



Why is literacy a women's issue? (Isn't it an issue for "everybody"?) We think that the answers to these questions are complicated. In a literate society, literacy is necessary; those who are without it find their options limited, their way difficult, even their sense of self undermined. Yet, a theme in the material we received for this issue is the resilience, and capability of those who seek literacy. In reaching for what ought to have been theirs from childhood, they express the courage and strength that they already possess.

The clichés about literacy, particularly for women, are that acquiring it allows the silent to speak, and the inarticulate to find language. Often, however, those without literacy are silent only because they have been silenced. In a literate society, the written word is the source of authority and power. Those not in command of the written word, by definition then, are powerless. It is in this sense and context that literacy is "empowering."

And so it is. Women learning to read often say their first goal is to be able to read a story to their children. There is poignancy and paradox in this goal. In some historical periods, women were educated only so that they could teach their children, while their use of literacy in the public sphere was restricted or condemned. Regardless of women's access to literacy, in all periods women's use of it in the public sphere occasioned comment. Many of the women in the literacy programs described in this issue are single parents. They need literacy to function in the public sphere in order to provide for themselves and their children. Literacy as a women's issue draws attention again to women's double role (whether or not they have paid employment).

But literacy and literacy programs provide other things women need as well. Another recurring theme in the material we received is women's isolation and the way in which literacy programs give women a context for gathering on their own behalf. Particularly when the program nurtures the possibility inherent in the gathering, these gatherings provide support and community. So in her literacy group, Mary, brought to Canada as a domestic worker and fighting to remain, received support in her battles with abu-

sive employers as well as with immigration officials. Her strength and tenacity in those struggles predated her arrival at the literacy program; the support helped her to continue, while her increasing literacy helped her deal with things in other ways.

There are more ways in which literacy is a women's issue. At least in Canada, most literacy workers, paid and volunteer, are women. Volunteer work has been, by and large, the sphere of women, and so the high proportion of women who are tutors is not surprising. Women seem also to predominate in employment that requires education but pays poorly, so the high proportion of women who are employed running literacy programs also is not surprising. We speculate further that helping people acquire literacy in a culture that assumes its early acquisition is women's work because women's job is to provide early language training — in speech and on paper. In this context, helping people to learn to read and write is very intimate; it requires tact, gentleness and a caring and nurturing attitude. And so women, expected from girlhood to develop these traits, more readily gravitate to tasks that use them.

Still it is only relatively recently that the literacy community has focused on the special needs of women acquiring basic literacy. The context created by the women's movement has made visible what was implicit, and so, for example, the CLOW pamphlet "Women and Literacy" [see pp. 26-28] delineates what earlier literacy workers knew but could not publicly articulate. Time and again, members of the guest editorial board, literacy workers themselves, as well as people we asked to submit articles for this issue, commented on the importance and pleasure in finally concentrating on the intersection of women's issues and literacy issues, even as they struggled to find time to do so. Ironically, the women's movement has not addressed the issue of literacy well, and this too is a theme in our issue.

Ironically, of late literacy has become (yes, we will say it) something of a "motherhood issue"—and not in any of the ways this phrase might find meaning above! Politicians declare war on illiteracy and distribute money. In the academic world,

the Modern Language Association has a big conference on Literacy.

Literacy is hot, Literacy is in.

We wonder, why now?

We have come up with no answer to that question, but we can speculate. True, helping someone learn to read *is* "a shortening of the road." As a national project, in Nicaragua, for example, literacy means engaging the people in modernization and is socially transforming.

However, as well, literacy programs, in industrialized countries especially, are a lot cheaper than changing the economic and social structures that keep people in poverty. In countries where literacy is the norm, the "illiterate" is an individual who has failed to keep up in the system — or been failed by it. Even when the latter is acknowledged, the individual is still perceived to be at fault, or defective in some way. Literacy provides a handy remedy but need pose no overwhelming challenge to the status quo. Countries with a long tradition of general literacy have learned to absorb its revolutionary impact.

In their article "Is it her voice if she speaks their words?", Elaine Gaber-Katz and Jenny Horsman illuminate another thread that weaves through this issue when they urge a critical pedagogy. This pedagogy encourages literacy learners to see patterns in their experience and to challenge the social arrangements that impinge on their freedom. When literacy programs employ this pedagogy, they can go beyond being the "motherhood" projects their benefactors may believe them to be. Literacy is an issue for "everybody" — certainly — but examining it at the nexus where it concerns women has made larger matters clear.

We want to thank the many people who contributed to this issue: especially our guest editorial board — particularly for their insistence that we stay with *basic* literacy and trust that the material would come: Betsy Alkenbrack, Betty Butterworth, Jenny Horsman and Gladys Watson; and Barbara Levine for all the photocopying that allowed us to make our collective decisions. This issue was a long time in the making, but by the time the guest editorial board had our last meeting, it too felt like one of those gatherings of women from which our power comes.

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