

Re-questioning Education and the role of Adult Education: an overview from the Arab Region

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Beyond Technology: rethinking Adult Education in a changing landscape

This reflection seeks to address questions that delve into a new reality within the realm of education, particularly adult education. Presently, we find ourselves at the crossroads between two worlds. Just two years ago, we did not experience this sensation; however, today we are confronted with emerging realities that challenge us. It appears that we are on the brink of two or even three educational revolutions or significant transformations. The foremost transformation involves reevaluating the landscape of adult education, which has been greatly impacted by the resurgence of the global order.

Identifying this transformation is not straightforward, as it begins with the recognition that beyond technology, a multitude of ideologies are reshaping the entire educational framework. This contributes to the emergence of a somewhat nebulous and unclear concept of education. These shifts affect not only adult education in general but also the involvement of women in the field. This landscape is still nascent and constantly evolving, with the potential for rapid change.

Reevaluating reality

Within this reevaluation of reality, we are compelled to address the influence of artificial intelligence (AI), not only in isolation but also in tandem with the escalation of global poverty. To illustrate, at the outset of 2023, coinciding with the advent of AI's dominance, some stark statistics demand attention. While acknowledging the positive aspects of AI, it cannot be ignored that according to a report from the investment bank Goldman Sachs, as many as 300 million jobs could be lost in the USA and European Union alone. (CNN, 2023). While delving into specifics is unnecessary, it is crucial to note that two-thirds of those affected are women. Furthermore, individuals trapped in the throes of extreme

poverty (earning less than \$1.9 per day, by the definition of the World Bank) bear the brunt of these changes, majority of them being women (Oxfam International, 2023), often evading statistical representation.

“The economic forecast [for USA] is equally staggering, with AI's estimated economic impact reaching a colossal \$15.7 trillion by the same year” (SEO.AI's Content Team, 2023).

Simultaneously, it is projected that these figures could increase by an additional 250 million in the coming year. Moreover, “over 1.9 billion people, or 26.2 percent of the world’s population, were living on less than \$3.20 per day in 2015. Close to 46 percent of the world’s population was living on less than \$5.50 a day.” As for the Arab region, World bank provides data for Middle East and North Africa: “Even though the region saw an increase in the number of people living on less than \$1.90 a day, levels of extreme poverty remained low. However, the region had more people living on less than \$5.50 per day in 2015 than in 1990.” (The World Bank, 2018). The data in the post-COVID-19 era are probably even worse. This demographic is poised to become increasingly vulnerable to these imminent changes.

Emerging challenges: facing the harsh realities

The logical progression of events paints a rather bleak future for our planet. One of the pressing questions now is how humanity will endure this newfound poverty that is spreading across the globe. Additionally, we must contemplate the meaning of political struggle amidst these challenging circumstances.

Could this widespread poverty lead to a surge in internal conflicts and external wars? On the political front, coping with poverty might necessitate a shift towards increased centralization worldwide. With the primary focus being the survival of affected populations, concepts like democracy and elections could recede. The difficult path of human rights in our lives might be neglected or interrupted under these new challenges. Could the future of education be reduced to mere survival? And how will all of this impact adult education, which is already grappling with its classical difficulties?

Furthermore, women's historical struggles may be similarly affected, if not more so. It raises the question of whether social and educational struggles will become luxuries when the fundamental need is sheer survival, all within an oppressive atmosphere of violence and wars. It is worth noting that, until the past two years, the idea of a nuclear war was largely regarded as a "fantasy" to discuss. However, under the weight of these global challenges, there is genuine concern that it might become a terrifying reality, albeit in different forms. This

is a part of the emerging new world where violence appears to be a normalized option.

Education for All: adapting to new realities

The theme of "Education for all" faces significant disruption due to these new realities. Education cannot remain neutral in the face of ongoing events. While it is true that education has never been entirely neutral, often influenced by dominant capital interests, civil society has strived to derive some benefits, even in the realm of adult education.

Consider the Arab region, where women make up almost half of the total population, with a significant portion being illiterate (about two-thirds of the total). Remarkably, in recent years, science and research is one area where Arab states are closer to gender parity, despite societal norms that often sideline them. "In tertiary education, the Arab States' GPI is 1.58 in GCC countries and 1.22 in Maghreb countries, while it is very low in LDCs, standing at 0.43. In some GCC countries, such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, the enrolment rate for women is double that of men..." (UNESCO, 2017); This underscores that, despite various challenges, a substantial percentage of young women have been able to pursue traditional education within the past decade. However, in the last two years, public university education has significantly deteriorated, leading to a considerable number of women leaving universities. Meanwhile, the demand for adult education continues to grow steadily.

The general situation of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) within the perspective of lifelong learning in the Arab region

Despite the remarkable development in our Arab region in the field of education/learning, there are still great challenges and gaps that threaten lifelong learning, including:

1. The cost of education being an obstacle to the continuation of lifelong education / learning, especially for poor and low-income people.
2. ALE no longer seen as a priority for decision-makers and policy makers in many of our Arab countries.
3. ALE being marginalized or underestimated, with the absence of rooting the concept of lifelong learning, and adult education is treated with traditional methods that lack creativity and innovation.
4. Marginalization of the values of tolerance and peace, acceptance of difference, and citizenship, limiting them to a theoretical framework without practice and application.

5. The absence of policies and future visions to deal with emergencies and pandemics, and the consequent displacement, asylum, further marginalization, and the absence of psychological and social security.
6. Fragility of partnership and networking between governments, civil society, and the private sector, particularly in the field of ALE.
7. The unavailability and lack of clear, specific and accurate data with regard to education in general and ALE in particular.
8. Most adult education activities being limited to literacy and the ability to read, write and do arithmetic.
9. Weak evaluation mechanisms and tools by bodies concerned with ALE, and reliance on quantitative rather than qualitative performance and evaluation.

Achievements and challenges

By analyzing the context in the Arab region, it was possible to monitor the achievements and challenges related to ALE issues:

1. The emergence of unified and participatory initiatives and visions to support ALE in the region through networking and partnership between civil society organizations, the government sector, as well as the private sector.
2. The existence of successful models and experiences. It is necessary to look at this accumulation and circulate these experiences and successful expertise, especially the field initiatives and interventions by AHAED members that have been developed to face the Corona crisis.
3. Recently, many studies and researches have appeared that are concerned with education / learning issues.
4. There is an attempt to unify visions and concepts and develop curricula that take into account the needs of adults and start from their reality and are interested in linking education / learning and the labour market.
5. There are attempts to integrate the private sector and soft forces to embrace ALE issues.

Despite all these efforts and the progress made, there are many challenges facing ALE in the region, the most important of which are:

1. The lack of educational innovation and the weakness of new methods that enhance the added values of teaching / learning.
2. The lack of government policies that support ALE.

3. Poor funding and allocations by governments or donors to support ALE.
4. The governments' preoccupation with the security and political challenges facing the Arab region.
5. Weakness and deficiencies in curricula, experiences, qualifications and training centers concerned with ALE and lifelong learning.
6. The weakness of the link between the levels of knowledge and skills provided by education and learning programs for adults on the one hand, and qualification for the labour market on the other hand (vis-à-vis the importance of Recognition/ Validation of Prior Learning).
7. The weakness of programs that promote and entrench human rights and active citizenship.
8. Lack of interest in education and nurturing from a human value perspective, social restructuring and psychological security, especially in areas that suffer from armed political unrest in some places of conflict in our Arab countries.
9. There is no common and clear understanding about ALE in the Arab region. ALE is taking place in urban and rural communities. It is implemented by civil society as well as public and private institutions. It is taking place through literacy education, personal and skills development, civic and cultural education. However, there are no holistic policy frameworks representing ALE in countries of the Arab region.
10. Weak employment of technology in the field of ALE, especially in times of crisis.
11. The existence of a gap between teaching and learning in practice with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals as a basic input to reducing poverty, destitution and marginalization.

AI in education: navigating challenges and redefining priorities

As we observe the escalating fragility of education, particularly in the Arab world, due to the rising tide of poverty, a new contender is poised to enter the arena: artificial intelligence (AI) educational systems. These AI-powered schools, with their affordability and efficiency, threaten to supplant traditional educational models. Some experts (such as Kamalov, F., Santandreu Calonge, D., and Gurrib, 2023) predict that AI-driven schools and universities might become the remedy for educational crises in many third-world nations. Such a shift could lead to minimized budgets, with the assurance of quality through AI systems, sidelining the fundamental connection between education and teaching. This decoupling has already begun and will likely intensify with the full integration of AI.

The term "education" itself warrants a redefinition, given that non-academic aspects such as human rights, citizenship, and gender issues hold little significance within the priorities of AI-driven education. This presents a significant challenge in the coming years. It is crucial to recognize that the poorest nations are likely to embrace AI education first, due to its cost-effectiveness and practicality – ideal for those who seek a streamlined learning process devoid of critical thinking. These systems also centralize education, providing an all-inclusive curriculum and knowledge repository, devoid of individualized teaching considerations.

This prompts us to examine the stark distinction between Education and Artificial Education, with the latter inevitably gaining prominence. The ensuing issues within AI educational systems will invariably impact our approach to adult education. How do we reshape the concept of adult education amidst these seismic shifts? What attributes should instructors possess, and which programs and curricula will resonate with the needs of these new adult learners?

In the Arab world, “the total number of illiterates decreased from 51.774 million in 2012 to 51.43 million in 2015, while the female literacy rate increased only from 66 per cent to 67 per cent due to population growth and other socio-economic factors” (UNESCO, 2017). In another words: “Between 2000 and 2019, overall literacy rates in the region increased from 65.29 per cent to 75.14 per cent, with youth literacy increasing from 82.06 per cent to 86.16 per cent (UIS, 2020). Despite this, literacy rates among adults and youth are still below the global averages of 86.48 per cent and 91.73 per cent, respectively” (UIS, 2020). These percentages might increase in the coming years, potentially reaching 60-70%, a trend that might extend globally. This poses a growing predicament for civil society stakeholders. The erosion of adult education values is imminent. The influx of learners may lead to centralization in adult education, potentially fostering increased control measures. Will this shift lead to a simplification of adult education components, gradually eschewing ideological complexities?

As we tread this transformative path, the role of NGOs comes into question. Will their ideological underpinnings be affected? How will they adapt to this changing landscape? Could they potentially find themselves distanced from the core impetus for change and the ideologies they champion?

The struggle for Adult Education: embracing change and reimagining impact

In the face of increasingly pragmatic societies driven by survival, it is worth pondering the role that the wisdom of figures like Paulo Freire and the pursuit of values and non-academic outcomes will have. As we simplify our perspectives, we find ourselves asking: how can these ideals find their place in societies racing to endure? This question reverberates among those championing adult education for a better world, including the advocates for environmental sustainability and freedom, who have long been stalwarts within adult education.

In this unfolding landscape, will educators transform into mere teachers, engaged in a competitive race? Will the realm of Adult Education remain untouched by AI, or will it, too, be transformed by its advances? The realm of creativity, particularly women's creativity, stands at a crossroads. Will it straddle the line between the old and the emerging new world? Amidst these transitions, crucial questions emerge, demanding our attention in this historical juncture.

This could be the moment when adult education activists must embrace the art of questioning, recognizing that answers may not be readily at hand. As we navigate this nuanced period, let us endeavor to dissect our circumstances. Despite the odds, even in the face of adversity, the spirit of adult education persists. It is imperative for Adult Education to embark on a significant breakthrough, actively engaging in the formulation of vital strategic questions. This participatory process should encompass every echelon, with women's voices resonating across its facets.

Together, we must decipher reality and cultivate the skill of questioning. Not solely for the sake of questioning, but because, in the process of inquiry, we pave the way for answers, evolving alongside our communities. With humility and unity, Adult Education is charting a roadmap for resilience in the impending years. In this journey, our vocabulary and approaches, within a participatory framework, must undergo profound realignment. The unchanging theme within Education should be more precisely defined: amidst relentless pressures, Adult Education stands poised to liberate life. It becomes an education that liberates life, focusing on rekindling the process with a simple yet profound directive: the evolution of self-realization.

In this endeavour, we acknowledge the historical significance of women's roles. Their potential to drive transformation remains pivotal, and their participation holds the key to qualitative change.

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A Re-questioning Education and the role of Adult Education: an overview from the Arab Region

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Abstract

This article addresses diverse questions posed by the unfolding landscape of the emerging new global order for adult education in the Arab Region. These include the role of educators, the impact of artificial intelligence and other technologies, the continuing impact of extreme poverty and the role played by the creativity of women in the transition from the old to the emerging new order. We outline the general situation of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) within the perspective of lifelong learning in the Arab region which suggests that ALE is no longer considered as a priority for decision-makers and policy makers in many of our countries and point to the fragility of partnership and networking between governments, civil society, and the private sector. Amongst the challenges for ALE in the coming years we point to the weakness of programmes that promote and entrench human rights and active citizenship and to governments' preoccupation with the security and political challenges facing the region. We conclude by acknowledging the historical significance of women's role in ALE and their potential to drive transformation and qualitative change based on their participation.

Keywords

Arab Region, Adult Learning and Education, artificial intelligence, role of women, impact of poverty.

El replanteamiento de la educación y el papel de la educación de adultos: Una visión general de la región árabe

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Resumen

Este artículo aborda diversas cuestiones planteadas por el panorama del nuevo orden mundial emergente para la educación de adultos en la Región Árabe. Entre ellas se incluyen el papel de los educadores, el impacto de la inteligencia artificial y otras tecnologías, el impacto continuado de la pobreza extrema y el papel desempeñado por la creatividad de las mujeres en la transición del viejo al nuevo orden emergente. Esbozamos la situación general del Aprendizaje y la Educación de Adultos (AEA) dentro de la perspectiva del aprendizaje a lo largo de toda la vida en la región árabe, que sugiere que el AEA ya no se considera una prioridad para los responsables de la toma de decisiones y de la formulación de políticas en muchos de nuestros países, y señalamos la fragilidad de la asociación y del trabajo en red entre los gobiernos, la sociedad civil y el sector privado. Entre los retos para el AEA en los próximos años, señalamos la debilidad de los programas que promueven y afianzan los derechos humanos y la ciudadanía activa, así como la preocupación de los gobiernos por los retos políticos y de seguridad a los que se enfrenta la región. Concluimos reconociendo la importancia histórica del papel de las mujeres en la EAJA y su potencial para impulsar la transformación y el cambio cualitativo a partir de su participación.

Palabras clave

Región Árabe, Aprendizaje y Educación de Adultos, inteligencia artificial, papel de la mujer, impacto de la pobreza.

Remettre en question l'éducation et le rôle de l'éducation des adultes: un aperçu de la région arabe

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Résumé

Cet article aborde diverses questions posées par le paysage du nouvel ordre mondial émergent pour l'éducation des adultes dans la région arabe. Ces questions comprennent le rôle des éducateurs, l'impact de l'intelligence artificielle et d'autres technologies, l'impact continu de l'extrême pauvreté et le rôle joué par la créativité des femmes dans la transition entre l'ancien et le nouvel ordre émergent. Nous décrivons la situation générale de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes (EFA) dans la perspective de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie dans la région arabe, ce qui suggère que l'EFA n'est plus considérée comme une priorité par les décideurs et les responsables politiques dans bon nombre de nos pays et souligne la fragilité des partenariats et des réseaux entre les gouvernements, la société civile et le secteur privé. Parmi les défis que devra relever l'éducation et la formation des adultes dans les années à venir, nous soulignons la faiblesse des programmes qui promeuvent et renforcent les droits de l'homme et la citoyenneté active, ainsi que la préoccupation des gouvernements pour les défis sécuritaires et politiques auxquels la région est confrontée. Nous concluons en reconnaissant

l'importance historique du rôle des femmes dans l'éducation et la formation des adultes et leur potentiel de transformation et de changement qualitatif basé sur leur participation.

Mots clés

Région arabe, apprentissage et éducation des adultes, intelligence artificielle, rôle des femmes, impact de la pauvreté.