Women's Literacy: *Not* a Given

By Mev Miller

Mev Miller is the founder and coordinator of WE LEARN (Women Expanding— Literacy Education Action Resource Network), an organization whose primary work is to create opportunities to publish and promote women-centered basic English literacy and reading materials. She has worked in the Women in Print movement for more than 20 years, including as a bookseller for Amazon Bookstore Cooperative in Minneapolis.

When I first read the outline for a special *off our backs* issue on women and education and saw the list of questions, I was once again reminded of a population continuously ignored in discussions of women and education. The call primarily suggested questions about academic women's studies, gender and lgbtq studies, and traditional institutions of schooling. However, the need and support for adult literacy and basic education for women remains largely invisible and marginalized in discussions of women and education.

Feminist activists tend to make assumptions about women's basic functional literacy. Feminist activisms located in print and higher education continue to be inaccessible to large numbers of women with limited or pre-basic reading proficiencies. How can we claim to be activists in a political movement seeking justice for *all* women when the liberatory resources and publications, calls for action, and writings of academics and movement feminists assume levels of literacy that don't exist?

The *oob* call for writings on women and education asked two interesting questions: What has women's studies done for feminism? How much do academic women's studies programs help real women in the real world? I would answer that for women with limited literacy proficiencies, the answer might be "not much," especially given how marginalized or non-existent these issues are in women's studies texts. I have looked through many Women's Studies textbooks—of the introductory or survey format. In these texts, discussion of education

(if addressed at all) largely focuses on gender inequities (such as in science or math), history and women's right to education, dropout rates, and problems of sexual harassment by teachers or peers. Though discussions of poverty, work, addiction and incarceration may make passing reference to women's lack of education, little connection is drawn between these issues and the on-going struggles faced by women who have limited reading proficiencies or education.

Who benefits from the assumptions of literacy and participates in this largely print-based and academy-centric feminist movement? Who is being silenced and ignored? What are the issues that get raised and what gets prioritized for discussion and, ultimately, focused on for action? What language gets used and is it accessible? What can be learned from women for whom print literacy presents challenges and who continue to be marginalized by educational systems? Much of our discourse is inaccessible because of elitist language and our focus on print-based media. This not only makes feminist theories inaccessible to those women with limited reading proficiencies, but also supports topics or theories largely removed from many women's everyday lives and realities. Women who may be non-readers, educationally disadvantaged, "illiterate," learning disabled, and those who choose not to read become isolated from the conversation, silenced, ignored and further marginalized from a women's liberation movement—assuming, of course, that feminism is still about liberation! (The irony of my own writing here has not escaped me!)

So who are these women affected by limited literacy or educational experiences? In 1992, the National Center for Educational Statistics, measured literacy along three dimensions—prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy—describing ordered sets of information processing skills and strategies to accomplish literacy tasks in five different levels.

40 to 50% of women in the United States do not have the reading skills needed to read this issue of *off our backs.*

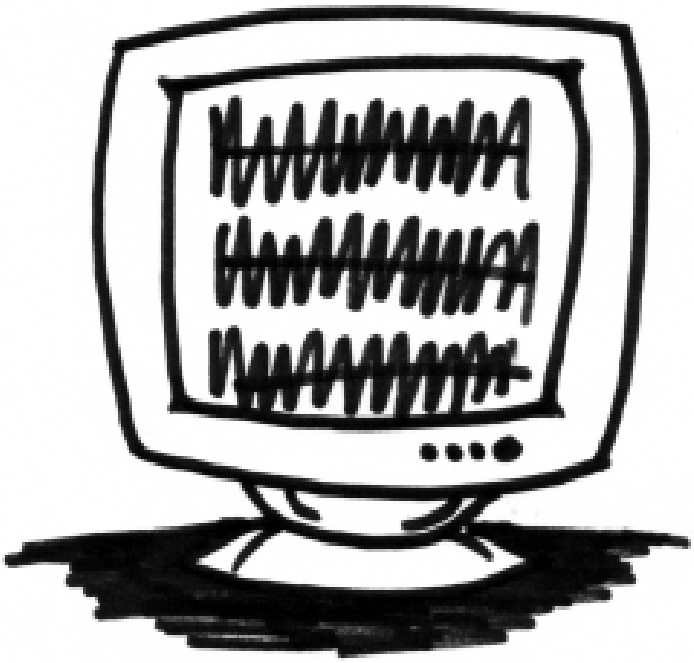
This National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) reported over 50% of women in the U.S. have literacy proficiencies lower than an average high school graduate (Level 3 proficiency). There are some additional statistics from the organization Wider Opportunities for Women (1994). For example, in the United States, an estimated 23% of all adult females have severely limited literacy skills, compared to 17% of males. Nearly 40% of female single parents and 35% of displaced homemakers have an eighth-grade education or less. In my own experience, when I discuss this research and statistics with feminist activists or academic feminists, the most frequent response I get is a raised incredulous eyebrow and the surprised utterance of "Really?" So-called "illiterate" women remain invisible to even those concerned about women's lives and issues. These statistics also signify what should be strong gender-based concerns for feminists concerned about educational systems. While feminist have advocated for girls' education and higher education, why have we not also strongly advocated for women's literacy and *basic* education as adults? What might we learn from the creative energies and survival strategies of women who "manage" the day-to-day on the edges of social power? What do they have to teach us about multiple languages and coding systems and critical thinking skills, and literacies that are not print-based? While print materials allow for larger access to individual ideas, what social interactions and opportunities for community building are lost due to the prevalence of print-based discussions?

It is important to understand the factors contributing to women's limited educational experiences. In *Something in My Mind Besides the Everyday*, Jennifer Horsman (1990) describes the reasons why adult women said they left school early: pregnancy; abusive home life; shyness and embarrassment; the silencing process (including being

called "stupid" or "dummy"); gendered divisions of labor in which girls were forced to stay home from school in order to care for home and family (especially in rural areas); cruelty or abuse experienced *in* school; socialization to wife/mother roles (so no need to stay in school); and, in general, men's attitudes questioning why women need education at all. Women in literacy programs also described themselves as shy, stupid, and incompetent and said they had no confidence and no ambitions. In *Too Scared to Learn*, Jennifer Horsman (2000) outlines the effects of violence on women's learning. The widespread and consistent prevalence of violence in homes and communities restricts women's access to education and presents challenges for them being able to attend, concentrate and ultimately successfully learn and achieve their goals

As we understand the barriers and concerns for women seeking adult basic education and literacy, feminists may be tempted to view those realities as "old" issues or "Feminism 101" concerns. There may be a perception that *we* (educated feminists or women's studies) have already discussed these issues. They are "boring" or "unchangeable" so we can "abandon" them or move onto more abstract postmodern issues of subversive bodies, identities, and high theory or intellectually abstract pursuits. However, these "mundane" real world survival issues remain for many women who are print-challenged. Their issues—which still are *all* women's issues—are very much entrenched in institutional oppression feeding off racism, sexism, classism, ageism and ableism.

Feminist education must accept a difficult contradiction—to make sure *all* women have access to education while moving beyond traditional education-based standards and discourse. It means we must extract ourselves from the patriarchal, educationally elitist and oppressive uses of language and decentralize academic and print-based discourses. This means we need to consciously find ways to make more materials available in styles of plain English—by insisting on giving value and visibility to feminist materials written simply and clearly. It will mean giving more legitimacy to spoken word, performance and street theatre, art, music, cartoons and 'zines, crafts, storytelling, word-of-mouth grassroots organizing, and many other forms of expressions women consistently use. It will mean that action and community will inform our theory, rather than theory informing theory and remaining academically theoretical!



Of course, I do not mean to suggest that we eliminate print-based materials or higher education altogether. Education, research, critical and theoretical thinking, and in-depth understanding of institutional oppressions remain necessary. But we need to recognize the wide range of women's educational backgrounds and reading proficiencies. One immediate solution is to make reading materials focusing on women's issues available at all levels of reading proficiency. Using popular/participatory community education and action research strategies will make our feminism and activism (and learning/education) far more inclusive, effective, liberatory, and dangerous! We will find commonality in these voices and challenges to our educated biases.

In the Spring of 2001, I facilitated conversation circles with groups of adult women learners in seven different literacy programs. These conversations posed questions to learners about the availability of authentic reading materials that would be of interest to them and if they would find use for learning materials focused on women's issues. Adult women learners in these conversations expressed a variety of

values. As expected, they believed better education would help them to get better jobs and opportunities, and make the day-to-day functioning of their lives easier. Additionally, however, they understood printed materials and their ability to read them as ways to provide them with wider ranges of information they needed.

Some women learners just thought reading helped them to understand their lives better and to understand how they are feeling. They valued what they could learn about themselves through reading about the lives of other women. Reading about other women's real lives helps learners to not feel alone and diminishes their sense of isolation. Women learners also valued the ways in which reading together in groups gave them not only information but also deepened their social interactions and created better understanding of what they were reading. The conversation circles themselves offered unique opportunities for women to converse with each other in ways not typical to their learning settings. They articulated the ways in which reading could enrich their humanity. But they also wanted conversation, audio-visual media, computer access, art and other learning opportunities as well. (A complete summary of those conversations can be found on the Internet at http://www.litwomen.org/learn.html.) The barrier to print materials continues to be accessibility—both in language and easy availability.

Women in adult literacy/learning centers often have these kinds of critical dialogues but because of educational elitism and print-bias, these conversations do not enter the larger arenas of feminist discourse or activism. Some way needs to be found to bring these discussions and actions to the center of awareness in conversations about women's education. Adult basic education and literacy programs must be legitimately placed on the continuum of education, lifelong learning, and adult educational culture. As print-based feminist activists, we need to challenge ourselves on this new ground to more closely examine our educational and literacy expectations. We will have to reassess our emphasis on certain types of print-based media.

To this end, WE LEARN (Women Expanding— Literacy Education Action Resource Network) has been established as an effort is to raise awareness of women's literacy and basic education as a social justice issue. Our primary work is creating opportunities to publish and promote women-centered basic English literacy/reading materials. ◈

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