amal September 2011

He who cannot read or write is like a blind person **by Farhana Sayed Aly**

I am a girl from the heart of Upper Egypt in Luxor. I never went to school and no one cared for me. I did not realize the importance of education in my life because life proceeded normally. I ate, worked at home, and played with my friends on the street.

But at one moment I felt like something was missing. I felt I had a problem and this problem appeared when I took my mother to the doctor and we couldn't reach the clinic. We looked for it and it was right in front of us but neither my mother nor I could read the sign. Unfortunately, some people gave us wrong directions. By the time we reached the clinic, the doctor had left. That day I realized the importance of education. He who cannot read and write is like a blind person.

I enrolled in literacy classes and the thing that attracted me most to the classes is the program of "Learn, Liberate Yourself". Its style appealed to me. I am now at the end of phase one and I am very happy.

We in literacy class b**y Hadia Mahmoud Ahmed.**

We, in literacy class	Are full of perseverance and determination.
We came to literacy.	We came to the light; we came to the ideas.
After gloom, we found the sun.	After darkness, we saw light.

After joking, we found seriousness. After playing, we found work.

Education, sewing and knitting Handicrafts and ideas

With our hands we build our future. With our hands we can choose.

With our hands we can produce Instead of sitting idly by the door.

But when we learnt All ideas were changed.

When one of us answers correctly, We are all happy for her.

Because we are one And wish the best for each other

Articles Appearing in Nashrat el Amal Number 32 May 2012

My experience with education **by Soad Abdel Men'em**

By the way, this is not just talk, this is a true story.

I wanted to go to literacy classes but my husband refused and said, "It is not proper for you to go out so much. Your house, children and field should be your priority". I said, "No, this was a long time ago. I must learn". (Meaning these beliefs are outdated)

He said "Then go back to your father's house."

I replied, "How can you say this good man? What you are saying is not reasonable! I am the mother of your children. What is good for me is always good for you". (This paragraph was beautifully written and the rhyming is exquisite. Translation cannot do it justice.)

He replied, "On one condition, what you learn you teach me. So I know exactly what you know."

And that's what actually happened. I would go to class and around sunset, I would sit with him and we would learn together. He was embarrassed (at first) but later on he took it easy and he used to buy me presents for teaching him.

I wish all who learns would pursue education **by Sabah Ahmed Sayed**

I was in literacy class and I learnt many things like how to make deserts and tablecloths. I learnt how to talk to people and I learnt how to read and write.

Now I am studying with my son, Ahmed, who is in second grade. I took out a 2000 L.E. loan and I bought cattle and it grew. I started building our own house and I hope to pay back the loan.

I wish all who is in class would pursue education and benefit from everything they learn. Thank you for inviting us (to learn in class).

I am a peasant woman **by Amira Mohamed Abdel Fatah.**

I am a peasant woman from Egypt. I came to literacy class. I learnt the meaning of freedom and how to express my opinion in literacy class. I learnt home economics, handicrafts. Even health awareness, I learnt in literacy class.

I am now educated after I was illiterate and I can benefit those around me.

Go my mother, go my brother to literacy classes.

It is our right to learn and it is enough what happened from ignorance. We walk around lost; we cannot even write our names. We have not missed our chance. The road is still long and the world is bright.

***A desperate girl* by Salwa Tharwat Kamal**

I am a desperate girl without school. I hoped to learn but I did not. I married an educated man. He used to ignore me in many things. But I did not give up and insisted on becoming an educated mature person, not lacking in anything especially education.

That is why I participated in literacy classes. At that point, I discovered that I was a blind person and education lit my life. I became able to help my children with schoolwork and solve their problems.

I now feel proud of myself and I have become in the view of my husband and everyone around me a mature educated person.

Articles Appearing in Nashrat el Amal number 33

***Every girl must learn* by Marzouka Mounir Ishak**

I am from the country side. I used to go to primary school but after four years I was tired of it because it was far from home and there was no public transport. (I dropped out) even though my parents wanted me to get educated.

After a few years, I saw the girls who used to be with me in class. Some went to university and their lives improved but mine remained the same.

I regretted what I did and was very sad. When a literacy class opened, I enrolled straight away. My advice to any girl is she must learn so she can prove herself.

***Ignorance is darkness and death* by Martha Mamdouh Nageh**

I am an Egyptian peasant and uneducated. I grew up, got married and wanted to learn like other people because I used to feel that they were better than me in knowledge and status in society.

I wanted to learn so I can help my children understand and know my role in society.

I went to class and can (now) explain things to my children and solve their problems at home or at school. I found out I had a role in the community. I found out a person has rights and duties.

Finally I would like to tell any person who is not educated, you must learn because having knowledge is an obligation and ignorance is darkness and death.

I wish I could continue my schooling **by Afaf Aziz**

I was dreaming of getting an education. But because there were too many obstacles, there was no hope of getting an education. When literacy classes opened, hope was renewed. I went feeling that my dream will come true. I held the book and my eyes were opened.

I would really like to continue my schooling but I am too old. I wish to tell everyone that if you get an opportunity to learn, go and do not let the opportunity slip from your hand.

Me, my daughter and learning **by Hanan Ayoub Riyad**

I am very happy that I am learning in literacy classes and I also teach my daughter. I help her study and memorize the poems and many other things I could not do before.

I also read useful stories. This is all due to literacy classes, the encouragement we receive there and our commitment to learning.

Education provided me with an opportunity to work **by Soheir Wadie**

I am a literacy learner. I am single and am 17 years old. I have three brothers and five sisters. I am happy that many things changed in me like my way of talking, boldness, (my ability to) plan my life and to communicate. When I learnt, I found a job in a nursery with a good salary that will help me to start my life.

The girl is better than the boy **by Souna Ahmed Abd el Kareem**

I am 40 years old and have 4 children: the eldest is in 7th grade and the youngest is 6 years old. I was very upset that I only have girls because my mother-in-law was always mocking me and calling me 'the mother of the girls' because I could not have a son. My husband would say, "We are thankful to God", and was content, but I was very upset.

When I went to literacy class, there was one lesson called, "The Baby". The teacher said, "There is no difference between a girl and a boy. The boy may fail and the daughter may do better than him. What is important is how you raise them."

That day I thanked God for the girls and discovered that the woman is not responsible for the gender of the baby but the man is.

Learning has given me courage **by Samah Halim**

I am very pleased with myself as I regularly attend literacy classes and help my children with their studies especially that I am a widow and this gives me something to do and makes me forget my sorrows.

Learning has helped me in my new job in a nursery. It is a temporary job but I hope I get hired permanently.

Now I can now study with my kids with strength and have courage to go anywhere. I even go to government offices to get my paperwork and this makes me very very happy.