

## **SDGs 3, 4, 5: Educating for Health, Literacy and Gender**

**Leona M. English and Veronica McKay**

### **Introduction**

The focus on education for girls and women has historically been a priority for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and there has been a constant call for nation states to give priority status to the education of girls with a view to eliminating the gender gap in girls' access to, and their continuation of primary and secondary schooling but also thereafter. The Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000), for instance, stressed the need to ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, access and complete primary education, and that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes. Similarly, the Education 2030 Agenda focuses on equal access for girls to complete education cycles whilst emphasising the United Nations focus on the elimination of violence against women.

In naming quality education as Goal 4, the UN proposes to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The educational focus of Goal 4 is wide-ranging and encompasses early childhood development; universal pre-primary, primary and secondary education; technical, vocational and higher education, as well as adult learning and education (ALE). Sub-goal 4.6 aims to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults of both genders achieve literacy and numeracy equivalent to the successful completion of basic education – and it is on this target that we focus in this article. (see also English & Mayo, 2019).

### **ALE and lifelong learning**

ALE, as part of the lifelong learning (LLL) continuum (UNESCO, 2017) acknowledges that our lives are influenced by our ever-changing contexts and this necessitates new ways of thinking and learning across all life stages, all age groups and in all educational settings (see Table 1).

Informal Learning	Non-formal Learning	Formal Learning
Informal learning occurs in daily life, in the workplace or in communities, and mostly garnered from the interests and activities of individuals.	Non-formal learning may be structured or unstructured. It usually takes place in community-based or workplace settings.	Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions; is recognised by national bodies and leads to formal qualification structured by national qualification frameworks and curricula.

*Table 1: Learning across the lifelong learning continuum*

In recognition of the need for learning across the life stages, Hanemann (2015:296-300) offers a tripartite, analytical framework for literacy as a dynamic process comprising three closely interrelated dimensions:

- First, literacy as a continuous activity leading to different proficiency levels that are part of a learning continuum.
- Second, literacy as a life-wide process, which implies that people use and develop their reading and writing skills in different ways across a wide range of places or spaces – at home or in the broader community, and that reading the word/world cuts across sectors such as health, work, social security, environment and culture.
- Third, literacy is viewed as a foundation skill which is the core of basic education and indispensable to full participation in society.

Implementing LLL in the North and South has required different approaches. In South Africa, like much of the developing world, LLL has focused on basic adult education and literacy for those with little or no formal schooling. Much of the second author's experience was in the South African Literacy Campaign that enabled 4.7 million adult learners to achieve basic literacy. The Campaign aimed to maximize the developmental impact of literacy by basing its lessons on SDG-inspired themes including SDGs 3, 4 and 5 (McKay, 2020a,b) through the pedagogical advantages of a mother tongue-based approach to learning, which enables learners to build on knowledge they already have, and to develop the more advanced concepts and knowledge using their mother tongue as the conduit for learning.

## Quality education as a driver for all SDGs

Education (SDG 4) precedes and directs the motion and intensity of the other SDGs, and we argue that the accomplishment of SDG 4 will, in addition, aid in redressing health issues (SDG 3) and gender equality (SDG 5) (see Figure 1; also English & Mayo, 2021).



*Figure 1: The interrelationship between quality education, gender equality, and health and well-being*

Literacy education is fundamental to the achievement of all 17 SDGs, essential in decreasing the vulnerability of individuals (especially women) and communities (SDGs 1-7, 10, 16), and increasing participation in knowledge-driven systems (SDGs 8, 9; 11-15; 17). Literacy education is also an essential element in ameliorating the rights of women, their health and well-being and for this reason should be integral to all national development agenda (McKay, 2020a,b; Oghenekohwo & Frank-Optu, 2017).

Understandings of literacy and numeracy have evolved significantly over the past 40 years. Literacy is now seen less as a static state and more as involving a continuum of learning and proficiency levels which allow people to participate fully in the wider society; with literacy going beyond the ability to read written textual materials, and including the ability to engage with multimodal and digital practices (UNESCO, 1978).

### Education interconnected with good health and well-being

Education and ALE offer opportunities to teach basic knowledge and skills that promote health, safety and well-being, address substance abuse, nutrition, chronic conditions, as well as pandemic awareness and mitigating behaviour. In addition, education, and specifically ALE, offers opportunities for health education to enable women to make informed decisions regarding their

reproductive health (SDGs 3, 5). The interrelationship of health, gender empowerment and education are consistently referred to in the literature with literacy being cited as essential to both women's empowerment and improved health outcomes. Literacy and education are seen as important for dealing with health challenges that persist in developing countries; for example, high maternal and child mortality rates, malnutrition, tuberculosis, and the high incidences of communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Health literacy, which entails the application of literacy skills to improve one's ability to engage with health-related messages, offers many benefits for improving one's understanding of general health and can be seen as analogous to Bourdieu's (1986) notion of 'cultural capital' in improving people's access to information and their ability to use it effectively. When applying this to health outcomes, health literacy, as part of ALE, can endow a 'cultural capital' and mitigate poor health outcomes.

In order to attend to issues of health literacy, the literacy materials of the South African Literacy Campaign (which was largely rights based) deliberately integrated a focus on health and well-being (SDG 3) as a way of simultaneously teaching health literacy and the development of literacy skills. Literacy topics included personal hygiene, health-seeking behaviour, reading a child's vaccination and weight chart, reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS. Focus group discussions and exit surveys with a sample of 485 941 learners who had completed a literacy campaign programme, showed that upon completion of the programme the majority indicated that they had a better understanding of their chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension and that they better understood how, when and how much medication to take. The findings also revealed that the learners had an increased understanding of the importance of nutrition in contexts in which malnutrition is prevalent or where family members have been immunocompromised and are being treated for AIDS.

There is little doubt that increased child survival rates are linked to increased levels of parental education. Numerous studies support this premise, which provides a compelling rationale for the global development community to focus on health education. There is now support for starting health literacy early and continuing into higher education to enhance its potential health and protective benefits. This once again illustrates that the success of SDG 4 can assist in facilitating the achievement of SDG 3, with specific reference to target 3.2, which aims to reduce the neonatal and child mortality rates as well as increase the awareness of women with regard to their own reproductive health. UNESCO estimates that of the 750 million adults who lack basic reading and writing skills, two-thirds are women, which emphasizes the critical role ALE,

literacy and health literacy can play in the empowerment of women, and most especially those in developing countries.

### **Education interrelated with gender empowerment**

Education, and in particular ALE, offers opportunities for the empowerment of women and girls and for individual and community action to end all forms of gender discrimination and violence against them. SDG 5 aims to enable the effective participation of women in leadership and decision-making in the political, economic and public spheres (UNESCO, 2021). While ALE and literacy offer opportunities for gender empowerment, in the context of South Africa (and Africa more broadly), it is necessary to consider empowerment through the lens of African feminism and 'womanism', as distinct from Western notions of theoretical feminism. African feminist theorists are critical of traditionally Western theories that do not take the experiences of black women into account. By focusing only on class or gender as forms of oppression these Western theories fail to explain the experiences and oppression of black women. African feminism locates the problem of black women within the parameters of race and for this reason the concept of race is the distinguishing feature underlying black feminist analyses of the subordination of black women. African feminism views of the relation between men and women give rise to two distinct strands – one emphasising the unity of black men and women against racism, and the other, which gives prominence to patriarchy – thus indicating a three-fold oppression of women in terms of race, class and gender (McKay, 1994).

'Third world' and African women's demands have been explicitly political with work, education and health being major issues. Hudson-Weems (2019) elaborates on African 'womanism' as being grounded in African culture and focusing on the struggles of African women as distinguished from Western feminism, which is largely the struggle of white women against white men for their personal subjugation. The struggle of black women is a struggle against race and class oppression which subjugates black women, their children and black men (Hudson-Weems, 2019); thus broadening the scope of focus for ALE with regard to the empowerment of women. SDG 5 focuses on the empowerment of women and the problems relating to their exclusion from the decision-making process and thus their marginalisation, Shah and Kukarni, (2020) argue, extends to decisions about their basic needs – such as in water management in countries affected by drought and the depletion of ground water – an area where women have traditionally been excluded, and which has limited their access to adequate quality and quantity of water as a critical resource. This kind of exclusion impacts on the production of food and fuel and

contributes to women carrying a disproportionate the burden of poverty. Education and ALE are critical in enabling the participation of women in decision-making in all spheres, and as such are critical in mitigating poverty.

The empowerment of women is therefore a critical factor in education across the lifelong learning continuum, specifically in ALE where learning can have a direct impact on the most vulnerable people. We however caution against making gender 'only a cross-cutting issue', since this often leads to women's rights and needs 'disappearing' under a barrage of ideas and initiatives. If gender is kept at the forefront as a named category, as it is in the SDGs, there is more of an opportunity for it to be addressed and focused upon and ensures that women's health and learning needs remain at the centre. Yet, there is reason to hope. As was shown in the South African Literacy Campaign, the incorporation of human rights, women's rights and social justice as themes in the literacy materials yielded extremely positive results. The literacy themes were aimed at empowering learners, especially women learners, to participate in community decision-making processes. The exit survey revealed that more than ninety percent of the learners stated that they felt more self-confident at the end of the literacy programme; it is noteworthy that of the 24 indicators, self-confidence was the highest ranking indicator. The majority of the learners stated that they felt they were "more respected by the community" and "treated better in the community" and that they had increased their social networks and social capital. Literacy learning also increased their participation in the community and decision-making activities (McKay, 2020a,b).

## **Conclusion**

This article highlights the importance of SDG 4 for the achievement of SDGs 3 and 5, and argues that ALE as embodied in SDG 4 can play a pivotal role in the achievement of SDG 3, particularly in countries where the average literacy levels are low. Education and indeed literacy and numeracy are ultimately the factors that facilitate the success of achieving the 17 Development Goals and their corresponding targets. We contend that literacy is indispensable, not only for the achievement of SDG 4, but also for the other 16 SDGs; specifically, those relating to SDG 3 - that of health and well-being and SDG 5 - gender equality. The potential of achieving literacy can only be reached if it is approached from a lifelong learning perspective, which includes adult learning and education - as literacy, with all its dimensions, remains an unfinished project. The implications for adult learning and education are considerable. Literacy, as one of the primary areas of concern in ALE is highlighted here as being central to the work of practitioners and researchers. We need to hone in on the

importance of literacy and related issues and work more cohesively to help achieve the SDGs by 2030.

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## **SDGs 3, 4, 5: Educating for Health, Literacy and Gender**

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### **Abstract**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's comprehensive plan for development has global implications for adult learning and education. With its 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets, the Agenda lays out a matrix of interlocking factors that are deemed to affect the development agenda, which is scheduled to be met by 2030. This article specifically examines the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which calls on countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning (LLL) opportunities for all. This article explores the relationship between adult learning and education (ALE) and literacy in particular – highlighting how SDG 4 relates to health and well-being, especially women's health (SDG 3), and the empowerment of women (SDG 5). The article focuses on the centrality of education (SDG 4) as an interconnected and catalytic goal in Agenda 2030 and draws on related examples from South Africa.

### **Key words**

Adult learning and education, Sustainable Development Goals, Women's empowerment, Health, African feminism



### *ODD 3, 4, 5 : Éduquer pour la santé, l'alphabétisation et le genre*

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#### **Résumé**

Le plan global de développement du Programme 2030 pour le développement durable a des implications mondiales pour l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes. Avec ses 17 Objectifs de développement durable et ses 169 cibles, le Programme 2030 présente une matrice de facteurs interdépendants qui sont censés affecter le programme de développement, dont la réalisation est prévue d'ici 2030. Cet article examine spécifiquement l'objectif de développement durable (ODD) 4, qui invite les pays à assurer une éducation de qualité inclusive et équitable et la promotion des possibilités de l'éducation et la formation tout au long de la vie (EFTLV) pour toutes et tous. Cet article explore la relation entre l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes (AEA) et l'alphabétisation en particulier, en soulignant comment l'ODD 4 est lié à la santé et au bien-être, en particulier à la santé des femmes (ODD 3) et à l'autonomisation des femmes (ODD 5). L'article se concentre sur la centralité de l'éducation (ODD 4) en tant qu'objectif interconnecté et catalyseur du Programme 2030 et s'appuie sur des exemples connexes en Afrique du Sud.

#### **Mots clés**

Apprentissage et éducation des adultes, Objectifs de développement durable, Autonomisation des femmes, Santé, Féminisme africain

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### **ODS 3, 4, 5: Educar para la salud, la alfabetización y el género**

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#### **Resumen**

El plan integral de desarrollo de la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible tiene implicaciones globales para el aprendizaje y la educación de adultos. Con sus 17 Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible y 169 metas, la Agenda establece una matriz de factores interconectados que se considera que afectan al programa de desarrollo, cuyo cumplimiento está previsto para 2030. Este artículo examina específicamente el Objetivo de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) 4, que convoca a los países a que garanticen una educación de calidad inclusiva y equitativa además de la promoción de oportunidades de aprendizaje permanente para toda la vida a todos. Este artículo explora la relación entre el aprendizaje de adultos, su educación (AEA) y en particular la alfabetización, destacando cómo el ODS 4 se relaciona con la salud y el bienestar, en particular la salud de las mujeres (ODS 3), así como su empoderamiento (ODS 5). El artículo se focaliza en la centralidad de la educación (ODS 4) como objetivo interconectado y catalizador en la Agenda 2030 basándose en ejemplos vinculados con este tema provenientes de Sudáfrica.

**Palabras clave**

Aprendizaje y educación de adultos, Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible, empoderamiento de la mujer, salud, feminismo africano