

BOOK REVIEW: Fatima Agnaou. 2004. *Gender, Literacy, and Empowerment in Morocco*. New York: Routledge, 212 pp, ISBN 0-203-48917-9

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Fatima Agnaou's *Gender, Literacy, and Empowerment in Morocco* was published by Routledge, New York in 2004. It presents an insightful and meticulous study into the literacy status of Moroccan illiterate women in nine integrated chapters. It also provides a clear account of the concept of literacy and how female illiteracy is deemed a stumbling block not only for the development and empowerment of women, but also for the country at large. Interestingly, the book takes one step further by highlighting the relationship between gender-oriented literacy programmes and women's emancipation and empowerment. Indeed, this book comes as a filler for the academic gap in gender unequal access to literacy and how non-literate females go about learning in literacy programmes. Practically, issues such as the conception of literacy, the planning and organization of Moroccan adult literacy campaigns and programmes, women's literacy needs and strategic needs are all made focal in this study.

Agnaou sets forth her research with an attempt to define the slippery concept of literacy. She admits that "literacy is by no means a unanimous concept as it means different things to different people within and across societies" (p. 23). She draws on prominent scholars to provide a clear understanding of the concept of literacy other than the traditional one, which limits it to the ability to read, write and do arithmetic. She, hence, views literacy as the acquisition of basic skills along with actualizing the functionality of these skills in order to serve as an empowerment mechanism in fostering female education. This latter aspect, stresses the writer, is "conceived of as a philosophical orientation toward social change" (p. 44).

Having set the ground for her study by delineating the concept of literacy, Agnaou sketches the planning and organization of adult literacy campaigns and programmes. She

basically highlights the state's attempts to fight illiteracy since the dawn of independence to the celebration of the international year of literacy in 1990. Further, special attention is paid to the new directions that have occurred in Moroccan adult literacy programmes and campaigns since the celebration of the International Literacy Year in 1990 to the publication of the National Charter of Education and Training in 1999. Moreover, Agnaou examines the position of adult literacy in the Charter and in the education decade 2000-2010, initiated by king Mohamed VI (p. 47).

Subsequent to the theoretical part of this study, the researcher delves into the empirical analysis of the findings. Of primary significance in the study are the profiles of female participants in Moroccan literacy programmes as well as the obstacles that hampered early on in their life their access to literacy. The data Agnaou relies on consist of interviews with 204 women students enrolled in the literacy programmes currently and 75 dropouts. The questions cover a range of issues such as the personal, educational and socio-economic characteristics of the target women, causes of illiteracy rooted in their childhood as well as the reasons behind a high absenteeism rate. In fact, the respondents' age, family status, mother tongue, occupation, to name but a few, have shed light on the impact of tradition, the quality of education and the correlation between illiteracy and poverty as main factors hindering access to literacy and empowerment.

After the thorough analysis of illiteracy causes and of the obstacles that female learners encounter, the study proceeds towards identifying women's literacy and learning needs. To help the reader understand, Agnaou draws on Kowalski (1988:122), who defines the concept of needs as the "gap between what is and what is required" (p. 94) making further distinctions between wants, needs and interests. This helps the researcher identify essential needs, as exposed by the informants, which include target needs, learning needs, language needs, job needs and cultural needs. Interestingly, the findings reveal a set of useful functional skills requested by the respondents that are deemed crucial in their everyday life. These skills comprise community-based, consumer-based, health-related and job-related talents that are linked with reading, writing and arithmetic activities so as to perform certain communicative tasks.

The identification of literacy and learning needs is not an end in itself. The study moves a step further to testing these needs through a set of practical exercises that target the beneficiaries of female literacy classes in Morocco. Literacy attainment measurement of 180 certified female graduates has revealed the efficiency of such literacy programmes implemented by the Moroccan government. To help in the process, Agnaou deploys a set of exercises like

pre-reading, word picture matching, letter recognition and production, cloze and sentence completion that have revealed the extent of mastery and acquisition of the target skills by the informants. Indeed, this process does not only pave the path for remedial work of flaws underlying women's attainment of literacy, but it also facilitates catering for women's strategic needs which would lead to their empowerment. It primarily goes through, as Agnaou sees it, an examination of textbooks assigned to teach illiterate adults and the investigation whether these textbooks "convey a culture of equity where women are represented in plural, balanced and non-discriminatory social roles" (p. 152). Agnaou insists that a real empowerment of women can only unfold in a learning context in which the textbooks are devoid of any form of gender discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice and sexism. The researcher pinpoints that men occupy more space than women in these textbooks, which is bound to affect the gender roles each part plays. Consequently, women are discriminately portrayed in terms of familial, occupational, social and political activities. The researcher evaluates the content of these textbooks from the perspectives of gender stereotyping, citizenship, social fulfilment and resistance to social pressure in real life.

Significantly, this work bridges the gap in gender literacy in Morocco through laying bare the interplaying factors that feed into gender empowerment. Moreover, it creates a solid ground for the construction of successful and efficient literacy policymaking, which would prioritize gender equality, representation and role playing. Agnaou's pioneering work serves also as a starting point for researchers interested in the field of gender literacy and empowerment, opening further horizons for unexploited areas. At the same time, the field work nature of this study gives more credibility and enables first-hand information, which should be taken into account by officials so as to support women's advancement in Moroccan society.