

Gender, Literacy and Empowerment in Rural Colombia

Beatriz Alvarado, Ph.D.
University of Massachusetts- Lowell

Adriana Granda, M.A.
Universidad Católica del Norte – Colombia

Abstract

Empowerment, understood as a process by which women increase their capacity to reexamine their own lives and aid those around them, as well as to question their roles as social agents, becomes critical in relation to the complex processes of literacy. This study takes a phenomenological approach to exploring the perceptions of a group of rural Colombian women on the path to literacy via the program *Alfabetización Virtual Asistida en la Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos (Virtually Assisted Literacy in Youth and Adult Education)* and discusses the dynamics of empowerment in the daily lives of these women during and after the program. Using the concepts of *critical social theory* and *critical theory* as a theoretical framework, this study demonstrates that programs such as this help women to reveal and reinvent their previously hidden identities; however, they offer only limited opportunities to challenge a stubborn patriarchal culture that insists on placing them in the domestic realm. The importance of this study relies on the fact that it identifies specific issues with regard to constraints in rural women's education; therefore, there is an urgent need for government, academia, international agencies, and civil society to jointly participate in the implementation and execution of adult literacy programs. These programs must imperatively focus on gender inclusion and continuing education past the elementary stages, as well as on functional literacy that effectively impacts the lives of rural women in terms of decision-making, personal and family health care, reproductive health, and entry into the labor market.

Keywords: Adult literacy, Colombia, gender, rural women, empowerment, literacy programs.

1. Introduction

There are about 780 million illiterate people in developing countries (UIS-UNESCO, 2015). In many geographical contexts, the objectives of the Education For All movement, specifically Goals Four and Five on gender equity and adult literacy, have not yet reached the desired objectives, and only half of the countries have achieved universal primary enrollment (EFA, 2015). In terms of figures, more than 20 billion dollars a year are lacking to achieve the existing educational objectives, which have simply been transferred to the year 2030 (UIS-UNESCO, 2013; Robinson, 2005). As for Goal Four -*achieving 50 per cent reduction in levels of adult illiteracy by 2015*- the EFA report indicates that only 25 per cent of countries have attained this objective. Of the approximately 780 million illiterate adults over the age of fifteen, about 495 million are women, thus accounting for more than half the illiterate population (UN, 2015). Dramatically, in the case of sub-Saharan Africa, more than half of women do not have even basic literacy skills. Progress toward Goal Five- *achieving gender parity and equality*- is not so encouraging, considering that it was estimated that gender parity would reach 69% in education by 2015, when in fact it reached only 48%, with an even wider gap evident in secondary and tertiary education. It is equally alarming that child marriage and early pregnancies continue to diminish girls' opportunities. There is an imperative need to establish educator-led training with a high equity component that transforms the curriculum (Archer, 2006) creating more inclusive and gender-sensitive education (Aksornkool, 1997; Torres, 2008).

Despite efforts to change the situation of millions of women in the world, they remain the most illiterate, marginalized group, with limited decision-making power even in their own lives (UNESCO, 2010). But which doors does literacy open, exactly, in terms of empowerment and inclusion? What does a literate woman represent for herself and her community? Abundant documentation on literacy programs points to its critical importance in the socio-political structure of countries as well as its immense benefits for improving self-esteem and empowering women. Furthermore, there is evidence of great improvement in the health and nutrition of women and their families, family planning, awareness of rights and development of a space for community participation (Bown, 1990; Hannum & Buchman, 2003; Easton, 2005). Important aspects that should be achieved in these programs, such as gender equity, personal health, education and reproductive health, are taken into account (Eldred, 2013). Literacy leads to empowerment and the right to education includes the right to literacy. This is an essential requirement for lifelong learning and a vital means of human development, as well as to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2008).

Nevertheless, we must consider that empowerment of women varies according to geographic and social contexts (DFID, 2012). It is therefore essential that empowerment processes emerge from women's own experiences and not be based on structures simply established by organizations or programs. The success of any

literacy program depends on its flexibility in responding to local needs, circumstances and experiences of women (Archer, 2006; Soares & Ponczek, 2011). The emphasis should not only be on reading and writing or on practical matters like family care, planning and nutrition, but also on an element which is often overlooked to the detriment of women's empowerment: the generation of their own income (Stromquist, 1990a; Borode, 2003). Without sources of income, women are at a disadvantage in the public sphere, and traditional gender roles are perpetuated. If we empower women without offering them structural support, we could be creating a complicated path for them. Thus, empowerment means not only allowing women to analyze and question their situations, but also to enable them to take part in collective action (Stromquist, 1990b; Ballara, 1991).

2. What does a critical and empowering literacy look like?

How is empowerment measured? How do we measure that ability of women to define their goals in life and act upon them? (Kabeer, 1999). In this regard, it is notable that the empowerment process is not a directly observable phenomenon and that we can only approach it through indicators. Similarly, empowerment is a multidimensional process; which is to say that gender inequality exists throughout different dimensions - social, economic, political and psychological. The indicators, in this case, must be specific and measured, and must consider these different dimensions. And finally, the contexts are decisive: empowerment varies according to multiple contexts; even within the same context all women do not experience the same dimensions of empowerment. For educational empowerment and literacy processes in women, this multidimensionality must be accompanied by a curriculum and content that questions historically instituted gender relations and patriarchal structures, which is an aspect too often absent in programs (Mahmud et al, 2012).

Here it is important to distinguish between a type of literacy that empowers and a literacy that domesticates. Certain literacy programs have focused on acquiring reading and writing skills. Although this is of the utmost importance, it should not be ruled out that, for women, these programs often reinforce gender roles and do not produce major changes in socio-political participation and decision-making. Empowering literacy seeks to strengthen awareness and active participation so that women can not only merely understand the causes of their oppression but take steps to improve their living conditions by discovering their new identities, developing their finances, creating opportunities and asserting their rights (Wedin, 2008; Cameron, 2012). The literacy experience should provide opportunities for accessing the labor market, social networks and resources to contribute to the development of their families and communities (Levine et al, 2001). Critical literacy allows participants to create meaning out of their social environments and provides tools to combat acts of injustice. Learning to read and write is justified only if it is accompanied by a thorough understanding of the world, meaning that through interaction with teachers and other classmates students use what is learned as a means of transformative political action capable of challenging the status quo (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Consequently, many authors discuss the need to situate literacy processes in real life contexts, attending to the needs of the participants and listening to their voices. In this regard, the purpose is to use language to question knowledge and conflicts of power in society. The classroom should thus become the place of learning, but also of personal growth and empowerment (Shor, 1992; Luke, 2012; Prins, 2015).

Experiences with literacy in Latin America indicate the need for programs that consider the interests of women, and which analyze the factors that limit their active participation and learning. The experience of women in El Salvador, for example, demonstrates that they developed solid knowledge of literacy and social skills due to teaching materials linked to their daily lives and to teachers trained to work with adults. For women in Brazil, the adverse social environment, marked gender roles and violence, and a serious limitation of teaching materials negatively impacted their learning processes. The analysis of experiences in Latin America and other geographic environments such as Pakistan and South Africa shows that the processes of literacy are socially constructed and negotiated locally in and outside the classroom. However, despite the benefits of these programs, they do not promote social change on their own; they need other agents that promote change such as community organizations, institutions, and educators to help students question their social roles as well as to discern the dynamics of power in society (Prins, 2001; Norton, 2007).

3. Between conflict and peace: Dynamics of literacy in Colombia

Bearing in mind the concepts of critical literacy and empowerment analyzed previously, this phenomenological study explores the perceptions of a group of low-income, young and middle-aged rural Colombian women on their path to literacy through the program Virtually Assisted Literacy in Youth and Adult Education and discusses the dynamics of empowerment in the daily lives of these women during and after the program. What impact did this program have on the lives of these women and their socio-economic environments? How effective was the process of educational empowerment in promoting emancipatory transformations in these populations struck by political violence? There has been much talk about the great benefits of educating women by incorporating critical, questioning literacies into the dominant discourses as indicated by the studies mentioned above. However, scholars differ on the situations of women immersed in these programs, which

achieve minor and weak impacts on their daily needs. They describe their realities as non-linear and subject to preestablished discourses. There is also a vast lack of knowledge about the real application of the concepts acquired by these women in their social spaces and the long-term effects of these programs (Robinson-Pant, 2001; Greany, 2008; Bartlett, 2008).

This study seeks to give voice to the experiences of women participants in a literacy program in rural Colombia and to discover how the acquired knowledge caused changes, or not, in their family and community environments. To this end, we relied on the phenomenological approach to examine the experiences perceived, lived and described directly by the participants (Hatch, 2002; Creswell, 2009). This approach was very useful for analyzing their common experiences within and outside the Virtual Assisted Literacy Program in Youth and Adult Education (PAVA - Alfabetización Virtual Asistida en la Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos), and for interpreting their experiences on a personal and group level.

Colombia is currently implementing a peace process with the guerrilla group FARC - Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – responsible for widespread ferocious violence at all levels, with women and children representing the most vulnerable group within the conflict (Southall, 2011). To illustrate this critical context with a single statistic, the Single Victims Registry shows that from 1985 to July 2017, about 8,160,987 people have been victims of the armed conflict. The Department of Antioquia, where this study took place, was the site most affected by the armed conflict in the country, with approximately 1,632,379 victims. In this context of violence, women have been the most heavily impacted by gender inequality: of the three million people displaced by numerous violent conflicts, 58% were women, who faced a compelling risk of domestic violence, rape and sexual slavery often used as tools of repression by paramilitary and guerilla groups. They have also been marginalized due to their rurality and ethnic group, which has limited them severely in their access and ownership of land, as well as their right to formal education, services, and financial assistance (Andrade et al., 2017; RNI, 2017; Güiza et al., 2016; Country Watch, 2017).

As with other Latin American regions where the educational level of women exceeds that of men, Colombia is no exception, with an average of 6.9 years of schooling for women compared to 5.1 for men. Despite this achievement, Colombian women still face great difficulties in assuming leadership roles, achieving wage parity with men, and reducing the arduous workload in the field. In the rural world, only 32% of males and 36% of females between 18 and 24 have finished secondary school, with rural women being the most vulnerable due to their work inside and outside the home, a patriarchal culture that limits their access to education, and the withdrawal from school due to early pregnancies (Botello-Peñaloza, 2017; Martínez-Restrepo, 2016). In order to create a context of inclusion and opportunities, the Ministry of National Education (MEN) of Colombia has proposed flexible educational models, including *Escuela Nueva*, aimed at elementary students of rural multi-grade schools; *Postprimaria Rural*, secondary schooling in rural areas; *Secundaria Activa*, for secondary students in rural or marginal urban areas; and *Aceleración del Aprendizaje*, aimed at elementary students aged 10 to 17 years in rural and marginal urban areas (MEN, 2014).

In terms of literacy, other programs have been implemented such as *Cafam*, *A Crecer*, and *Alfabetización virtual*, which includes basic training in Information and Communication Technologies. With this goal, Rural Education Service (SER) and Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation (ESPERE) programs were implemented throughout the country, the latter aimed at serving displaced populations. The central government expects that by 2018 Colombia will have eradicated illiteracy, which currently stands at 5.8% (MEN, 2016). However, analyses of literacy in the country indicate that it is essential to restructure these programs and pedagogical practices, making them more relevant to the realities of adult students (Arias et al., 2013) while incorporating broader themes of gender equality and giving voice and participation to women (Gutiérrez, 2015; Bolaños, 2010). Likewise, the literature on experiences and programs of literacy indicates the need to establish programs that generate individuals critical of their social and political environments in order to strengthen young democracies (Londoño, 2015; Gamboa et al, 2016).

Regarding rural education, one of the criteria included in the peace agreement signed by the central government and the FARC in 2016 proposed the implementation of a special program to eradicate rural illiteracy, encouraging a permanent access and a place for women participants (Acuerdo de Paz, 2016). Similarly, decree 3011 of 1997 in the subdivision on adult education establishes the creation of literacy programs, prioritizing rural areas of the country (MEN-Decree 3011, 1997). Despite profuse literature on the "what" and the "why" of the importance of literacy mentioned here, there is a shortage of consistent evidence demonstrating that women's literacy leads to empowerment and has a positive effect on their decision-making and autonomy (Latif, 2009; Nagaraja, 2013).

This phenomenological study made it possible for us to get involved with the participants of the program to closely analyze their successes and weaknesses, and to listen to the experiences as interpreted, lived and described by them (Hatch, 2002; Creswell, 2009).

4. Setting and methods

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of a group of Colombian rural women on the path to literacy through the Virtually Assisted Literacy in Youth and Adult Education program, as well as to analyze the dynamics of empowerment during and after the program. Thirty-three women and two men participated in this study, that took place in Antioquia region, located in the Colombian northwest. This is the most populated region and the country's largest economy after the capital city of Bogota, with approximately 6.5 million inhabitants, of which more than half live in the metropolitan area of the capital Medellín.¹

Of the group of 35 participants, 25 were beneficiaries of the literacy program, 7 were facilitators, and 3 were coordinators. The program was launched in 2008, with a pilot group of 350 students in the Guajira region, on the coast of the Caribbean Sea, and expanded to different locations including Antioquia, Bolívar, Cartagena, Valledupar, Cesar, Santander, Buenaventura, Cordoba, Sucre, Magdalena, Santa Marta, and Medellín, among others. About 113,414 young people and adults were beneficiaries of the program that was implemented between 2008 to 2014 (PAVA, 2012a). The program was implemented in Antioquia between 2010 and 2014 in cohorts that lasted between 3 and 7 months, in which students were supposed to cover the first three years of elementary education, meaning first, second and third grade. We will discuss how these cohorts' implementations impacted the learning process of these women in the discussion section.

The program was funded by the Ministry of Education of Colombia and implemented by the Universidad Católica del Norte and its Cibercolegio. PAVA is an educational approach for comprehension grounded on sociocultural thinking, cognitive functions, and learning. It also seeks to promote literacy development and written culture through pedagogical mediation accompanied by technological tools and printed and virtual materials.² Likewise, the program is based on Critical Social Theory and borrows components of Vygotsky's sociohistorical-cultural paradigm, as well as Paulo Freire's pedagogy regarding Pedagogical Mediation (PAVA, 2012b). According to PAVA:

"Literacy is assumed as a practice of social and cultural transformation in which the young and adult establish a local interaction with a focus on citizenship, coexistence and democracy from a critical mediation using ICT as a framework of critical appropriation. Basic formal education, including student-centered flexible hours for literacy teaching, is articulated with educational projects of local institutions" (PAVA Manual, 2014, Arias et al., 2013).

Although PAVA is a program aimed at both men and women, this study focuses its attention on a group of women from Antioquia region. The reasons for this choice are based on women's education studies and the need to better examine their social, educational and political realities (Latif, 2009; Betts, 2003; Nagaraja, 2013; Stromquist, 1990b). Our study participants were purposively selected (Patton, 2002) from among students of literacy classes in three Antioquia municipalities located in the north and northeast.³ Data was collected from semistructured interviews with participants, program coordinators, and facilitators, as well as from focus group discussions and document analysis. Some female facilitators were interviewed via phone calls due to their distant location. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, the native language of the authors of this study. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and the focus groups lasted approximately two hours. As for our data analysis, we were guided by six analytic phases (Marshall & Rossman, 2010), which entailed data reduction and helped with the interpretation of the participants' views and meanings. The writing of analytical memos was also useful in challenging our own assumptions (Mason, 2002), and recognizing the extent to which thoughts, actions, and decisions shaped our research. Three main emergent themes came to light after the data analysis

¹. Antioquia is the second largest economy in the country due to its economic activity in the production of coffee, gold and flowers, some the country's highest export products. In terms of education, while 21% of people (ages 15-24) have reached the highest level of education in the country, there is approximately 1% of the population with no formal education; and 5% have attained at most incomplete primary education, meaning that in total 7% of 15-24 year-olds have not completed primary education. These figures have a critical impact on the country's development and create obstacles to attain an inclusive education. Furthermore, there are still important educational challenges that need to be promptly addressed in the country's agenda such as lowering the illiteracy level, which in the case of Antioquia is at 5.1%, increasing in rural areas to 10.6%; and reducing the poverty rate - almost half of the population is below the poverty line. Unemployment is also a worrisome problem in the country with about half of the workforce working outside the formal labor market. This is another barrier for women's advancement and their permanent insertion into the market - unemployment rate is higher for women (15.6%) compared to 9% for men. The average gender income gap is 20%, being even higher in rural areas. This figure has remained stagnant in the last decade, as evidence of lower access to labor markets for women. Even though there have been significant gains in several sectors, there is still a long way to go to reach gender equality and inclusion (World Bank-FHI360, 2014; Country Watch, 2017; OECD, 2012; UNDP, 2012).

². The digital and physical work materials provided to the students included writing notebooks and text books used with the physical notebook; digital notebooks in USB or CD ROM format, with which students were expected to construct new texts outside the classroom setting through autonomous and individual work in their homes. There was also a digital book in multimedia format that accompanied the assisted virtual process; and some of learning material included: *Mi Proyecto de Lectura* (My Reading Project) sought to develop literacy and written culture, and *Mi Proyecto de Escritura* (My Writing Project) for use with the computers. According to PAVA's documentation, the student was to be accompanied by a facilitator while using these materials. (PAVA, 2012c). In 2010, PAVA received the UNESCO - King Sejong Literacy Prize Award for its work with the use of new information and communication technologies aimed at vulnerable populations displaced by the armed conflict.

³. Names of participants have been changed, and specific locations have not been mentioned to protect confidentiality.

process: Sociocultural aspects of program access and implementation; accomplishments and limitations of the program for practical needs; and experiences of work and social integration following the program. Each emerging theme had sub-themes that we will develop in the next section.

5. Findings and Discussion

This study does not claim to provide generalized conclusions on the results of literacy acquisition among its participants. This kind of research recognizes that each setting is unique and that the perceptions captured are exclusively tied to that setting. In terms of Mason (2002), qualitative researchers provide a rich and detailed description using multiple sources of data. Therefore, this research describes the life experiences of a group of adult women in PAVA.

5.1 Sociocultural aspects of program access and implementation

Within this emerging theme, we analyzed the previous literacy training experiences of participants, family and social limitations to accessing PAVA, and the personal and economic benefits, if any, that the program produced. In this regard, the interviews indicated that of the 25 student-participants, only two had studied prior to PAVA, acquiring first and third grade levels of primary education. The rest of the interviewees did not have access to formal education during their childhood for reasons ranging from parents reluctant to educating their daughters to security problems in the zones of the armed conflict where these women lived. Throughout our conversations with them, we analyzed major factors that limited their active participation in the program.

The most significant obstacle to learning comes from within the family circle (Durgunoğlu et al., 2003). Josefina, 42 years old with seven children, stated that “the biggest criticism was from my husband. He wanted me to stay at home locked up at all times. He only reached the third grade of primary school. He insulted me with very strong words that I cannot repeat here. He told me I was going to my classes to find another man.” Josefina’s statement captures the repressive challenges that women experience from the men in their lives. Mariana, 24 years old with five children, explained “my father had the idea that women only went to school to get husbands and that they were only to have children. We only attended first grade of primary school. My mother did not know anything, she did not even know how to sign her name.” Throughout the interviews, these women described multiple social, family and economic limitations that forced them to abandon classes or even not see the program as an option. They also narrated the need to “ask permission” from their nonliterate husbands to be able to attend literacy classes (Puchner, 2003). More than one participant found attendance difficult because their husbands decided that “they had better things to do at home and that they were too old to study” (Giselly, focus group participant, northern Antioquia). Likewise, Katy, 42, mother of six children, shared that she experienced many obstacles to reading and writing, explaining “for me it was not easy, I had to get up at four in the morning, organize everything at home, cook, and clean. But that was nothing compared to the problems my husband caused. He thought that I went to classes to look for other men and that I was not going to do anything outside the house with those literacy classes.” In this regard, we acknowledge the discrimination of women, not only in education but also in access to other societal spaces. This is predominantly true in rural areas, where opportunities and traditional customs remain more dominant than in urban areas. The notion that women are inferior to their male counterparts still exists in many cultures (UIS-UNESCO, 2013).

Political violence and social insecurity were other factors that distanced our participants from education. Ana, a 30-year-old woman and mother of a girl, stated that her education took a back seat due to the environment of political insecurity, “when I started the program, I worked in a rural community, living with my grandparents, but I had to leave that place since my husband disappeared and I never saw him again. I had a young daughter and I had to take care of her and go to work in any job I found.” The narratives of the lives of these women illustrate the various sociopolitical dilemmas that impact their lives, making them opt for other basic needs and put aside their education. These serious limitations were not only shared by the participants of the program but also by the facilitators, who expressed that due to the political situation in the region a few years ago, “several of these women came from places taken over by the guerrillas and had to leave their communities, leaving behind opportunities to access education” (Esmeralda, 35 years old, facilitator - Southwestern Antioquia).

Despite family and social conflicts and with very little expectation about their educational futures, most participants of this study remained in PAVA until its completion ($n = 20$) while the rest ($n = 5$) left classes for multiple reasons. Another aspect analyzed within this emerging theme is linked to the real benefits of this program. The findings on the benefits, similar to studies carried out in other geographical contexts, analyze the application and incorporation of literacy in the daily lives of the participants (Durgunog̃lu et al., 2003; Puchner, 2003). The authors of this study analyzed four relevant aspects of the apparent benefits of the program as indicated by the participants: personal, social, economic and political. The personal benefits they found in the program are varied and indicate having overcome, in some way, the shyness of speaking in public and even going out, “I was very shy, I could not read, I learned. I felt embarrassed to go out and say anything; with the program I learned to say what I think and express myself.” (Diana - 42 years old, four children). The basic

knowledge acquired by the program served to break down communication barriers and to stimulate her self-esteem. Most of the participants expressed having “lost their fear and shame” in their social and even family settings, where their voices had been silenced for a long time.

In her research on literacy programs in Brazil, Barlett (2008) points out that economic and social mobility reached by students participating in these programs resulted from the relationships and networks they cultivated through and in schools, rather than the literacy they learned in school. Our research reveals similar findings. The participating women felt part of a learning community where not only did they acquire content but were able to share personal and family experiences in a significant way, “I learned to coexist better with my family, to stop being shy and to teach something to my grandchildren. When clients came to the house, I welcomed them, shared breakfast and then sold them the products.” (Eli - 58 years old, five children). It is important to note that three (n=3) of the twenty-five participants indicated that they are sellers and representatives of beauty products. When asked about the benefits of the program in their lives, they indicated that they gained self-confidence to go out and sell the products, something that previously would have been difficult for them. Here it is important to emphasize that meeting and developing personal relationships with their peers pushed them more than the classes themselves to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. The participants were able to take advantage of networks and spaces facilitated by the social environment of the literacy program. Another beneficial aspect of the program could be described as the “motivational effect.” Undertaking the program and creating trusted networks and social spaces translated to a motivating effect in their home lives as well.

Whether due to patriarchal restrictions, long distances from school, or political displacement due to guerrillas, the women in this study indicated that their sons and daughters did not access formal education either. Being immersed in the literacy program helped them to encourage their sons and daughters to seek formal education in local schools or technical education centers. “Because of the displacement problem and because my husband, now dead, did not want my children to study, they were not able to get an education. I really liked what I learned in the program and the people I met and told my children to study. My daughter studied up to fifth grade and my sons up to second grade, but now they don’t want to continue because they are almost adults.” (Rosi - 46 years old, five children). One noteworthy aspect that we noticed was that despite the excitement and motivation of belonging to a learning community and acquiring basic literacy and math skills, these women and their families continue to suffer from what we may call a “partial” or “fluctuating” access to resources and opportunities in their communities and in society in general. Observing the reality of these women, we find that the educational system and literacy programs do not fill the gaps and voids that social, political and economic marginalization has created in the lives of these individuals. While each one has a particular history of experiences with literacy as well as the meanings that the program represented in their lives (Street, 1984), along with their new identities (Wedin, 2008; Cameron, 2012) created from that experience, the system does not generate opportunities for a broad and secure access that goes beyond their idealization of a literacy program.

Other than the benefits the participants described - being able to leave the house, overcoming shyness, being able to meet people and create friendships - it is necessary to emphasize that this program, as well as those that came after PAVA, were not effective in offering these women the necessary tools to access greater job opportunities and leadership. Almost in their totality, the women remained in their role of housewives, or working at menial jobs that did not require much use of the basic contents learned in the program. Thus, we must ask in what way an educational system properly structured on the needs of individuals can empower these and other rural women and move beyond their position of historical subordination and marginalization.

5.2 Accomplishments and limitations of the program for practical needs

This particular emerging theme led us to explore in more detail the experiences of these women in aspects such as their access to technological tools, use of learning materials, time and place of classes, interaction with facilitators, and the application of what they learned in their family and social lives. Within its pedagogical development, PAVA applied not only face-to-face classes, but also made use of virtual education¹, in which the participants worked on modules and activities using computers. These activities were supervised by class facilitators. During our interviews, all participants without exception described their reactions to the use of computers for the first time. Except for two participants, the rest indicated that they did not have a computer at home or had ever “played” one before the program. These women indicated the great fear of combining their literacy learning with the use of computers in the classroom. “When they taught us classes with the computer, I was terrible, terrible. I never saw a computer before. I was afraid to touch it, I needed help, because alone it was difficult. I did not feel comfortable working on a computer, so that was difficult for me.” (Focus Group - Talía - 28 years old, a son). Likewise, it was mentioned that the time allocated to the use of the computer in class was

¹. The *Universidad Católica del Norte* developed the Virtually Assisted Literacy in Youth and Adult Education program (PAVA) with an educational focus distinct from other literacy programs in its use of virtual learning. The idea behind this practice was based on the application of Information and Communication Technology - ICT, an aspect that sought to renew the concepts of literacy, as well as to minimize inequity gaps among the most vulnerable members of the illiterate population.

very limited for the learning objectives of these women. “I would have liked more time with the computer. The space with the computer was very little, some women did not learn because they weren’t able to remember how to do it.” (Diana - 42 years, four children). The generational aspect was not a determining factor in the use of computers because, due to their condition of poverty and exclusion, almost none of the women had ever had contact with this type of technology, regardless of age. “Some said that it was difficult to operate the computer and impossible to learn it, but the teacher said that it was possible to learn.” (Piedad - 39 years, six children).

Introducing them to a “new world” of computers during literacy classes generated a series of new expectations in the lives of these women. Their first contact with these technologies led them to live an experience largely unknown to them: all indicated that they felt differently as individuals and as a group as a result. This reminds us of the concept of critical literacy, proposed by Freire & Macedo (1987), which generates the creation of new identities and meanings in social environments, besides being accompanied by a broader understanding of the world surrounding the individuals. Thanks to the literacy program, the women of our study gained access to a technological world with which they were unfamiliar, but this experience was momentary and ephemeral, and no longer a part of their lives after the completion of the program.

Interviews with facilitators indicated two main obstacles that limited the use of computers in classrooms and further restricted participant access to this tool: (1) the limited availability of machines in schools due to friction with the directors of these educational centers, who did not want to provide computers for literacy classes, and (2) the scarcity of computers for individual use, which meant that two adult students had to share a computer. This caused frustration in the students, as it was difficult for everyone to have the opportunity to use the computers and practice the activities. Also, it was noted that the computers were in poor condition or infected with viruses. These limitations caused interruptions in the teaching-learning processes for these adult students, who had to learn contents from the first, second and third grades of primary education within a restricted period of 290 hours. “The institution’s directors were not willing to lend computers to adult students of the literacy program. There was a lot of fear that students would mess up the computers. Another major obstacle was the number of students per course, which exceeded the facilitator’s ability to work adequately with everyone.” (Elena, National Program Coordinator).

The positive impact of computers as part of the literacy experience cannot be denied. Feeling able to handle this tool strengthened their self-esteem and self-confidence and created a sense of community, according to their comments in the focus groups. Throughout the interviews, these women expressed how access to the program represented a break with feelings of self-exclusion and social marginalization. Being illiterate caused them long-term shame, fear and ridicule, because they could not access a formal education in childhood due to poverty, patriarchal families that prevented them from studying, or social displacement caused by the guerrillas.

Unfortunately, the duration of the literacy program was brief in the lives of these women, not only in its use of computer-assisted literacy modules but also in consolidating their writing, and math skills. In accordance with the definitions of literacy and empowerment as a means to improve the living conditions of individuals, as well as to increase their finances and create better opportunities (Wedin, 2008; Cameron, 2012), a restructuring of programs is clearly needed, allotting more time for content development. It is equally important to create a continuity in the educational cycles that do not stop at basic levels (first and third grade only) but accompany and support these women up to the completion of literacy programs. The effort and expectations of our participants were soon overshadowed or vanished as the women felt they had not accessed the upper training levels of other literacy programs. Many of them soon forgot the contents and skills learned, returning to the shadows of illiteracy and limiting their access to other jobs or decision-making activities (Prins, 2001; Maddox, 2005).

Some facilitators pointed out the lack of continuity in the literacy program when comparing it with other literacy programs, which instead of helping them, put them at a disadvantage when looking for job opportunities. “They (the students) continue being illiterate, because they only reached third grade in primary school. For all practical purposes, they are illiterate because if they present a resume to a company showing a third-grade level of education, they will not get a job. Each one must find a way to continue being educated after PAVA.” (Lady - Program Facilitator -

Southwestern Antioquia). And “looking for ways to continue education” became difficult for some participants because of the lack of continuity in the program, heavy domestic work, and partners who do not allow them to continue studying, among other obstacles, which caused these women to stop their education permanently, closing off access to greater opportunities.

Regarding the use of materials and interaction with facilitators, the experiences of the study participants indicate that they were positive and encouraging. “Homework was taken from the books and classes. I thought it was very wonderful, for a woman to study is a good thing. When we graduated, we cried. We wanted to continue studying to reach more grades.” (Leti - 50 years, 5 children). We noticed that the contact with teaching materials, previously unknown to these women was beneficial to their self-esteem, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in the curriculum. Gaining a social space, a sense of belonging in the group, and creating social networks (Bartlett, 2008) went beyond the use and application of learned contents. “I felt very good. I had a

hard time with the drawings, but the teacher and the classmates helped us. It was very good to learn.” (Camila - 30 years, 5 children). Our analysis of the teaching modules used in the program as well as our conversations with facilitators found that these materials motivated students and introduced them to new learning experiences. However, they also indicated that it would have been necessary to connect the materials with their needs and socio-cultural realities where the program was developed.

Likewise, some facilitators emphasized some obstacles encountered when teaching the material on the computer. On more than one occasion, computers were not available or not allowed in the literacy classes. Unable to access the virtual component, the facilitators had to adjust the contents of the materials, which had an impact on the planning of that particular module. There was also the need for a space reserved solely for literacy classes, taking into account the needs of adult students. “There were always excuses for not lending the computer rooms. They said they were not working, that they were stolen, that they were occupied, etc. That affected the classes and sometimes the contents could not be covered. If the program is redesigned, it would be very good for these students to have their own spaces.” (Jenny - Program Facilitator - Northwestern Antioquia). While the compilation of teaching materials was in line with grade-level pedagogical content and the facilitators fulfilled what was expected of them, we think that the modules could be more robust in terms of practical contents that prepare these women for life. Beyond the basic contents of literacy, there is an urgent need to train these women in functional adult literacy, which allows them to increase their quality of life, make informed decisions, and continue their learning path.

One of the main interests of this type of literacy is to train learners to effectively participate in income-generating activities, improving their welfare and economic lives. Experiences utilizing functional literacy with rural women in other contexts show that they become empowered on issues related to family planning and health related matters; they take better care of their children in terms of nutrition and a healthy lifestyle; they make use of local resources efficiently; they feel more prepared to access different business opportunities; and most importantly, they learn how to mobilize for community development and to play an active role in governing within their communities (Abal et al., 2017; Akaraka, 2015).

The need to apply a functional adult literacy approach to literacy programs was reiterated both by facilitators and coordinators of our study. They noted the need to go beyond a program that focuses only on providing basic elements of literacy. “I would like to see literacy programs that include more about social life, family planning, education of children and the theme of food. During the program, there were no evaluations. I had the feeling of being like a machine that only worked and worked.” (Barbara, National Program Coordinator). The pressure exerted by the Ministry of National Education to meet the educational goals to end levels of illiteracy in the region and country caused the restructuring of the program in various locations to cover more students with short learning times. This impacted the teaching and learning processes among these vulnerable adult student populations.

From the topics analyzed above, we can conclude that the program had several positive aspects in terms of creating new identities and experiences in the lives of the participants. Their contact with computer-based learning, although short-lived for some and of limited access, represented an important step toward modernity. The creation of social networks and the “coming out of the dark” through basic literacy and math skills, involved discovering a reality previously unknown to them. Some And yet, questions remain: What happened to these women after this experience? What doors did their learning open? Did the empowerment of the program have a long-term effect, or did it stop right after classes ended?

5.3 Experiences of work and social integration following the program

Our third emerging theme led us to analyze and reflect on the social and work experiences of our participants after the program. Throughout the conversations, interactions and interviews with these women, there was great excitement and self-motivation stemming from the literacy program. Within this theme we wanted to better explore the impact caused by PAVA. Thus, our questions in the interviews were oriented toward to work, community participation and finance. In this regard, there is a considerable amount of research in diverse geographical contexts about the positive impact of literacy programs on women's self-esteem and empowerment.

There is evidence that educated women are more likely to be economically active and to have more control over household decision making. Significantly, mothers’ education has been found to have a greater influence on children’s achievement than paternal education. Furthermore, studies have found that adult education is used primarily to learn skills necessary for coping with everyday life, and that adults are more interested in functional literacy when literacy and the learning of economic skills are combined into one whole (Onweazu & Olorin, 2014). Research on adult literacy shows that empowerment is strongly related to women’s economic opportunities; and a critical aspect of this empowerment is having access to formal sector employment, community leadership, savings, and access to economic resources (Olomukoro & Adolore, 2015). Thus, through literacy programs people are provided with skills and knowledge that will enhance their socio-economic and political lives (Sibiya & Van Rooyen, 2005).

The women in our study constantly mentioned feeling more confident in themselves, overcoming fear, shyness and embarrassment. “You feel more confident in yourself, to express yourself a little better. In the time we were studying we had the opportunity to meet more people, we got together to do homework. Every week, we looked forward to seeing each other again. It greatly improves self-esteem, for us PAVA was the freedom to leave home, realizing that we didn’t just have to look to our husbands and depend on them.” (Focus Group - Northeastern Antioquia). Only four of the total participants reported not completing the program due to family reasons and illness. When we inquired about the job opportunities they got from PAVA, the responses of these women were varied. It is interesting to note that three ($n = 3$) of the participants who worked during the period of our interviews were already working before enrolling in the literacy program. The work done by these women did not require the use of reading and writing concepts. Only two ($n = 2$) of the participants indicated that the basic concepts of mathematics learned in the program helped them to start their small businesses selling beauty products.

In addition to feeling motivated to participate in the program and create social networks as described above, we observed in our fieldwork that the program did not provide the necessary tools to open better job opportunities and social inclusion for these women. Although it is understood that PAVA offers curriculum based on standard topics taught in grades 1-3, neither PAVA nor other programs these women accessed after it were able to procure them a place in the working world or financial independence from their partners. Four ($n = 4$) of the total participants finished eleventh grade because they enrolled in later programs; however, even with this degree, they remained in the domestic environment. In conversations with some program coordinators, they stated that literacy programs for women should teach students some type of job that will help them earn a living for their families and gain economic independence.

On the other hand, the policies on literacy in Colombia described previously must also be considered. The need for central government and regional governments to reach an immediate goal to end the country’s illiteracy has a high social cost when it comes to assessing the accountability and reliability of these programs, especially in the case of women. In addition to literacy policies, there are factors that go beyond poverty and lack of power and are related to the gender roles and discrimination deeply rooted in patriarchal societies (Puchner, 2003). Throughout the study, it has been argued the need of providing these literacy programs with critical functional literacy skills. Experiences with this type of programs reflect multiple positive and encouraging aspects of empowerment, economic independence, and community participation (Akaraka, 2015; Abal et al., 2017).

In light of the dynamics of literacy and the concepts of empowerment and inclusion, another point to examine is the duration of the program itself. Condensing concepts of first, second and third grade primary education into a span of three to seven months or 290 hours and expecting satisfactory results is an unrealistic goal, considering the multiple obstacles encountered by participants during their learning processes described above. Apart from two women ($n = 2$) with some previous experience in literacy courses, for the rest of participants PAVA represented their first (and for some their only) educational experience. The duration of the program was stipulated by the offices of the Ministry of Education; however, for obvious reasons, program length is insufficient for adults with very little or no prior educational experience. Relevant findings in this sense indicate that, the longer the program lasts - at least a year – the better the results (Durgunog˘lu et al., 2003). Likewise, studies on adult literacy show that a wide variety of methodologies, hours of immersion, methods of study, and rigorous preparation and training of instructors are key elements for the success of a literacy program (Comings & Soricone, 2007). The increase in the duration of the program must be accompanied by continuous support, both pedagogical and personal, that helps to incorporate the learned literacy into the daily needs of the students.

6. Implications and conclusions

The initial sections of this article indicate alarming statistics on the socio-educational conditions of women in the world. Empowerment through education of women is not delivering the expected results; on the contrary, in some cases, it serves a political agenda as it helps to increase the numbers of "literate people" reported throughout the country. Critical and inclusive literacy will only be achieved through literacy programs capable of fully incorporating the realities of adult students from and accounting for their needs. For women, functional literacy provides the best way to become independent agents and decision makers regarding their finances, their families, and their own bodies.

Although the issue of family planning was not part of our research questions, during the documentation of participant demographics we could not ignore the number of children of the participants – averaging between five and six. This is a critical matter that must be considered by government and executing agencies when planning and executing literacy programs. Several studies on the subject indicate that women with low literacy level have more children, unlike educated women, who tend to have better housing, income, water, and sanitation (Kim, 2016; USAID, 2000).

Our interviews with facilitators also revealed their limited knowledge on the subject of empowerment and

equity in educational processes. On more than one occasion we had to explain the definition of empowerment and what it implies in the education of women; however, we cannot place full responsibility on the facilitators. Literacy training programs should have a more inclusive and equitable component in terms of an empowering education that removes women from a subordinate position and helps them to be active and productive agents in society.

Throughout the study, the importance of functional literacy as a key element in the training of women has been reiterated. We have described the countless benefits of this type of literacy, which is not constrained to just reading and writing, but greatly contributes to the preparation of individuals for social, civic and economic roles. Although PAVA contributed with basic literacy training that was highly appreciated by the participants, it is necessary that future programs contain functional components, ranging from optimal preparation of facilitators on issues of gender equity, workplace skills, and family planning to the creation of materials which emphasize empowering and inclusive education on citizen's rights and duties.

Regarding the three to seven-month duration of the literacy program, facilitators, coordinators and students had different reactions as previously described. Expecting satisfactory results in such a short time is an unrealistic goal, considering the pressure exerted by the Ministry of Education to decrease illiteracy of larger groups in a shorter time. Throughout the interviews, we found that after program completion those participants, who did not continue to next levels of literacy training forgot previously learned contents. Future inquiries need to develop and validate tools to examine factual applicability of learned contents in participants' lives.

The use of computers as a key element in this program did not attain the desired effect or result in any real impact on participants' lives. The issue of logistics was a limitation that must be reexamined in future literacy projects. Computer access was impractical and insufficient, and almost nonexistent once the program was completed. Future research on the use of technology in literacy classes should explore the actual functional impact on women, who pursue these programs.

Although the findings of this study are not intended to serve as a generalizable evidence, there are limitations that we must examine for future research conducted on adult literacy programs in other regions of the country. In addition, accessing the study participants in their localities was a difficult task because the program had already been completed three years ago. Future studies of this nature should also add an ethnographic component, which would deeply explore lives, cultures, and educational conditions of women in these programs.

In conclusion, within a highly patriarchal society where social, economic and educational rights of women are still questioned, literacy programs for adults, especially in rural areas, should be required to provide the necessary tools to train individuals to fully exercise those rights, with complete liberty to go beyond domestic spaces, historically assigned to women, and insert themselves into spaces of power and decision making. Only then we will be able to claim, as we mentioned at the beginning of this article, a literacy that empowers instead of a literacy that domesticates.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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