

**Acknowledgements:**

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# Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women

Throughout the world there are many more illiterate women than men. However, in Canada, if we use completion of grade 9 as a benchmark (as suggested by UNESCO) to define functional illiteracy the numbers are about the same for both men and women: one in five people, or about five million Canadians are considered functionally illiterate. Despite the similarity in numbers, there are important differences in how women are affected by illiteracy.

In this pamphlet the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women discusses some of these differences, and what literacy programs are doing and can do for women. It's our hope that this pamphlet encourages literacy workers to share experiences, new ideas and good learning materials they have found. CLOW is working on a catalogue of literacy materials for women which will be available in the Spring of 1989, and we would like to hear about other projects in this area. Our address is:

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## Why do women want to learn?

Often women hope literacy will be a step to a better job, or to further training:

**"It's more or less to help me find a job, like a better paying job than \$4 an hour." Betsy.**

\*

Sometimes women want to be able to be more involved in their children's education:

**"It would help me with her a lot because if I could read stuff to her she'd understand it... We could go to the park, we could get books and sit outside and read." Susan.**

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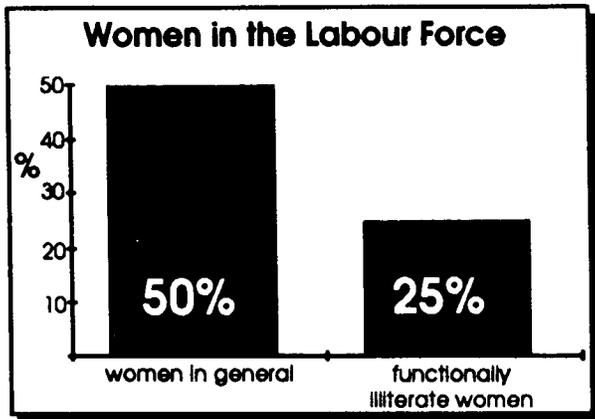
Many women see reading as something meaningful which they are missing out on:

**"Reading I think has a lot to do with life. If you can read and understand what you're reading I think you can do a lot with it." Susan.**

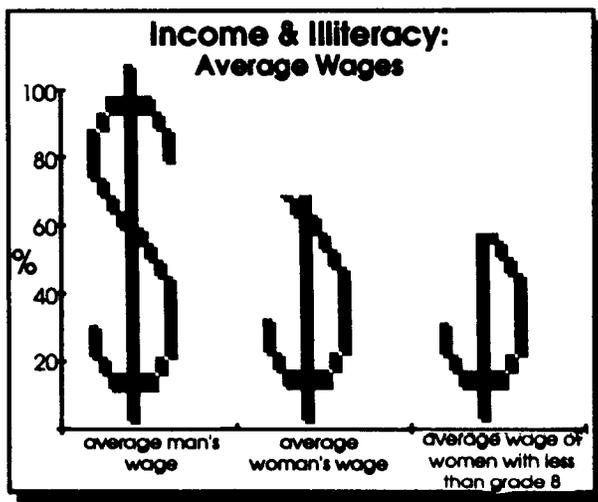
# Making Connections: Women, Poverty and Literacy

The relationship between literacy and poverty is complex but important in the way it affects women's lives.

- Only 25% of functionally illiterate women are in the paid labour force compared with 50% of women as a whole.<sup>1</sup>



- Half of all female-headed families live below the poverty line. The rate of illiteracy in this group is much higher than the national average.
- Jobs available to women with poor reading and writing skills are traditionally the lowest paid jobs — such as domestic work, sewing machine operation.
- The average woman of any educational status who works full time makes only 68% of what the average man makes. Women with less than grade 8 make on average only 59% of what men earn.<sup>2</sup>



## What are the Barriers to Women Learning?

Women enter literacy programs for lots of different reasons. Often a woman hopes it will be a step towards a better job or further training. Sometimes mothers want to be able to be more involved in their children's education. And, most women hope that literacy will enrich and improve the quality of their lives. However, a woman's desire to learn is often mediated by other circumstances in her life. Literacy workers must look at the pattern of a woman's life, and at the role a woman's responsibilities and relationships play in her decision making. Understanding and valuing a woman's situation will help educators provide ways for her to continue learning.

The following may be important factors:

### Children at Home

Responsibility for childcare may hinder a woman's ability to participate in literacy programs. It may be difficult for her to get babysitters or childcare at the times when classes are available. Once in a program, a woman might be kept from attending classes by her children's illnesses. At home, children often distract their mothers from completing or concentrating on homework.

### Demands of Husbands and Boyfriends

Men in a learner's life may feel threatened by her attempt to do something on her own and especially by an attempt to become better educated. While many men are supportive, others are not: their negative reaction may range from just not helping her (for example, no babysitting while she goes to class) to verbal, emotional or physical abuse.

### Isolation in the Home

Women become isolated in the home for many reasons. For women already isolated by their lack of reading ability, this

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.<sup>3</sup>

### 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.

<sup>1</sup> & <sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup>Audrey 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.