

may be a formidable barrier to even finding out about a literacy program. Isolation often comes from traditional expectations that a woman should stay at home. Mothers — especially sole-support parents — are often isolated in the home. One-tenth of all families in Canada are headed by single parents and 80% of these are women. The rate of functional illiteracy among these single parents is 36%, much higher than the rate for the population as a whole.³

Options: Making Literacy More Accessible to Women

To be successful, literacy programs try to reach those who need them most. Often this involves extra work, such as publicizing programs in different communities, communicating in different languages, making participation possible to disabled learners. Some literacy programs have come up with ways to make it easier and more beneficial for women to participate.

Making childcare available to students is one way to help women benefit from literacy programs. Sometimes childcare at the literacy centre is not possible and alternatives, such as providing in-home baby sitting or a childcare allowance, may be more beneficial.

Scheduling classes that are convenient for women is also important. Some women with children may find day time classes the most convenient, especially if time is left for the women to get their children to and from daycare or school. But many mothers also work outside of the home, so the more flexible a program is, the better. It may be necessary to offer the same class in different time slots so that women will be able to attend.

Women may benefit from **women-only groups**. Women are often more able to talk freely with one another, and share experience of learning without men present. Women-only literacy groups become an important space in which women can discuss common problems in their educational experience and their lives. Out of these groups, women sometimes gain new motivation for writing and communicating.

For many women learners, classes become an important social experience providing a break from their home or work life. The supportive atmosphere a

woman learner experiences is likely to help her learning and encourage her attendance, as well as improve her life beyond the classroom.

To reach isolated women, many literacy workers are using **existing networks in their area**, for example: schools, daycares, social service agencies, women's church groups, farm women's networks, and public service announcements.

What DO Women Want to Learn About?

Once women are in a program it's important that the material used holds their interest. By listening to what women want to learn about literacy, practitioners can design programs relevant to women's lives. For example, women may want information on **health care, birth control, childcare, or sexuality**, so materials on these subjects may make good learning material. However, it is important not to assume that all women are interested in the same things, and to offer a range of possible learning materials.

Women who are working or planning to work need **information about what jobs are available**, and how to prepare for them. It's also important that they are able to learn what different jobs will mean for their future, and that they understand the options for change and growth.

Material must relate to women's lives, but not portray women stereotypically. It should be grounded in reality but allow for the possibility of change. How are women portrayed in material — as passive, weak, always doing "women's work"? How often are they the central character in a story? In illustrations, are they in the background? Is inclusive language used? For example, it's better to use "firefighter" than "fireman." Language used in literacy material should not be sexist, racist or otherwise discriminatory.

¹ & ² CLOW, *Decade of Promise*, 1986. Quotations are from women in Maritime upgrading and literacy programs, interviewed by Jennifer Horsman. See also Horsman's "From the Learners' Voice: Women's Experience of Il/literacy" to be published in *Adult Basic Education: A Field of Practice* (edited by James Draper and Maurice Taylor).

³Audrey Thomas, *Adult Illiteracy in Canada — A Challenge*, UNESCO, 1983.

JILL SOLNICKI

Bill

Bill, I banish you
to the back burner,
the trash can.

Banish you to
the lexicon of
short, dumb names.

And if, at the traffic light,
your green eyes blink,
I'll wait for red;

and if, bill-in-the-box,
you pop from every
doorway — your

square shoulders,
shapely legs
and narrow waist —

I will lid you,
key the latch.
And if, while I am

reading by the fire,
the words from your
grey letters, bound and gagged

at the back of the drawer,
dare to steal across the page,
stain the paper,

I will close the book,
douse the fire,
go upstairs to bed.

But Bill, Bill,
when I lie
on my defenceless sheets,

please don't come
breathing
on my warm sleep.