



# Older Women Count!

## The Right to Education and Lifelong Learning

**Education and lifelong learning is imperative for all girls and women, especially in the developing world.**

Female education benefits the individual, family and community. It positively affects family health and nutrition, fertility, the ability to earn an income, and agricultural productivity. Yet, there is still a wide gender gap in education.

**Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.** These include such groups as persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations, but do not especially mention older adults. Many people argue that attaining this goal is fundamental to achieving the other 17 SDGs.

**There is a paucity of information about education for older women in sub-Saharan Africa** and adult literacy rates vary greatly within and among countries in the region. However, new indicators from UNESCO provide some data. In sub-Saharan Africa in 2015, literacy rates for women aged 65+ were 26%—a modest increase of 2.5% since 2005. For younger

women (aged 15-49), the literacy rate was just 65%, the lowest in the world. Without adult education, these women will become older women who will have great difficulty understanding and creating written material.

**Most older women in sub-Saharan Africa have not had the opportunity to go to school. Even though they have great knowledge about their customs, values and environment, they are not literate.** Because of this, they may have difficulty filling in forms to get bank loans, advocating for pensions, interpreting policies and laws regarding land and property inheritance, taking advantage of technology, gaining independence in the community, reading prescriptions and health information, and assisting grandchildren with homework.



### **Literacy and Functional Adult Literacy**

In 1950, UNESCO defined literacy as the ability to read and write a simple sentence. In 2005 the definition was changed to “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printing and written materials associated with various contexts”. This reflects a rapidly changing world where the need for a quality education is now vital protection from living a life of economic and social poverty. Functional Adult Literacy links literacy to everyday life and to people’s livelihoods and needs. It incorporates skill-specific training in addition to literacy and numeracy.

**Barriers to education and lifelong learning** include poverty (e.g. no money for fees and uniforms), a lack of resources and infrastructure such as safe schools, a lack of quality-trained teachers, and discrimination based on gender, age, ability and origin.

**While some countries provide formal education for adults, there is a great need for non-formal learning** (also known as community, popular or liberal education). This type of adult learning aims to empower people to engage with a range of social issues, and is often led by community leaders and nongovernmental organizations. Non-formal learning needs to be culturally sensitive, for example, aware of cultural perceptions related to the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS.

**Education and training for their grandchildren and themselves is a top priority for grandmothers raising young people orphaned by AIDS.**

*We call for more training in critical areas such as home-based care, HIV/AIDS education, on parenting orphaned children and adolescents, health care, literacy, and financial management. ... Manzini Grandmothers’ Statement*

**Increasingly, community grandmother groups are engaging in non-formal adult education to teach about HIV/AIDS and other issues.** Speaking at the 2013 Grandmothers’ Tribunal, Mariam Mulindwa, a leader in the Jinja District, Uganda said:

*“Every Wednesday, I meet with grandmothers like me and we share our challenges and achievements in life ... We use music, dance and drama to entertain them, but also to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS, good hygiene and sanitation. Theatre and plays work because they help the grandmothers express themselves in a different way-- they laugh, have some fun, and feel like part of the group. It is a skill to reach out to grandmothers who are grieving and isolated and help them feel better, understand their rights, their healthcare entitlements and access government programmes.”*



## **We can protect and enhance older women's right to education and lifelong learning:**

- Insist that education and lifelong learning is imperative for all girls and women (including older women).
- Stress the importance and benefits of addressing and resourcing the second part of SDG 4 “to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.
- Ask the Global Partnership for Education, the Forum for African Women Educationalists and other groups working in education to encourage and advocate for quality education programs for older women that are taught by trained educators.
- Share the stories of how community-based grandmother groups are engaging in lifelong learning and functional adult literacy. Press for financial support for these initiatives.
- Encourage our government to increase funds for Official Development Assistance and to specifically increase Canada’s contribution to education.
- Celebrate International Literacy Day in September with a focus on intergenerational education and the need for lifelong learning.

## **Sources**

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