

Literacy as Freedom

By Sawsan Zaher¹

International Literacy Day was celebrated on 8 September 2005. In addition, the United Nations (UN) has proclaimed a Literacy Decade (from 2003 to 2012) with the theme of "Literacy as Freedom." During this decade, all UN member states will make efforts to reduce the level of illiteracy in the world. According to statistics published by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), approximately 20% of adults in the world do not know how to read and write, two-thirds of whom are women.² Moreover, around 113 million children in the world do not attend school, and are thus deprived of access to basic education and literacy.³ For years, the UN has been working to eradicate illiteracy in the world. This effort reached its peak in a "framework for action" issued at the conclusion of the World Education Forum, which convened in the Senegalese capital Dakar in 2000. The countries which participated in the Dakar forum, including Israel, made a commitment to lower the percentage of illiteracy in the world by half by the year 2015. According to the assessments presented at the time, if the framework for action signed at Dakar does not produce the desired results and the percentage of illiteracy does not decrease as promised, then 15% of all adults in the world will remain illiterate.⁴ The Literacy Decade was inaugurated in February 2003 with the goal of implementing the Dakar forum's framework for action.

The average rate of illiteracy in Israel, at 4.6%, is considered relatively low.⁵ In the UN's Human Development Report 2004,⁶ Israel was ranked 22nd among 177 countries in which the level of literacy was measured. However, a closer analysis of illiteracy in Israel according to gender and ethnicity indicates that certain population groups have higher percentages of illiteracy than the national average. The group with a particularly high level of illiteracy is Arab women. In 2003, 14.7% of Arab women were considered illiterate, compared to 4.5% of Jewish women, 6.2% of Arab men and only 2.6% of Jewish men.⁷

In Israel in general the phenomenon of illiteracy among the Arab population and the methods used to deal with it are treated with indifference both by the authorities and organizations working in the fields of education and social change. Data on the rate of illiteracy in Israel is usually only given when submitting reports to the various UN committees. Even then, this data is not detailed, and there is no mention of the measures required to eliminate the phenomenon or the steps being taken toward this goal. At most, the percentages of people suffering from illiteracy are noted on these occasions. The latest occasion on which the phenomenon of illiteracy in Israel was addressed was during the country review of Israel undertaken by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee). In July 2005, the CEDAW Committee reviewed a report submitted by the government of Israel. Unsurprisingly, the reference to illiteracy in the Israeli government's report was minimal. It was only a shadow report written by a coalition of Palestinian Arab non-governmental organizations and submitted to the CEDAW Committee in parallel to the government's report that filled the void and described the phenomenon of illiteracy in Israel according to ethnic affiliation and gender.⁸ One might have expected that a UN committee operating during the decade declared by the UN as the Literacy Decade would include in the

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² See, <http://portal.unesco.org>. (Website viewed on 4 September 2005).

³ *Ibid.* (Website viewed on 4 September 2005).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2004*, No. 55, Table 8.3.

⁶ See, <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2004/>.

⁷ See note 5, above.

⁸ For a full copy of the report submitted by the Working Group on the Status of Palestinian Women Citizens of Israel in January 2005, see, <http://www.adalah.org/eng/cedaw.php>.

concluding observations it presented to the state of Israel a clear recommendation calling for an intensive effort to wipe out the phenomenon. This is a vital recommendation because the percentage of Arab women who are illiterate is three times higher than among Jewish women, and 2.5 times higher than the percentage of illiterate Arab men. However, the CEDAW Committee made no mention of the need to eradicate illiteracy among Arab women. The Committee's concluding observations, issued in July 2005, included a demand that the state of Israel should act to eliminate discrimination against Arab women in a range of fields, *inter alia* public life, health and education, including increasing the percentage of Arab women in universities, lowering the dropout rates among Arab schoolgirls, and the revision of school textbooks in the Arab education system to eliminate gender stereotypes.⁹ However, the CEDAW Committee did not address the percentages of illiteracy within Israel as a phenomenon in and of itself, the eradication of which requires both preventive measures and treatment.

Throughout the world, the definition of the phenomenon of illiteracy has undergone far-reaching changes from the beginning of the 20th century. In 1930, the United States Census Bureau determined that an illiterate person is someone who does not know how to read or write in any language. During the 1960s, the UN defined illiteracy as the inability to read and write simple and basic sentences. The definition was subsequently expanded by the UN to include a functional component. According to the revised definition, anyone who is unable to take part in the performance of social activities is considered illiterate.

The index of illiteracy adopted in Israel corresponds to the narrow definition of the phenomenon of illiteracy: according to the accepted definition in Israel, any person under the age of 15 who does not know how to read or write at a level enabling the reading and writing of short and simple sentences related to everyday life (including reading comprehension) is considered illiterate.¹⁰ Such a narrow definition of illiteracy does not suffice, however, and the broader definition that includes a functional component, such as the one adopted in the United States should be employed. The adoption of the broader definition is clearly required in light of the mutual relationship that exists between socio-economic status and the ability to receive a basic and fundamental education. The failure to receive the most basic education is what leads to illiteracy. The lower a particular population group's socio-economic status, the higher its percentage of illiteracy, according to the broader definition. This definition also encompasses people living below the poverty line, whose social and economic activities are limited. According to the poverty reports published by the Israeli National Insurance Institute (NII) during the past two years, almost 60% of Arab families live below the poverty line, compared to "only" 30.8% of Jewish families.¹¹ In fact, the percentage of Arab families living under the poverty line is much higher than the percentage cited in the NII reports, as they do not include data on poverty among certain population groups, such as Arab Bedouin citizens of Israel living in the unrecognized villages.

The high rate of illiteracy among Arab women is not surprising and can be attributed to the social roles assigned to them. However, under both domestic and international law, the state bears a heavy responsibility for the status of Arab women and an even heavier responsibility to eliminate all types of discrimination against them. Moreover, the state is responsible for eliminating other phenomena directly or indirectly related to illiteracy, such as the high dropout rate among Arab schoolgirls and the marriage of minors. In many cases, girls who marry as

⁹ See, <http://www.adalah.org/features/women/concluding-en-22jul05.pdf>.

¹⁰ See, Ophir Ben Asoulay and Dafna Sahayek, "Indexes for International Comparison in Education," Knesset Research and Information Center, 23 July 2003, p. 29 (Hebrew).

¹¹ National Insurance Institute reports from August 2005 and November 2004. See, http://www.btl.gov.il/btl_idx.asp?name=heb_rashim&type=m. The percentages cited above do not include the transfer payments received by the families from the NII.

minors and have children drop out of school, which contributes to the high level of illiteracy among Arab women.

The state's shirking of its responsibility to improve the situation of Arab women is expressed in its denial of two basic rights provided to all citizens of the state under domestic law: the right to receive an education and the right to a free education, both of which are stipulated in the Compulsory Education Law – 1949. The right of every person to receive an education does not stand alone. The realization of this right is the basis for the realization of further rights, including the rights to liberty, dignity and self-fulfillment, freedom of expression, and participation in public life. Of course, this list goes on.¹² As far back as 1928, US Supreme Court Justice Cardozo made the connection between the right to receive an education and the right to liberty:¹³

We are free only if we know, and so in proportion to our knowledge. There is no freedom without choice, and there is no choice without knowledge – or non that is no illusory. Implicit in mind is the very notion of liberty of the mind to absorb and to beget.

Thus violation of one right, the right to receive an education, leads to the restriction of another right, in this case the right to liberty. The phenomenon of illiteracy, which in itself is the result of a violation of the right to receive an education, is one of the most problematic restrictions on the right to liberty which affect developing countries. In India, for example, the government took urgent steps to eradicate illiteracy and improve the basic human capabilities of those – mainly women – who suffer from this phenomenon.¹⁴ Blocking access to education limits the knowledge an individual is likely to acquire during his or her lifetime, thus limiting the options available to the individual. This results in a limitation on the individual's liberty and freedom of action.

The elimination of illiteracy is an obligation imposed on the state, not only as a part of its commitment to provide education to its citizens, but also as a part of its duty to act to narrow social gaps and to promote the human development of its citizens. This cannot be achieved without lifting restrictions on freedoms, restrictions that leave individuals with minimal options.¹⁵ The ethnic and gender-based gaps in the standards of living in Israel, as outlined in the official reports of the NII, require the adoption of immediate and decisive measures to eliminate the phenomenon of illiteracy. The state's silence in this context and its failure to develop any programs to eliminate the phenomenon of illiteracy comes as little surprise when one considers the identity of those who suffer from it. This is not an accidental or unintentional failure. The education system, for example, develops plans and allocates resources for the successful absorption of newly-immigrated pupils. Special resources are also allocated for identifying and nurturing gifted students. I am not expressing reservations about the allocation of these resources, and any effort to enrich and nurture pupils who need help is commendable. However, the efforts to identify appropriate groups for the receipt of extra care and the allocation of the necessary budgetary allowances should be invested equally among all segments of the population.

¹² On the right to receive an education, see, Yoram Rabin, *The Right to Education* (Jerusalem: Nevo Publishers, 2002) pp. 65-129 (Hebrew).

¹³ Benjamin N. Cardozo, *The Paradoxes of Legal Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928) p. 104.

¹⁴ Raj Kumar, *International Human Rights Perspectives on the Fundamental Right to Education – Integration of Human Rights and Human Development in the Indian Constitution*, 12 *Tulane Journal of International & Comparative Law* 237, Spring 2004, 239.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

In addition, we should not ignore the directives of international law and the covenants that obligate signatory states to grant free and equal education to all. The right to education was recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. A more explicit reference to this basic right was included in subsequent covenants signed and ratified by the state of Israel. These include: the Convention against Discrimination in Education (CDE) of 1960; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966; the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1979; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989. In this context, it is important to mention the Declaration on the Eradication of Illiteracy, which was formulated at the General Conference of UNESCO in 1964. This declaration also notes the connection between the right to education, and individual liberty and the right of human development, stating in paragraph 3:

Not having the basic tools of literacy, half the adult population of the world is today denied the exercise of man's inalienable right to education, and is committed to live unaware of the new vistas that the advancement of knowledge, science and technology are rapidly unfolding to make man's struggle for freedom from want, hunger and disease less arduous, and to remain isolated even from its own common heritage enshrined in the moral, cultural and artistic achievements and the noblest aspiration of each nation.

Paragraph 6 of the declaration adds and emphasizes the importance of literacy and basic education in attaining socio-economic order and justice:

...literacy and adult education form not only an integrated part of the programme of educational growth, but also a critical sector in the strategy of human resource development. Together with formal education, it is basic to developing economic and social order. The eradication of mass illiteracy and provision for the maintenance and widespread use of literacy should therefore be treated in development plans as an essential complement of formal education as one of the foundations of self-sustaining economic growth.

In summary, the eradication of illiteracy will lead to the advancement of education provided to women, to the development of their characters, and an improvement in their level of freedom and liberty. Beyond this, however, it will raise their awareness of their dignity and self-fulfillment. This, in turn, will contribute to the collapse of the division between the private, domestic sphere, reserved for women in a hierarchical and patriarchal society, and the public sphere, reserved for men.