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# **Tanzanian Women Literacy Learners---Balancing Autonomy and Community**

**Olivia L. Weitz**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines women's literacy perceptions and practices to better understand why women's literacy rates in Tanzania have declined in the past couple of decades. To assess Tanzanian women's literacy practices and perceptions my paper examines answers from 38 female respondents on Julie Christoph's 2011 survey in Zanzibar that is designed to represent Tanzanian women's attitudes and practices more generally. To supplement emerging trends from the survey, my paper adds responses from women derived from a survey I conducted in Zanzibar this summer at Zanzibar State University. The results from the surveys suggest that women literacy learners are discouraged in developing and maintaining literacy because they are buying into the government's autonomous literacy model, which implicates the individual role in literacy sponsorship in a way that leaves out support and accountability among community members and families. The outcome of women perceiving literacy in this way is that other supporting structures for literacy sponsorship, such as community literacy circles are undervalued. The wider implication of autonomous literacy learners and practices is that literacy is not applied towards UNESCO and government development goals. My paper suggests that if the government is trying to encourage women to obtain and maintain their literacy in a community, centered way and use literacy in ways that have community development in mind it would be wise to reflect upon lessons from Tanzania's initial literacy campaign, which holds the value of community and collaboration in higher regards.

## **Framing and History**

Historically Tanzania holds one of the best track records for the success of its adult literacy campaigns in the 1970's and 1980's. Following Tanzania's independence from British rule in 1968, which united the islands off the southern coast of Tanzania including Zanzibar with the mainland of Tanzania, President Nyerere embarked on a nationwide literacy campaign. The campaign was designed to help "develop the potential of individuals, making them better able to contribute to their own well-being and to the development of the society in which they live (Nyerere, 1985). Tanzania's first literacy campaigns deeply rooted in Nyerere's educational philosophy of socialist concepts of Ujamaa, helped Tanzania progress from a literacy rate of 25% to nearly 85% (Nyerere, 1985).

Despite the success of the initial literacy campaign Tanzania experienced a decline in literacy rates during the post-literacy period, particularly among women. Literacy rates for women peaked in 1986 at 88% (MOE figures 1989 Tanzania statistical Reports on Literacy Campaign cited in Rusimbi) while literacy rates have dropped on the Mainland to 65% (Karume, 2009) and 60% in Zanzibar. Scholars in the late 1990's and early 2000's put forth a variety of reasons for the decline in women's interest in becoming literate and the practical constraints facing the advancement of women's literacy in Tanzania.

The most recent scholarly literature argues women literacy learners became disinterested as the teaching and learning process in the literacy programs followed a top-down approach that failed to take into account individual needs and interests among women literacy learners in various local circumstances (Bhalalusesa, 2007). Also the materials presented did not match the needs or interests of literacy learners (Mushi, 1994). Besides the method of delivery and mismatch of literacy needs, scholars cite a variety of practical constraints including the difficulty of class attendance for many rural Tanzanian women due to long work hours and significant

domestic and community responsibilities (Rusimbi, 1992).

To take a more recent approach towards understanding why women's literacy rates are dropping in the status quo my paper will take into consideration individual women's perceptions regarding literacy and how their attitudes concerning literacy sponsorship might lead to discouragement among Tanzanian women literacy learners. My paper will also take into account how these attitudes impact Tanzanian women's literacy practices.

My paper will argue that despite the historic and somewhat current emphasis on the value of community and collaboration in literacy skills development, women's perceptions regarding literacy are impacted by the autonomous literacy model in ways that are discouraging women from developing and maintaining their literacy in a community, centered manner. As a result they are not using literacy for development purposes. To construct my argument I will begin with a brief overview of the autonomous literacy model and explain how its focus on individual literacy sponsorship poses tensions for the community, centered approach the government is endorsing.

To reveal the impacts of the autonomous model on women's literacy perceptions I will present some trends from Julie Nelson Christoph's 2010 survey on contemporary women's literacy practices and perceptions in Tanzania and supplement some of the responses with my own survey conducted in Zanzibar during the summer of 2011. Finally, I will offer some alternatives to the autonomous model that might encourage women literacy learners and be more in alignment with the community, centered approach the government is endorsing.

UNESCO supports literacy in Tanzania as part of its education for all goal to reduce adult literacy rates by 50% by 2015. In the UN model, which Street calls the autonomous literacy model the accepted way to lead to larger scale processes of socioeconomic development is to empower individuals with literacy skills that will lead individuals to "become authors of their

own learning, developers of their own knowledge and partners in dialogue about situations in their lives.” (Sandhaas, 2008). According to Sandhaas as individual’s literacy skills develop their cognitive decision-making abilities should increase and this resulting confidence should encourage people to participate in the development process. The UN understands literacy applications for development for women to be increased workforce participation, family welfare, and improving health to name a few (EFA, 2000).

Although a certain degree of autonomy and self-reliance is necessary in developing and maintaining literacy skills among women that might be related to development the ways the programs are implicating individuals as primarily responsible for developing and maintaining literacy skills is causing women to perceive themselves as primarily responsible for their own literacy. This may be leading them to rely less on community support structures to create literate environments. As a result literacy skills are not applied in a wider, community or national development framework.

There is a move towards community-based literacy circles supported by UNESCO that aims to be community and learner centered, with less emphasis on autonomy among literacy learners. However, despite the government’s community based adult literacy program’s (otherwise known as ICBAE) attempt to engender a strong sense of community centered literate circles, in reality the individual’s role in developing and maintaining their own literacy is compounded for a couple of reasons. One is that the program availability is decreasing due to a lack of political will for community mobilization (Bhalalusesa, 2005). As a result individuals are left without ample community support in developing and maintaining literacy skills. Secondly, despite the goal of teaching women literacy learners in more of a community centered manner to become more community conscious Bhalalusesa argues that the programs are not very wide-reaching in the broader community sense--- impacting only a select group of individuals.

Equally as important, the programs are failing to become the literacy learning circles that they claim to create (Bhalalusesa, 2005). If learners are not part of a community of learners and accountable to putting forth their literacy skills in a wider community context, this might lead individuals to use their literacy skills for individual purposes. More importantly individuals may begin to understand the development of literacy skills as a responsibility of their own, as opposed to leaning on others in a created literate community. My paper will now present some trends from Julie Nelson Christoph's survey on women's literacy perceptions regarding attitudes towards literacy sponsorship and discuss some ways how these might be impacting literacy practices.

### **Women's Literacy Practices and Perceptions--- The Surveys**

Until Christoph's survey (2010) detailing contemporary attitudes concerning literacy and literacy practices in Tanzania there has not been much written on how literacy is understood on an individual level and how individuals might be using literacy for development purposes. Christoph's survey is designed to represent perceptions regarding literacy and literacy practices among Zanzibaris and Tanzanians more generally as both share a similar literacy campaign history. The 38 women detailed on the survey represent a diverse group from a range of educational levels, literacy levels, disability, socioeconomic status, profession, and marital status. To examine women's perceptions regarding their role in literacy sponsorship I will consult the section containing Lickert Scale questions with language from UNESCO's autonomous literacy model and the section containing open-ended questions on definitions of literacy and further thoughts on the status of literacy in Tanzania. I will follow up with some open-ended answers provided by women on a survey that I conducted to women in Zanzibar that relates to trends on Christoph's survey.

To begin introducing women's perceptions regarding literacy sponsorship I will begin with

the last question on Christoph's Adult Basic Literacy Questionnaire, which asks respondents in an open-ended manner if they have any additional comments concerning literacy. One of the older women, a farmer who lived during Nyerere's literacy campaign responded, "You can't rely on family. Plus if you don't have the will to learn neither government nor neighbors can come to your rescue. It is only learning that can eradicate ignorance and give you skills. The literates are happy. Better to learn yourself rather than have somebody narrates things for you. You study to be knowledgeable." Her answer pinning the individual's responsibility in promoting literacy and leaving out the family and governments role in assisting new literates reflects a trend among Tanzanian women's attitudes concerning literacy sponsorship. My paper will then uncover how women's literacy perceptions regarding sponsorship may be impacting their literacy practices.

In tandem with the response above that "the government nor neighbors can come to your rescue" women on the survey generally understand their individual role in sponsoring their own literacy as more integral than the government or neighbors role in developing literacy skills. When asked to rank the following actors: individuals, teachers, family, neighbors, government, countrymen and countrywomen, and religious community in terms of responsibility for literacy sponsorship Tanzanian women ranked individuals role as second followed by all of the other actors besides, family in position one. No longer are neighbors and fellow countrymen, nostalgic of Nyerere's community centered literacy campaigns even in the top three in the minds of Tanzanian women.

The prioritization of the individual's role in promoting and maintaining literacy aligned with answers given by women on the survey I conducted in Zanzibar in summer 2011. My survey was designed to better understand how women perceive the constraints posed to educational and literacy advancement in Zanzibar and more about how they understand their individual role in the process. Three of the women whom I interviewed were enrolled as

students in the education department at Zanzibar State University. I located my respondents using the snowball sampling method. Their responses are important because their understanding of the role women play in literacy attainment and educational advancement reflects the extent to which women feel responsible for achieving higher educational opportunities especially as these women have overcome obstacles to educational advancement.

When asked about the individual's role in literacy sponsorship in relation to government and neighbors a woman at SUZA remarked: "It is women's fault for not being literate, the government allows everyone the opportunity and there are a lot of schools." Both of the other respondents responded in similar ways reiterating the excessive degree of personal responsibility women are attributing to themselves, in obtaining literacy and educational advancement. Another woman followed in leaving out the government's responsibility and pinning it on the individual answering that if a woman is not literate it "is women's fault...not the government's fault."

Finally, the third respondent from SUZA's sole remark in response to the individual sponsorship is that, "it is up to women to be empowered." Certainly, the degree of personal responsibility women are ascribing themselves in educational advancement is significant. The degree of personal responsibility might be impacting the ways women are understanding the government and neighbors role in literacy sponsorship and support. If they hold themselves as overtly responsible over these actors, women may not be holding these actors accountable to the degree necessary to further narrow the gap between men and women's educational advancement and lessen disparity in literacy rates in Tanzania. Also women may not be utilizing the support structures these actors offer to their fullest potential.

Besides understanding the individual's role as integral to developing literacy skills, Tanzanian women on Christoph's survey are holding themselves accountable if they are not literate or if their literacy skills are not developed to the point that they would like them to be.

All of the women on the survey answered strongly to the statement that if individuals are not literate then it is their fault and that it is because they didn't work hard enough.

Even though an individual's hard work and dedication is part of the process of becoming literate and maintaining literacy there are other factors outside the hands of individuals that work to create literate environments and support structures for new literates such as literacy sponsors and affordable, accessible literacy materials. Contemporary literacy studies understands the individual's role in promoting his or her own literacy as only a piece of the puzzle of becoming literate or furthering one's literacy skills (Street,1985). Equally important are literacy sponsors such as teachers who provide encouragement and support (Brandt, 1998). If these supporting sponsors are not doing their part or if there is a lack in numbers, there are limits to advancing women's literacy.

In the survey responses from women we get the sense that they are ascribing a significant degree of personal responsibility to themselves in obtaining and maintaining their literacy skills. With a significant degree of personal responsibility, literacy learners may be experiencing discouragement because they lack the supporting structures to help in developing their literacy skills. Support structures, necessary for new literates that Tanzania currently needs include more community centered literacy classes (Bhalalusesa, 2005), a steady supply of trained and supporting teachers (Mushi, 1994), and affordable and accessible literacy materials (Christoph 2011). Essentially, self-reliance may be leading to discouragement if the supporting structures are not in place. Also, if they were in place to the degree necessary to support women's literacy, then perhaps women would not be as discouraged in developing and maintaining literacy skills.

Also, women may be becoming discouraged due to the individual blame they are placing on their own abilities in obtaining literacy. Like the farmer in Nyerere's campaign mentioned if you don't have the will to learn and if you don't learn for yourself, then the prospects of

obtaining literacy are grim. Furthermore, individuals are blaming themselves in understanding the process of obtaining literacy as linked to an individual's hard work. The degree of importance women are placing upon individual responsibility in promoting literacy over their community and neighbors responsibility in promoting literacy could lead to excess autonomy and the destruction of potential community engagement among women literacy learners. Autonomy may lead to women growing less dependent on neighbors and their communities to help in developing literacy skills. My paper will now argue that less reliance on these actors may lead women to apply literacy skills to other modes besides community or national development purposes.

Community engagement among female literacy learners for the purposes of increasing literacy is especially fragile in Zanzibar. Currently, these types of groups don't really exist and despite the potential desire among women's to adopt literacy and apply literacy skills in a community context whether this be for the purpose of women's advancement, practicing their literacy skills, or other purposes designated by women the creation of these types of circles would require a significant amount of effort to form, fund, and maintain.

Women literacy learners becoming increasingly autonomous and self-reliant in developing and maintaining literacy skills has implications beyond alienating potential literacy support groups for women that might be used to practice literacy skills and allow women to gain a foothold of their position within the community. The lack of reliance on community members and government in developing literacy skills might also lead women to apply their literacy skills in ways that are not related to community and national development goals. On Christoph's survey women are not serving national development goals in ways that the government and the UN might suspect, but rather they are using literacy for their own purposes that includes religious and pleasure literacy.

## **Balancing Autonomy and The Community**

If the government is trying to encourage women to obtain and maintain literacy in a community centered way and use literacy in ways that have community development in mind, it would be wise to reflect upon lessons from Tanzania's initial literacy campaign sponsored by Nyerere. In contrast to the excessive individual role encouraged by the state now, there is historical evidence in the Tanzanian case that a balance of collective and individual interests that leans more heavily on the communal interest engendered a strong interest in women becoming literate and using literacy in ways related to community development.

In the initial literacy campaign self-reliance was encouraged, but with a strong emphasis on accountability to the community. The campaigns were designed to develop a degree of self-reliance by imparting literacy skills that would "increase [adults] physical and mental freedoms to increase control over themselves, their own lives, and the environment in which they live" (Nyerere, 1978). However, the self-reliance was balanced in understanding literacy applications related to development in Marxist terms as the programs encouraged individuals first to apply literacy skills towards the community and secondly for oneself. Strong communal emphasis created support structures for women to develop and maintain their literacy skills and resulted in women perceiving literacy as related to community development. A survey conducted by Rusimbi in 1970 indicates that Tanzanian women were encouraged to develop and maintain literacy as they perceived literacy as rendering them more capable of rising to a new membership in society and responsibility in their communities.

Finally, there is more research needed on how to better assess linkages between women's literacy perceptions and women's literacy practices. Although, there is a limitation to which literacy may lead to national development as other political and economic factors play an equally

important role in achieving development indicators (Street, 1985), the power of women's literacy perceptions should not be overlooked. Currently Bernadette Dean and her colleagues at the Institute of Education at Aga Khan University are looking into different methods of assessing women's literacy perceptions and women's literacy practices and how these might be related to the ways women are using literacy in community frameworks (Rogers, 2007). If women are more encouraged to develop and maintain literacy, when they perceive literacy applications as accountable to the community and in these circumstances are applying literacy skills towards rising up to the responsibilities in their communities then programs may need to place less emphasis on autonomy and more emphasis on relying on neighbors and fellow countrymen for literacy sponsorship and support.

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