

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 554

CE 051 145

TITLE Women, Illiteracy and Poverty: Breaking the Cycle. An Issue Brief.

INSTITUTION National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education.

PUB DATE Jul 88

NOTE 7p.

PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.

DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Adult Programs; \*Educational Needs; Federal Programs; Futures (of Society); One Parent Family; \*Poverty; Program Improvement; Unemployment; \*Womens Education

ABSTRACT

Illiteracy is an alarming national problem. An estimated 27 million Americans are considered illiterate, and another 45 million are considered marginally competent in basic skills. Although literacy efforts have been increasing, little attention has been focused on women. This oversight could be costly. Four critical factors weigh heavily in favor of the needs of literacy education for women: (1) the economic jeopardy of poorly educated women and the families they head; (2) the cycle of illiteracy; (3) increased labor force participation of women; and (4) family needs. Illiteracy is increasingly linked to America's deepest problems: teenage pregnancy, crime, chronic unemployment, long-term welfare dependency, and poverty. Each year the lives of millions of women and children are tragically affected by illiteracy. In the future, two out of three new entrants to the labor force will be women, and few jobs will fall into the low-skill category. If women are to benefit from the jobs of the future, their literacy needs must be met. Programs must not only address their learning needs, but must also provide support services (such as child care) so they can learn. More public funds should be targeted toward women, and provider programs must be coordinated to help women and the families they head to break out of the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. (KC)

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# Women, Illiteracy and Poverty: Breaking the Cycle

*"The woman solely responsible for herself and her children occupies a marginal position, socially and economically, at best. If she is illiterate, she might be pushed outside society's margins altogether. The illiterate woman is essentially helpless to shape her own life. If...the majority of our children are going to be raised by single mothers, then the impact of a woman's literacy extends beyond her own social position and self-esteem."*

**An Issue Brief by the  
National Coalition for Women  
and Girls in Education  
July, 1988**

**Nancy Mairs, "Hers,"  
New York Times  
July 16, 1987**

Illiteracy is an alarming national problem. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that more than 27 million Americans older than 17 cannot read or write well enough to perform the basic requirements of everyday life, while another 4.5 million are considered marginally competent in basic skills. The implications of this problem for the future of our nation are frightening.

The weight of statistical and other evidence of this crisis has brought the issue of literacy into the public eye. Yet little attention has focused on women. This oversight could be costly.

There are four critical factors that compel the National Coalition on Women and Girls in Education (NCWGE) to advocate for programs and policies that will increase female literacy levels:

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**Economic jeopardy:** Women and girls with minimal literacy skills are in economic jeopardy. Whether they have dependent family members or not, there is a high correlation between women's low educational attainment and high levels of poverty. Women of color (especially those for whom English is a second language) and older women have traditionally had little access to quality education and are even more likely to be poor. The cost of illiteracy to society is staggering; in addition we lose the contribution of valuable human resources.

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**The cycle of illiteracy:** Studies have shown that the literacy levels of children are strongly linked to those of their parents. In the past two decades we have seen an unprecedented growth in the numbers of families maintained by women. Millions of these mothers have low literacy skills. Unless we raise the literacy levels of both mother and child, the cycle will be perpetuated.

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**Increased labor force participation of women:** It is imperative that resources for literacy be targeted to women because of the growing importance of women to the labor force. For the first time, the majority of new workers will be women, minorities and immigrants. If America is to build and maintain a competitive labor force, we must ensure that the literacy skills of women workers meet the demands of the available jobs.

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**Family needs:** The range of services needed for women to successfully participate in and complete literacy training is different than that needed by most men. Support services such as dependent care must be available in any program designed to serve women.

It is not enough to identify the illiteracy of millions of Americans as a national crisis. We must also identify the specific needs of all those affected by the problem and offer sound program and policy recommendations to address those needs. NCWGE believes that targeting resources and developing specific strategies to improve female literacy are critical to America's economic, social and political well-being.

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## THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

Illiteracy is increasingly linked to America's deepest problems: teenage pregnancy, crime, chronic unemployment, long term welfare dependency and poverty. Each year the day-to-day lives of millions of women and children are tragically affected by illiteracy. The impact is dramatic and widespread:

Young women with below average skills and below poverty incomes are five and a half times more likely to be teen parents than those with average or better basic skills and with above poverty incomes.

Three-fifths of all adults receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children have not completed high school; the average reading level of AFDC mothers between the ages of 17 and 21 is below sixth grade.

Individuals with less than a sixth grade education are four times more likely to need public assistance than those who have a ninth to eleventh grade education.

Seventy-five percent of female heads of households with less than a high school diploma are living in poverty, compared with thirty-four percent of men in the same situation.

Nearly forty percent of female single parents have eighth grade or less education.

Parent to child reading ranks as the single most important activity for the ultimate literacy of a child, thus children of illiterate parents are at a disadvantage and may continue a cycle of illiteracy.

Thirty-five percent of displaced homemakers have eighth grade or less education and thirty-nine percent of these women fall below the poverty line.

Total costs related to illiteracy are estimated to exceed \$225 billion each year.

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# WOMEN, LITERACY, AND THE LABOR FORCE OF THE FUTURE

*"We are rapidly approaching a new century and a vastly different labor market from the one we know... A growing share of our new workers will come from groups where human resource investments have been historically deficient -- minorities, women, and immigrants."*

**Ann McLaughlin, U.S. Secretary of Labor**

Two out of three of the new entrants to the labor force between now and the year 2000 will be women.

Only twenty-seven percent of all new jobs will fall into low skill categories. For the first time in American history, the majority of new jobs will require some kind of post-secondary education.

One out of every five current American workers reads at no more than eighth grade level and one of eight reads at roughly fourth grade level or below.

More jobs will require not only basic skills but also problem solving, analytical, and communication skills, yet a growing percentage of the projected new labor force entrants are expected to lack these skills.

## Public Funding for Literacy

Federal assistance for adult education and literacy is primarily authorized through the Adult Education Act, which serves about 2.8 million people each year. Other federal programs are authorized to address some component of literacy problems, including illiteracy prevention in Chapter One of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (remedial education for educationally disadvantaged youth); programs for homeless adults, American Indians, and refugees; bilingual vocational training; literacy training in the military; and support to public libraries. The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act both authorize expenditures of funds for remedial and literacy education for those receiving vocational training. Very few of these resources are targeted to improve female literacy or to provide needed support services for women with limited basic skills.

# FINDING SOLUTIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY DIRECTIONS

*"A greater Federal effort might be made to define adult literacy and collect the data to determine the actual size and scope of the problem. The complexity of the issue—and its relation to national productivity, security, and welfare—suggests a Federal concern beyond program funding and public awareness campaigns."*

Paul Irwin, "Adult Literacy Issues, Programs, and Options", Congressional Research Service, 1988

The resurgence of interest in literacy over the past few years has been accompanied by experimentation in the design of federal programs. Recent innovations have resulted in new strategies with potential for improving the literacy of women and girls. For example, the Even Start Act provides funds for joint remediation programs for parents and children, while workplace literacy initiatives allow for partnerships between education, business and industry, and community-based organizations. Yet there remains a great need for targeting of resources to ensure that the needs of women and girls are better served by Federal programs. Federal education programs rarely provide dollars for the kinds of support services (such as child care) which make participation in literacy programs possible for single and teenage mothers. The National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education recommends the following policy directions to increase women's and girls' access to literacy programs:

Increased federal funds to support literacy and basic skills initiatives in established federal programs such as the Adult Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, the Perkins Vocational Education Act, and others.

Special efforts to ensure that women are targeted and served in publicly funded programs. Vehicles for achieving increased equity for women include: set asides of funds for services to women or special groups of women (i.e. single mothers, minority women); inclusion of women as special target populations for services; the requirement that state plans indicate how the state intends to ensure that women are recruited and served.

Improved coordination among public systems of literacy service provision (e.g., job training, vocational education, adult education, public schools, social service agencies).

Expanded joint remediation programs for parents and children. The Even Start Act is a step in that direction; opportunities for similar efforts exist in other public programs (e.g., JTPA summer youth program).

Authorized federal funds for the provision of support services to women in literacy programs. States should also be encouraged to allocate funds for support services.

Encouragement of partnerships between community-based organizations, education agencies, businesses, and unions for the design and delivery of literacy services.

Provision of opportunities for welfare recipients of all ages to receive educational services from high school equivalency certificates to higher education in addition to other employment and training activities.



**THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN EDUCATION** is comprised of more than 60 organizations dedicated to improving educational opportunities and equality for women. Established in the late 1970's, the Coalition has been instrumental in working on the Civil Rights Restoration Act, Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA), Vocational Education, Equity in Women's Sports, and other areas involved in increasing educational opportunities for women.

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**THE LITERACY TASK FORCE** was established by the Coalition in 1987 to advocate for programs and policies to increase women and girls' access to literacy programs.

NCWGE expresses its appreciation to Jennifer Watson, an intern at Wider Opportunities for Women, who conducted the research for this paper and provided support to the task force.

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