



Strengthening Adult Literacy for Women in Bengaluru's Slums: Policy Directions

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Background and Context

India's literacy landscape presents a paradox of progress and persistent inequality. National literacy rates rose from 52.2% in 1991 to 74.4% in 2011, yet these aggregate figures mask profound gender disparities (Census, 2011). Female literacy stood at 65.46% in 2011, nearly 17 percentage points below male literacy (82.14%), with the gap widening dramatically among marginalised communities in urban slums. Globally, women constitute nearly two-thirds of all illiterate adults, a pattern reflecting systemic educational exclusion across socio-economic contexts (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017).

Karnataka mirrors these national trends. While the state's overall literacy rate reached 75.6% by 2011, female literacy lagged at 68.1% compared to 82.9% for males (Census 2011). The latest data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) reveals a significant improvement, as 73.4% of women in Karnataka between the ages of 15-49 have achieved literacy; nevertheless, disparities in literacy rates persist, particularly among economically disadvantaged and marginalised urban communities. Bengaluru, acknowledged as India's technology hub, exemplifies these contradictions. The city hosts approximately 597 slum settlements officially identified by the Karnataka Slum Development Board (KSDB), though informal estimates including unnotified settlements range from 1,500 to 2,000. These areas house an estimated 1.3 to 1.5 million people, representing roughly 10% to 15% of the

city's population (New 18, 2025). Although city-wide literacy appears high, disaggregated slum-level data indicates persistent deficits in adult female literacy, though systematic local statistics remain limited. These communities are characterised by inadequate infrastructure, fragile livelihoods, and heterogeneous socio-economic conditions (Roy et al., 2018; Ucar, 2023). Women in these settlements navigate multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage: disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, participation in precarious informal labour markets, and limited access to public services. This "triple burden" leaves minimal time or energy for educational pursuits, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of illiteracy (Stromquist, 2016).

The consequences of women's illiteracy extend far beyond individual deprivation. Education is a primary determinant of women's employment opportunities, earning capacity, and household income, serving as a critical pathway out of poverty (Swati, 2014). Maternal education profoundly influences child health, nutrition, and educational attainment, with literate mothers more likely to enroll and retain children, especially daughters in school (Andrabi et al., 2012). In spite of enhancements in general literacy levels, a notable fraction of the adult female population in India is still illiterate, emphasising the critical requirement to shift emphasis toward adult education programmes that go beyond fundamental skill development to facilitate true empowerment.

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Literacy as a Human Right and Development Imperative

Literacy is perceived as a core human right as defined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and constitutes the cornerstone for ongoing learning across formal, non-formal, and informal educational environments. It is imperative for the alleviation of poverty, the promotion of sustainable development, and the actualisation of human rights (UNESCO, 2013). In contemporary society, the concept of literacy has evolved to encompass not merely basic reading and writing skills but also includes numeracy, digital literacy, and multilingual communication competencies that are pertinent to various socio-economic contexts. For women, literacy is particularly transformative, strengthening mobility, decision-making autonomy, and control over life choices, thereby promoting both individual empowerment and social progress (Raya, 2012; Thingbaijam, 2021).

Prioritising literacy initiatives for slum-dwelling women is therefore not merely a social welfare intervention but a strategic investment in community development. Empowered women uplift families, strengthen neighbourhoods, and drive the creation of more equitable and prosperous societies. Yet, despite decades of policy attention, adult literacy programmes in India including Karnataka remain fragmented, under-resourced, and poorly aligned with women's lived realities.

Methodology

This study investigates the role of adult literacy programmes on the empowerment of women living in the slums of Bangalore. It seeks to assess the degree to which participation in these initiatives promotes the advancement of women's literacy, numeracy, and comprehension abilities, while concurrently enhancing their understanding of rights, the significance of education, access to improved employment opportunities, and overall quality of life. In addition, the study aims to identify the factors influencing women's non-participation in adult literacy programmes and to analyse the problems and constraints faced by those who participate in such initiatives.

The study adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative techniques, with a primary emphasis on qualitative data. The sample consists of 200

non-literate women aged between 15 and 50 years, including 120 participants of Adult Literacy Programmes and 80 non-participants. Data were collected from two taluks of the Bangalore Rural district, specifically from slum areas of Doddaballapura and Vijayapura, representing locations with relatively higher and lower female populations. Primary data were gathered through structured interviews, achievement tests, and focus group discussions.

Key findings

The adult literacy initiative has played a pivotal role in enhancing fundamental literacy and numeracy competencies among women residing in slums. A majority of the participants, who were formerly illiterate, now exhibit proficient recognition of both single- and double-digit numerals as well as foundational arithmetic abilities, while numerous individuals can articulate words although they continue to encounter challenges with constructing complete sentences, and they are capable of writing the alphabet. Comprehension and writing abilities show notable improvement, reflecting the programme's overall success. Beyond academics, it has increased awareness of women's rights, legal protections, and the value of education, leading participants to discourage child marriage and promote schooling for their children. It has also enhanced community participation and awareness of healthcare resources. However, challenges persist. The programmes have shown limited effectiveness on enabling women to assist with their children's education, pursue higher learning, or achieve financial independence. Most participants reported minimal improvement in income or job security, hindered by scarce vocational training and lack of entrepreneurial skills. Socio-cultural barriers, inadequate family support, and irregular teaching schedules further constrain progress.

Non-participants largely lack basic literacy and numeracy, struggling even with simple reading and writing tasks. Their non-participation is mainly due to heavy domestic workloads, time constraints, and poor programme communication. Many remain unaware of available adult literacy opportunities. The study highlights the need for greater accessibility, flexibility, and community-based awareness efforts to strengthen women's empowerment and long-term socio-economic impact.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of adult literacy programmes.

Community Awareness and Family Engagement

Launch intensive awareness campaigns through community leaders, local-language materials, radio, TV, and social media, while actively engaging families and men to sustain women's participation and challenge gender norms.

Flexible Learning Schedules

Implement flexible schedules, weekend or hybrid classes, and mobile learning options to accommodate participants' varied responsibilities.

Supportive Learning Infrastructure

Provide supportive infrastructure such as safe learning environments, on-site childcare, and transport assistance to reduce practical barriers to attendance.

Volunteer Recruitment and Capacity Building

Recruit and train volunteers through partnerships with institutions and NGOs, offering incentives, recognition, and flexible engagement opportunities.

Integration of Literacy with Skill Development

Integrate literacy with vocational, entrepreneurial, digital, and financial skills training, including budgeting, saving, and banking to promote self-employment, employability, and economic independence.

Contextualised and Learner-Centered Curriculum

Align curricula with learners' real-life contexts (e.g., health, parenting, livelihoods) and adopt flexible, learner-centered, and interactive teaching methods supported by simplified visual materials and peer mentoring.

Empowerment and Motivation Initiatives

Incorporate empowerment and confidence-building components such as leadership opportunities, recognition events, and certificates to improve motivation and retention.

Monitoring, Sustainability, and Partnerships

Establish strong monitoring and sustainability mechanisms through regular assessments, refresher courses, mentorship and partnerships with industries and government bodies to facilitate continued learning and employment pathways.

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