

# THE CHANGE AGENT

Adult Education for  
Social Justice: News,  
Issues, and Ideas

## Women & Literacy

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## Women & Literacy

by Daphne Greenberg

According to the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey approximately 20% of women in the U.S. have difficulty completing applications, reading labels, or reading to their children. Twenty-three percent of all women aged 25 and over have not gone beyond 11th grade and 28% of women aged 65 and older have not gone beyond eighth grade. Women continue to be grouped in a few low-wage occupations, and lack of education is one of the reasons for this. Access to quality education is essential for women to progress socially, economically, and politically.

The field of education often does not take into account the consequences of gender differences in the classroom, and



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*The Change Agent* is the biannual publication of The New England Literacy Resource Center. Each issue of the paper helps teachers incorporate social justice content into their curriculum. The paper is designed for intermediate-level ESOL, ABE, GED, and adult diploma classes. Each issue focuses on a different topic that is relevant to learners' lives.

In New England, *The Change Agent* is available free of charge in limited quantities through NELRC's affiliated state literacy resource centers (SABES, ATDN, CALL, Vermont Adult Education Board, Literacy Resources/Rhode Island, New Hampshire Department of Education). Contact these centers to learn how to receive your free copies. PDF versions of *The Change Agent* can be downloaded for free from our Web site.

**Submissions**  
**Our next issue is about TRANSITIONS.**

We welcome submissions from teachers and students in our field as well as activists and thinkers from outside the field. For submission guidelines visit [www.nelrc.org/changeagent](http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent) or call 617-482-9485.

**Subscriptions**

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## From the Editors

What are the causes and consequences of women's low literacy levels? How are women learners bringing unique strengths to the challenges they face? What do women learners have to teach us about the best ways to reach out to other women, to nurture leadership, and to create the kind of change in society that will address systemic injustices? How have teachers created lessons that resonate with women's everyday experiences? With this issue on women and literacy, we address these questions (and more) by sharing the perspective and wisdom of adult learners and their teachers. In this issue, student voices are prominent as their writings highlight what they're going through and how they define issues for themselves. The teacher writings outline some of the transcending curriculum issues related to women and literacy.

"Being a woman is something to be proud of, but it includes many challenges," writes Agnes Nansubuga. The challenges are not unfamiliar. As many of our student contributors report, family responsibilities, abuse, inadequate income, and gender and race oppression make getting an education challenging. Punitive immigration and welfare laws put an extra burden on women learners from other countries and women with low or no income.

Perhaps less familiar are the enormous strengths that women bring to the process of learning and changing—not just themselves but the world we live in. The articles here reflect many of those qualities. Women learners with disabilities provide guidelines for ways to support women with disabilities in their learning. Intergenerational Asian-American women support each other inside and outside of class. A nursing home worker uses her union membership and improved literacy skills to protect her rights (and those of others) on the job. Immigrant women learners at VozMujer start with their own real-life dilemmas and their own problem-solving abilities, and engineer both private and public solutions as they gain literacy skills. Diverse women's voices come together in this issue to claim women's power to change, grow, support each other, and create a better world.

You will also notice that *The Change Agent* now has a new format. We hope teachers will be better able to reproduce pieces for use in the classroom. This collaborative effort between WE LEARN and NELRC gave us an opportunity to promote both the former's commitment to the creation of women-centered literacy materials and the latter's focus on the adult learner's role in social change. The experience and enthusiasm of our editorial board generated much of the vision and content for this issue. We thank them. We also received many more high quality student and teacher submissions than we had room for in the print issue. Thanks to the WE LEARN Web site ([www.litwomen.org/tca/index.html](http://www.litwomen.org/tca/index.html)), an addendum of these pieces is available online. WE LEARN, with the agreement and support of NELRC, will continue to use this issue to promote women's literacy issues and to build curriculum and community networks. We encourage you to contact WE LEARN and to participate in this important work.

After all, as community activist Klare Allen reminds us, education is not just about reading and writing, it's about "learning what you need to know to be the kind of person you need to be and to have the kind of community you want to have."

Mev Miller and Cynthia Peters  
Guest Editors

*Continued from page 1*

adult literacy is no exception. There are issues unique to female learners. Educators and policymakers need to address them so that women can begin to take advantage of their educational strengths while overcoming their educational weaknesses.

Although men and women share many of the same obstacles when it comes to attending programs (shame, fear, conflicting work schedules, etc.), women often have additional barriers, such as lack of family support and multiple family responsibilities. Sometimes women are just plain too tired to attend classes. It is not uncommon to hear women complain that after child rearing, housekeeping, and work outside the house, they simply do not have time for studying. Many literacy programs do not have child care options and many women cannot leave their children with partners, family members, or friends. Transportation is another obstacle; often even if an attached woman has a car, the partner's transportation needs supercede the woman's needs. Not every area has adequate public transportation, nor is it safe for women in some communities to walk unescorted. Finally, husbands often do not allow wives to go to classes at night or to mixed

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**Women often have additional barriers [to attending programs], such as lack of family support and multiple family responsibilities.**

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gender classes. As researcher Janet Isserlis has pointed out, many women live with partners who do not want them to become more literate and/or independent, and this impacts their ability to participate in classes. Some women are not allowed to leave home, and therefore cannot attend classes (either due to cultural restrictions on women and/or domestic abuse reasons).

Literacy training begins as an issue for females when they are young. While boys and girls

share many of the same reasons for why they drop out of school, girls have the added issues of marriage, pregnancy, family violence, and abuse. Another reason why girls may drop out of school is that they are

systematically underrepresented in identification for learning disability services. Lack of a diagnosis means lack of needed services, which often

leads to low self-esteem, frustration, and hopelessness—all factors that contribute to dropping out of school.

Many policymakers take an instrumental view of women's education, stressing that increased female literacy skills are correlated with improved child care, nutrition, and health. Higher educated women have been said to provide better prenatal care, produce more full-term babies, provide better postnatal care, and produce higher participation rates in their children's schooling. This type of reasoning has influenced many literacy instructional programs to focus on women only as homemakers, ignoring women who do not have children, de-emphasizing the personal literacy interests of women, and side-stepping the fact that the majority of women must earn a living and therefore need additional types of literacy instruction. Women deserve access to meaningful education because they have a right to it—not as a means toward some other end. To help women achieve this right, policymakers and educators should work to better understand gender differences in the classroom and meet the specific needs of women learners.

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**Women deserve access to meaningful education because they have a right to it—not as a means toward some other end.**

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*Daphne Greenberg is the facilitator of the National Institute for Literacy Women and Literacy Listserv ([http://novel.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/nifl-womenlit/women\\_literacy.html](http://novel.nifl.gov/lincs/discussions/nifl-womenlit/women_literacy.html)) and the associate director of the Center for the Study of Adult Literacy in Atlanta, Georgia. For references to this article, contact her at [dgreenberg@gsu.edu](mailto:dgreenberg@gsu.edu).*

# Kaleidoscopic Image *by Kinnari Sutariya*

My poem has no beginning, middle or end.  
She contains pieces of broken colored glass  
participating in abstract blurry patterns;  
wants to make a kaleidoscopic image  
and possibly some difference.  
She speaks about  
personal experience and observance  
but not limited to self.

I wanted to study architecture.  
My parents preferred me to  
choose a college in the town we lived.  
It would have been different, if I was a boy.  
Good grooms look for educated girls.  
To start college studies was encouraged  
but pursuing a career was not.  
When I was refusing to  
marry a man, my marriage was arranged.  
It was said that going to a good school  
had gone to my head  
and freedom was not given  
to bring shame to the family.  
This would not have been said  
if I was a boy.

What defines illiteracy?  
Is it only about the ability to read and write,  
deprived opportunity?

I entered the U.S.A. as a newly married bride.  
After a few days, I entered jail as a murderer:  
first time away from a sheltered life,  
interrogation by two white American men,  
lack of fluent English and knowledge of law  
made me feel illiterate  
even though I had B.S. from India.

Amazing but true, in prison, I learned  
more about women's issues and studies  
by taking "Understanding Women" class.  
Before that it was a mirage effect not in easy reach.  
Women's studies are mostly offered as college courses.  
They are real issues.  
Shall it not start early at school level?

In India, for ages, Sarswati has been  
worshipped as a goddess of knowledge.  
Indira Gandhi became the first woman prime minister;  
she took a high stand as a woman.  
But the rate of illiterate women is still high today.  
In Saudi Arabia, women are allowed to get an education  
but, professional careers are limited to certain  
care-giving areas only.

Afghanistan, Pakistan,  
Bangladesh, South Africa...

Early-age marriages, children having children,  
75-95% of household work and childcare  
done by women, son preference over daughter  
and much more affects women's education.  
Problems are not limited to a few countries.  
They are global.  
They are women's.

For many women, literacy has influenced  
their communication and standing voice,  
and lead them towards better health and better life;  
individually and collectively, it empowered them.  
But gender oppression and inequality  
causes women to be a major target of illiteracy —  
scattering women as pieces of broken colored glass.  
Women's depth is much more than separate pieces of  
color.

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*Kinnari Sutariya was born and raised in India. Currently, she is incarcerated in Michigan, USA.*

# Women's Adult Education

*A fundamental tool for empowerment*

*by Agnes Nansubuga*

Being a woman is something to be proud of, but it includes many challenges, particularly when it comes to education. Social, economic, and cultural systems throughout almost the entire world often do not support women's literacy. However, adult educators can help women overcome barriers and empower themselves and their communities.

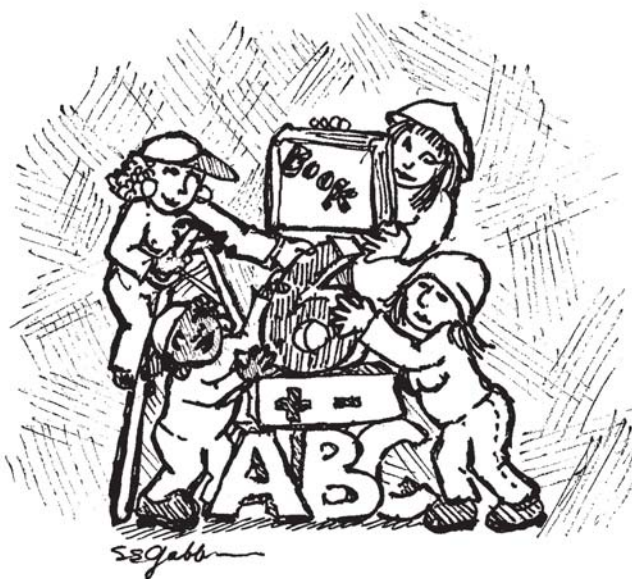
Often, it is women's responsibility to look after the children, their husbands, and at times the extended family. Because of the overwhelming workload at home, women do not have time to train for high-paying jobs. Employers are sometimes hesitant to hire women because they worry about having to provide maternity leave and they assume that women will have difficulties with childcare. Taking low-paying jobs means that women have to work extra hours to catch up with the bills. With all these pressures, it is hard for women to find the time to engage in educational programs and, anyway, they are often too tired to take on additional class work.

Traditionally, many cultures push women away from education. Some countries emphasize literacy and education for boys more than for girls. Consequently, there have not been many women to mentor other women in higher educational programs. Secondly, in some cultures, a female may be considered less marriageable if she is highly educated, so her family will pressure her not to go to school. Also, many cultures condone or do not do enough to prevent violence against women. Being the victim of violence can lead to shame and isolation, which has a profound impact on women's ability to learn and meaningfully participate in literacy programs.

Educators need to support women to overcome the barriers that hinder us from getting educated. It is important for educators to ask women what they need, to respect voices from all cultures, to make connections with diverse learners, and to link educational programs with what is happening in communities. Specific approaches should include: women's participation in curriculum development, using real life issues in lesson plans, and helping women increase their participation in politics. Women's literacy calls for a grassroots effort to combat the negative images about women through education and action. Through education, we shall move from self-empowerment as women to community empowerment.

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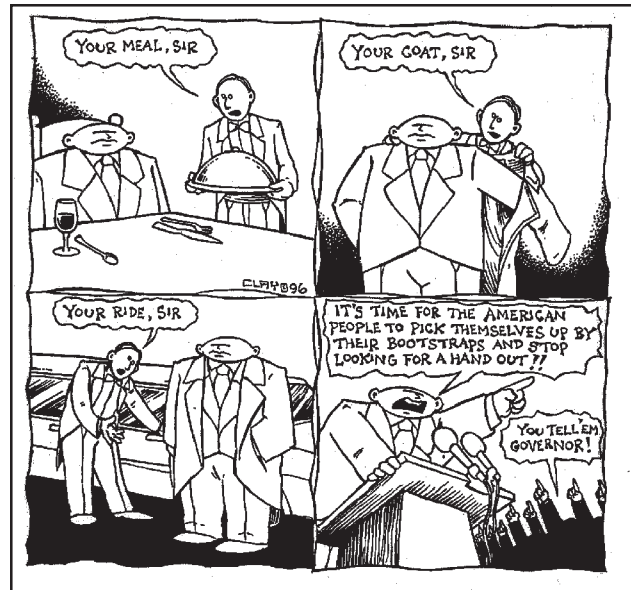
*Agnes Nansubuga is an undergraduate student at the College of Public and Community Service at UMASS Boston.*



# Welfare Reform & Women's Education

by Lorna Rivera

I am always amazed when our political leaders create public policies that are based on stereotypes and misinformation. Welfare reform is an excellent example of this. Despite the fact that there is an overwhelming amount of evidence that the more education you have, the more likely you are to access decent paying jobs, many women on welfare have been forced to give up on their education and find "any job" as soon as possible. A significant number of my women adult learners at Project HOPE and at the College of Public and Community Service dropped out of school because of changes in welfare laws that began to be implemented in 1996. A 1997 study by Steve Reuys at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute (ALRI) in Boston found that adult literacy programs throughout the state of Massachusetts experienced significant declines in their enrollments immediately after the welfare law passed. According to Reuys, "Education is no longer encouraged—and is in fact often ac-



tively discouraged—for recipients of public assistance in Massachusetts." As Congress continues to debate this issue (see "What You Can Do"), it is important for us to understand how and why low-income women's access to education is being restricted, and the effects of welfare "work-first" policies on women adult learners and adult literacy programs.

There is a widening gap in U.S. society between the very rich and the rest of us. According to United for a Fair Economy, the average

## WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT WELFARE REFORM

1. Speak or testify at a city or town meeting.
2. Organize a press conference.
3. Organize a media blitz—contact various media outlets to set up interviews, meet with editorial boards of newspapers.
4. Meet with your elected officials.
5. Write your representatives in Congress to let them know how you feel. (Find your representatives at [www.firstgov.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml](http://www.firstgov.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml))
6. Participate in local activist groups by contacting:
  - The Welfare Made a Difference Campaign: [www.wmadcampaign.org](http://www.wmadcampaign.org)
  - Welfare Information Network: [www.financeprojectinfo.org](http://www.financeprojectinfo.org)
  - The Welfare Reform Academy: [www.welfareacademy.org](http://www.welfareacademy.org)
  - The National Welfare Rights Union: [www.nationalwru.org](http://www.nationalwru.org)

worker earned only \$517 per week in 2003, while the average Chief Executive Officer (CEO) earned \$155,769. The people who are in powerful positions to shape social policies typically come from very wealthy backgrounds and they have the most influence in shaping programs that are supposed to help low-income families. Unfortunately, many of our elected officials have little experience or insight about the everyday struggles of poor families.

Welfare reform passed in the United States as a result of politicians and the media promoting the idea that people are poor because there is something wrong with them as individuals. One of the great myths of U.S. culture is that people are poor because they made bad choices and bad decisions in their lives; they irresponsibly failed to answer the door when opportunity came knocking. Poverty is seen as an individual problem, not as a result of the unfair way our society distributes resources.

The media perpetuates these beliefs by focusing on the individual characteristics of the women who receive welfare, and they "color" these images to make it seem like more recipients belong to racial and ethnic minority groups and that they receive welfare for generations. By focusing on the mothers, the media also downplay the fact that the majority of welfare recipients are actually children. We are more likely to support lifetime limits on public assistance if we feel threatened by welfare recipients in some way—for example by thinking that excessive amounts of tax revenue are going to support these lazy women—even though this is simply not true. We have to buy into the myth that there is something fundamentally different between us and them.

One of the worst things about welfare reform is the effect it has on women's self-esteem. Many welfare recipients are prejudiced against themselves and each other. For example, I will never forget how one of my GED students said that welfare mothers should, "Get off their asses and try to find a man to support them." This particular student had a physical disability and was

a welfare recipient herself. Her remarks sparked a heated discussion in our class about stereotypes and so the women wrote essays about the "realities" of being welfare recipients. One woman wrote: "I'm tired of people thinking I am less than everyone else just because I live off AFDC, cause I know I'm not. And the reason why I said this is because I have a friend that is always talking about mothers on AFDC and it gets me mad. She was

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**One of the great myths of U.S. culture is that people are poor because they made bad choices and bad decisions in their lives; they irresponsibly failed to answer the door when opportunity came knocking.**

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on it too and now, just because she has a job, she criticizes everyone else that lives off AFDC. When I pass my GED test and accomplish my goal and find the job I want, I will never criticize no one that is going through the same situation I was in." This student identified with other women experiencing a similar "situation." It was an eye-opening lesson about the importance of challenging the self-hatred that weighs down the hearts and minds of poor women, and how internalizing oppressive messages prevents unity among women everywhere.

My own studies, as well as those of Barbara Sparks and Steve Reuys, have documented significant dropout rates and declining enrollments in adult education in the aftermath of welfare reform. Many of the adult education programs that had the greatest decline in enrollments were intensive (20 hours a week) community-based programs that offered classes during the morning hours to accommodate the schedules of mothers with school-aged children. Some of these were participatory learning and popular education programs that, in addition to providing literacy instruction, were also aimed at increasing political empowerment and social change. These programs offered a real possibility of change for

the women who attended them. But it seems that women who need education the most should just stay in low-paying jobs that will never help them escape from poverty.

I believe now is a critical time to confront stereotypes and misinformation about the causes of women's poverty. We could do more to increase awareness about the benefits of education and be more effective in lobbying for access to quality adult basic education. We live in the world's richest country that has the means to eliminate poverty and to provide access to education for all who desire it. We need to challenge bad public policies that perpetuate poverty.

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*Lorna Rivera works with adult learners in the College of Public & Community Services at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. Contact her at [Lorna.Rivera@umb.edu](mailto:Lorna.Rivera@umb.edu) for more information about the studies cited in this article.*

### Learn More About Welfare @

[www.faireconomy.org/press/2004/CEOPayRatio\\_pr.html](http://www.faireconomy.org/press/2004/CEOPayRatio_pr.html)  
**United For a Fair Economy**

<http://inequality.org>

**Inequality.org** is a nonprofit organization that provides information about US inequality with regard to healthcare, technology, economics, education, and other issues.

[www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp](http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp)

**Institute for Research on Poverty** at University of Wisconsin Madison, is an excellent source for statistics, links, news, research on issues such as health, education, welfare reform, low-wage workers, and child support.

[www.cbpp.org](http://www.cbpp.org)

**Center for Budget & Policy Priorities** has information about Federal Budget expenditures and the congressional reauthorization of TANF.

## It's Never Too Late *by Crecelia Jaurequi*

I am from Mexico where I received only eight years of education. On the one hand, it is difficult for a woman like me to go to school. I have to take care of two daughters and a husband. I have to organize my day from early in the morning, deciding what to cook and cooking early. Then I can have time to go to school and try to get the most that I can learn that day. After that I have to go pick up my daughters from their school. When we get home, I review their homework for that day and see how I can help my daughters. It is important for us that I learn English to help and encourage them. It is important for them to be in school and learn as much as they can.

On the other hand, it is fun to go to school because I have friends and I share time with them. We have little conversations as classmates and forget our problems and feel happy being in school. In conclusion, I want to be in school no matter how difficult it is or will be for me.

*Crecelia Jaurequi is a student at the Marine Avenue Adult Learning Center and Family Literacy Program at the Harbor Community Adult School in Los Angeles.*

# My Life As a Teen Mom

by Darlene Paulino

I start my day by waking my four-month-old son, Aidan, and myself at 6:00 a.m. I bathe, feed, and dress my son, and then I pack his bag with diapers, wipes, clothes, and his bottles. After I am done with my son, I sit him in his walker and take him with me to the bathroom so that I can take a shower and get dressed.

After we're ready, we march out the door. Aidan goes to daycare while I am in school. I drop off my son at 7:30 a.m. so that I can be at the bus stop by 8:00 a.m.

In school, the teachers help me get prepared for my GED. I am in class from 9:00 to 2:00, studying math, social studies, reading, writing, and science. Also, case managers help me with my plans for college, housing, and a career.

I pick up my son at 3:15 and go home. I feed him and change him. Later, I put him to sleep and I start cooking a small meal for myself.

In the evening, I usually will watch T.V. with the baby or play with him for a little while. We then go to bed. What will tomorrow be like? The same as yesterday and today.

It makes me mad because there are so many young girls who want to have babies. Many friends that I know don't even use condoms to prevent disease and pregnancy. It is very difficult to take care of a baby, especially if don't have an education or a job.

I don't regret having my son Aidan. I love him 'til death do us part. He is my inspiration, devotion, and focus. He needs a mother that can stand up for him and say, "Present." Also he needs a warm home and a good example. I am his example; that is why I decided to make my life better. I am here to be somebody. I will get my GED and attend college. It does not matter how hard it gets.

*Darlene Paulino is currently a GED student at the Crittenton Hastings House in Boston.*



## List some steps of your day:

1. I wake up at \_\_\_\_\_ .
2. After I wake up, I \_\_\_\_\_ .
3. \_\_\_\_\_ .
4. \_\_\_\_\_ .

# How Much Education Do You Get?

by Cynthia Peters

**Teacher's Note:** One aspect of literacy is being able to read and interpret charts and graphs. In this lesson, the average years of schooling for males and females in selected countries is represented in two different graphics. Start by asking your students to simply look at the charts and identify what they see. Some might notice the layout and the shape and shading of the bars. Others might immediately react to the data. After they have had some time to absorb the information graphically, work with them on the math questions to help sharpen numeracy skills.

Chart 1: Average Years of Schooling for Males and Females in Selected Countries Compared to the U.S.

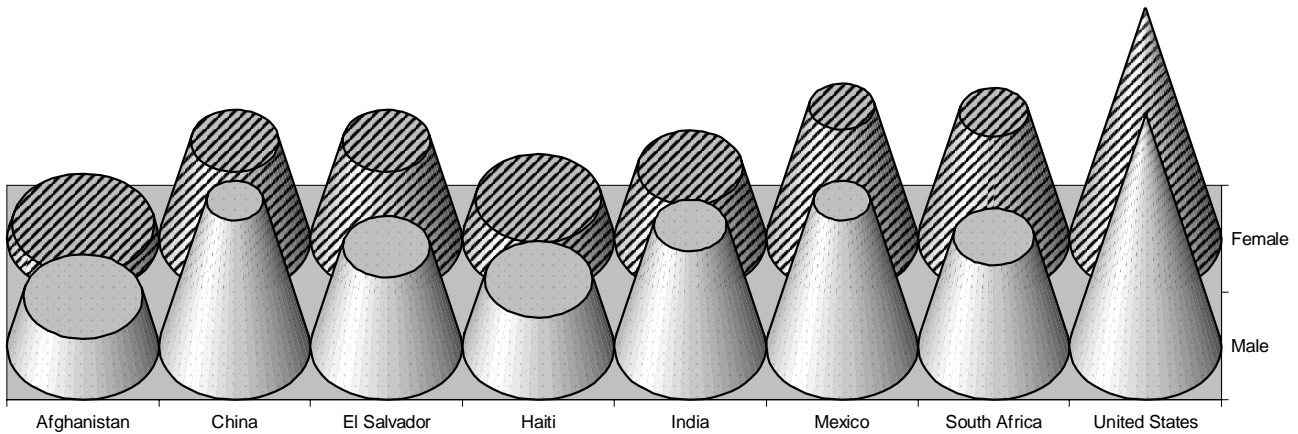
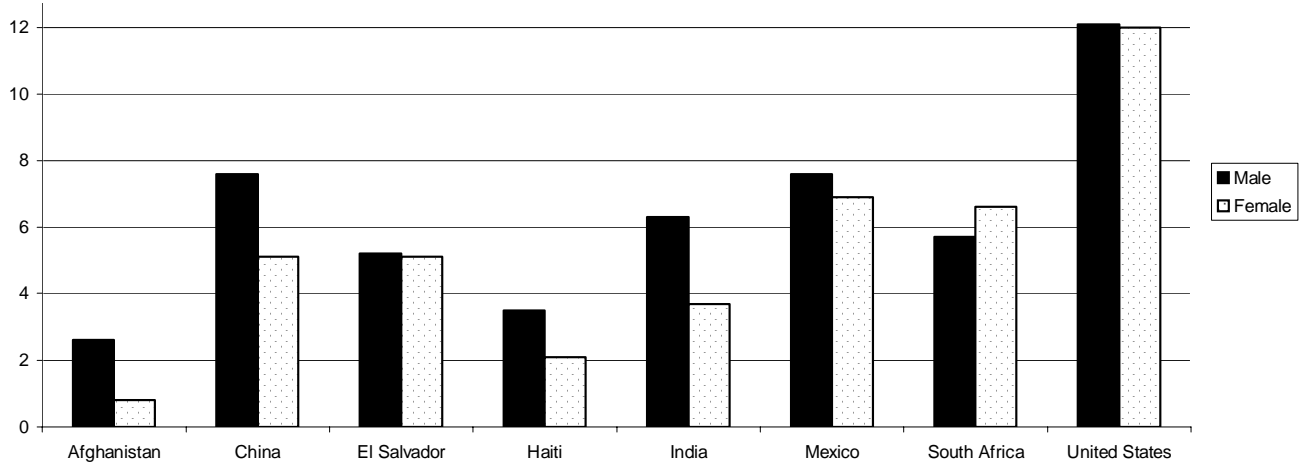


Chart 2: Average Years of Schooling for Males and Females in Selected Countries



Source: Table 2.13 (pp. 84-86) in the 2003 World Development Indicators, World Bank.

## *Student Worksheet: Average Years of Schooling*

Look at Chart 1 and list three things you notice about it.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Now look at Chart 2 and list three things you notice about it.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What are three differences you notice in the two charts?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Look at Chart 2. The y axis is vertical and the x axis is horizontal. What information does the y axis give you?

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What information does the x axis give you?

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Where does this data come from?

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## *Student Worksheet: Statistics and Averages*

**Statistics** only tell part of the story and sometimes they do not even tell that well. What questions do these charts raise for you? What information is left out? What else would you like to know? Why do you think that in so many countries women get less education than men?

**Questions to sharpen numeracy skills:**

1. Which three countries show the least inequality between the sexes?

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

2. Is there any country where females get on average more schooling than males?

**Average** years of schooling is found by adding all the years that males and females attended school and then dividing that number by the total number of males and the total number of females. Averages can mask certain facts. For example, averages tend to make us think that everyone's years of schooling are close to the average. But that might not be true. Averages often mask gross inequality.

Say you had a country with a very few well-educated people and a majority of people with very little education. Now, imagine another country where everyone had fairly equal access to a moderate level of education. The average years of schooling might look similar in both countries, but one country would have much more equal access to school. See below for how two very different countries (in terms of access to education) have similar averages. (Each country has 100 people.)

**Country with Fairly Equal Access to Education:**

30 people get 8 years of schooling = 240

40 people get 6 years of schooling = 240

30 people get 4 years of schooling = 120

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**TOTAL = 600 years**

**Average years of schooling per person = 6.0**

**Country with a Big Educational Divide:**

10 people get 16 years of schooling = 160 years

20 people get 12 years of schooling = 240 years

70 people get 3 years of schooling = 210 years

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**TOTAL = 610 years**

**Average years of schooling per person = 6.1**

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*Cynthia Peters, co-editor of this issue of The Change Agent, teaches in the Worker Education Program of SEIU Local 2020.*