

# Women in Adult Education Program for Sustainable Development: Challenges and Implications for Library and Information Services

Ngozi Perpetua Osuchukwu and Ndidiamaka Lucy Nebolise

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Article abstract

**Objective** – Education offers advances in human and social development. It provides knowledge and resources that hold the potential for economic empowerment, resulting in a better livelihood. Hence, women need access to education with library services, if they are to have a voice, participate in sustainable development, and take care of their own health, as well as that of their children and members of their households. This paper examines the challenges women encounter in Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State, Nigeria. This study seeks to gain insight into the resources used to enhance learning, as well as the students' perceptions and satisfaction with their learning experience.

**Methods** – A descriptive survey research design was used. The study was carried out in five adult education centres in the city with a sample size of 120 women, randomly selected for collection of data. Questionnaire, interview, and observation methods were employed. The physical assessment of the centres was done for an evidence based report and to assess the real situations of the centres.

**Results** – The findings show the challenges faced by Nigerian women in their pursuit of ongoing adult education included: time for the classes which are usually held in the evening, poor financial status, lack of encouragement from spouses and relations, poor learning environments, and stress. The data were analyzed using percentages and frequency counts. They are presented in tables and figures.

**Conclusions** – It is recommended that education and library management should assess these centres for program improvements like providing more enabling environments and learning facilities. The implication of the study is that library and information services should be extended to these women to stimulate and support learning with the right attitude for active involvement in the educational activities and for enhancement of social inclusion.



*Research Article*

**Women in Adult Education Program for Sustainable Development: Challenges and Implications for Library and Information Services**

Ngozi Perpetua Osuchukwu  
Department of Library and Information Science  
Madonna University, Nigeria (Okija Campus)  
Anambra State, Nigeria  
Email: [ngostary2k@yahoo.com](mailto:ngostary2k@yahoo.com)

Ndidiamaka Lucy Nebolise  
Academic Librarian  
National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)  
Awka Study Center  
Anambra State, Nigeria  
Email: [ndynebe@yahoo.com](mailto:ndynebe@yahoo.com)

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## Introduction

Educational attainment is arguably the most empowering strategy that has the potential to change lifestyles and increase earnings, as well as improve one's standard of living. Education is vital to everyone and has the potential to drive creativity and productivity and close the gap for socially marginalized women in achieving freedom from poverty, allowing them to fully develop and participate as citizens (Sanchez Moretti & Frandell, 2013). Libraries also play an important role in promoting education and engaging women in information services, through the provision of resources like information communication technology and other literacy activities. The overarching goal is to reduce illiteracy rates affecting 493 million women worldwide (Kelleher, 2014; Gillard, 2014). Improved literacy rates will allow for increased participation and contributions by women for sustainable development.

Adult education is classified as any form of education or learning programs in which adults participate (Kwapong, 2005). Research has shown that education helps in assisting adults with basic knowledge, reading and writing

skills, and use of numbers, which are all critical in the fight against poverty and inequality (Nhamo & Nhamo, 2006). This is especially important for women, as adult education creates spaces for them to earn their school equivalency or to gain further knowledge in their chosen profession. In Nigeria, an illiterate woman is placed in the background and without adult education programs, she cannot understand the framework of today's societal standards or participate in Nigerian politics. Participating in the adult evening education program may not be an easy venture to pursue given their responsibilities of cooking, child rearing, marriage, and other wifely roles in the home; geographical locations; social-cultural background; religion; health; or economic status. The multiple roles women play in the household can be overwhelming in accommodating other valuable social literacy activities (Cleveland Clinic, 2018; Wanyama, 2014).

Literacy programs in the South Eastern Region of Nigeria have had a tremendous impact on the lives of women. Here, the value of woman's education has been underestimated but is beginning to be seen as a vital priority to a more functional existence (Mbah, 2018). The adult

evening classes were restructured to enable the women to acquire a quality education for the actualization of sustainability development goals (SDG). Sustainable development goals have been set by the United Nations to end hunger and poverty and improve access to education, while promoting gender equality. The SDGs also seek to improve a person's overall well-being through improved access to healthcare, clean water, and sanitation initiatives, as well as economic development (United Nations, 2015). Giving women a second chance at literacy through adult education will increase their earning power and give their children a brighter future (Kelleher, 2014). This study identifies the resources and challenges of women in adult education in attaining their goals for improvement of quality of life.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Low literacy levels for women can be attributed to inequality, cultural bias, unequal opportunities, gender disparity, poverty, and lack of decision-making (Alexander & Robinson, 2014). This is true in the case of Nigeria and is the reason adult education centres have been created, being mindful that every woman can learn if given an enabling environment and the right resources, like library services. Library services are vital because they supplement and support both formal and informal education, while promoting education at all levels. However, what is not clear is what constitutes adequate resources for the adult education program. This study addresses and assesses the availability of resources and the challenges women face in their pursuit of adult education, as well as the implications for library and information services.

### **Literature Review**

Education is recognized as a source of empowerment for women throughout the world and has become one of the foremost topical issues throughout Africa (Farrell, 2016). Adult education is an inalienable human right that is

enshrined constitutionally by all countries to ensure its effectiveness and practicability (Nyagoha, 2016; Sanchez Moretti & Frandell, 2013). This is the reason adult education centres are established and why their existence is vital in the fight against multi-generational illiteracy. Libraries play an important role in ensuring a woman's right to education, in that libraries ensure the creation of safe spaces that allow women to realize their full potential through effective adult education programs (Sciabica, 2014). The value of literacy should never be underestimated as it is a vital priority to a more functional existence.

Existing literature indicates that the major barriers women face in their pursuit of education include family demands and the stress of upholding the family structure. Women fulfil multiple roles; mother, wife, daughter, and worker within the economy. Each of these roles affects their ability to improve their literacy. This is consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Moyo (2014), which states that women cannot easily pursue adult education because priority is given to looking for food and meeting other basic requirements to sustain life and the well-being of their families. It is these basic requirements that outweigh their intellectual needs.

Arguably, a woman with family challenges cannot afford education, especially where poverty and lack of supports are experienced. In Nigeria, literacy rates vary from state to state and from urban to rural areas, but what is clear is that there is a gender gap. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2010), the overall literacy (in any language) was 71.6%; 79.3% for males and 63.7% for women. The report also shows that a desire to be literate exists with 47.4% of illiterate persons (both genders). The challenge is in creating awareness of the availability of programs. Only 32.5% of surveyed adults were aware of literacy centres and the services they provide (NBS, 2010).

Adult education for women should be made more accessible. This calls for the restructuring of processes and the need for assessment of resources in the adult education centres in order to ensure willingness and effective learning experiences for women. It also demonstrates a need to improve general awareness of program availability throughout Nigeria. Libraries are essential in achieving this, as they provide useful services to the community by fostering education and disseminating information to all sections of the society (Laila, 2010). As partners in the education system and as an empowerment hub, libraries have applied strategies in integrating women in adult reading as well as providing night reading opportunities (Farrell, 2016; Katz, 2012). Information and communication technology (ICT) has also been integrated into library services and other learning activities. Women in adult education should have access to adequate representation of ICT-based resources, equipped libraries, and other instructional media resources (Mamman, 2015; Jiyane & Mostert, 2010; Oyelude & Bamigbola, 2012). The simple reason, according to Osuchukwu (2016), is that ICT has come to stay and has become “a must-have” if the society and the people therein do not want to be left behind in a fast-changing world. Access to ICT will ensure that no woman is left behind in the ever-changing world.

Studies have recorded satisfaction of women participating in adult education programs. Mbah (2018) in Enugu state, Nigeria found that women whose formal education was stopped at the primary level were satisfied with their adult education experiences and their new literacy levels. Even a limited increase in a woman’s education improves her knowledge, boosts her wages, and enhances social inclusion, all of which have the potential to foster economic empowerment, better livelihood, and social development (Egenti & Omoruyi, 2011). Education can provide a woman with the choices she needs to improve her overall health and to participate and contribute to a country’s sustainable development (Organization for

Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008; Moyo, 2014).

### **Aims of the Study**

This study seeks to gain an understanding of women’s experiences of attending adult education programs in Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria. The study seeks to explore the resources available for the program, the challenges women face in seeking to further their educational goals, and their perceptions, as well as the satisfaction derived from the adult education program.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were asked:

1. What challenges do women face in acquiring education in the adult learning centres?
2. What are their perceptions of the challenges they encounter?
3. Which resources do they use in enhancing learning in the adult education centres?
4. Are they satisfied with the learning taking place at the centres?

### **Methods**

This is a descriptive survey research design carried out in five adult education centres in two local government areas (LGAs) of Onitsha North and South metropolis in Anambra State, Nigeria. Random sampling was employed to select five adult education centres in the LGAs: Holy Trinity Adult Education Center, Holy Spirit Adult Education, Sacred Heart Adult Education, St. John Adult School and St. John College. Two centres were selected from Onitsha North and three from Onitsha South. All centres are government approved and use the government stipulated curriculum for education in Nigeria. The qualitative data were obtained through a self-designed questionnaire designed for this study by the authors.

The copies of questionnaires were randomly distributed to women enrolled in the adult education classes at each of the five centres. In total, 120 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, 24 copies in each centre.

Questionnaires were collected back each night, thus making a 100% rate of duly filled completed and returned questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed over a two week period to enable the physical distribution of questionnaires to the women and the assessment of facilities in the adult education centres.

Interviews were also carried out. The researchers randomly selected two women class

captains in each centre as participants. This was done to validate the claims in the questionnaire. Also used was an observation checklist, which was self-designed by the authors of this study to assess the availability of facilities and resources for evidence based research of the real situations of the adult education centres. Results were collated and analyzed using percentages, frequency counts, and figures. A benchmark of 50% was taken for responses rated on percentages.

## Results

A summary of the results of the study are shown below.

Table 1

Biodata of Women Participants in the Adult Education Centres Understudy

S/N	Age	F	%	Class	F	%	Occupation	F	%
1	Below 18	24	20	Primary	24	20	Trading	42	35
2	19-29	36	30	Junior Secondary School (JSS)	36	30	Stay at home mums	12	10
3	30-40	42	35	Senior Secondary School (SSS)	60	50	Artisan	36	30
4	50 & above	18	15				House help	18	15
5							Public servant	12	10
	<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>120</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2

Observation Checklist of the Resources/Facilities Seen in All the Five Education Centres

S/N	Items	Holy Trinity Adult Education Center	Sacred Heart Adult Education	Holy Spirit Adult Education	St John Adult School	St John College
1	Library	X	X	X	X	X
2	Board	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Classroom	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Chairs and desks	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Instructional aids	X	X	X	X	X
6	Computer room	X	X	X	X	X

The analysis in Table 1 shows that the highest number of adult education students fall between the ages of 30 and 40 years (35%). This is followed by the age group of 19-29 years (30%) and below 18 years (20%), while 50 years and above represents 15%. It was also shown that 50% of the students are in the senior secondary class, while others are at the junior secondary class (30%) and primary school (20%) credentials levels. The cross sections of occupations identified by the women are traders (35%) and artisans (30%). Others identified as stay-at-home mothers, household helpers, and public servants. The results demonstrate that women in every sector seek education and are determined to upgrade their literacy levels in the information society.

### ***Challenges Women Face in Acquiring Education in the Adult Learning Centres***

A majority of the women (75%, n= 90) indicated that they faced challenges during their time pursuing adult education, while 25% (n= 30) stated they had not faced any barriers. Of the challenges experienced, the participants identified the following: stress (79.16%), family demands (58%), financial issues (54.16%), lack of resources to enhance learning (50%), duration of classes and time constraints (35%), and poor learning environments (20.83%).

The interviews allowed for further exploration of these challenges. One class captain revealed that some women and girls, especially the household helpers, do not pay school fees and other dues until they are stopped from attending school by the management. Also disclosed was that some women drop out of school due to family demands and stress.

Table 2 disclosed the researchers' physical assessment of the five adult education centres. The observation of the adult education centres revealed that the students in all adult education centres have access to classroom, board, and chairs and desks, but cannot access the school library and the computer room where media

instructional resources are housed. Students in adult education centres are denied access to these facilities. The researchers also observed that the chairs and desks were chained, making sitting arrangements uncomfortable for reading and learning.

The interview process allowed for the exploration into the restriction of resources, the reasoning for it, and student perceptions. When asked about the reasons for chained chairs and desks as well as restricted access to school libraries and computer rooms, one teacher stated that classroom environments and facility access is determined by the management of the day school section. Management dictates the availability of facilities for the adult learning program. When asked about the classroom environment and the restrictions, the students commented that not having access to the library and computer rooms negatively impacted their education. They indicated that access would have helped them in acquiring a higher level of knowledge, since many of them have never used a computer or entered a library.

When asked to comment on the chained chairs and desks, the women complained that they make sitting very uncomfortable, affecting their attention span because their legs were cramped and relaxation could not be achieved in the classroom. The women also added that the young students in the morning sections probably chained their chairs to their desks to avoid people moving them to other classes and for fear of loss. The adult education program has no power over the chairs. They only access what they see when they come to school in the evening.

### ***Satisfaction with the Learning Taking Place at the Adult Education Centres***

The women were asked to evaluate their overall satisfaction with their educational experience, specifically their acquisition of reading and writing skills. Overall, 75% of participants were satisfied with their experiences in the adult

education program. The 25% of the participants who expressed dissatisfaction with the adult education program attributed it to lack of access to educational resources in the centres. Thus, the satisfaction suggests that the basic acquisition of knowledge and literacy mean a great deal to the women in spite of all the challenges encountered in the adult education program.

### ***Perceptions of the Challenges Women Encounter in the Adult Education Centres***

Half of the women (50%) indicated that they expected to encounter challenges while participating in the adult education program because of added responsibilities as adults. Another 35% described themselves as adjusting, while 15% disclosed that they did not expect to encounter challenges before they started and that they are coping very well.

The interviews allowed for the participants to indicate the specific challenges they faced. Interviewees revealed that they felt overwhelmed and were exhausted when trying to find work-life balance. The stress experienced by the women related to the management of busy schedules in pursuit of their daily economic activities, while seeking opportunities for higher education. Their desire for ongoing education far outweighed their need for rest; hence, the desire to continue to achieve their goals. The interviews also revealed that those who were coping well had already possessed the opinion that education was the only way to improve their social and economic status.

### **Discussion**

The age differences of women in the adult education centres indicate that women of all ages still seek basic education opportunities to live functionally. The number of women enrolled in senior secondary school classes (50%) indicates the women's level of determination to upgrade their literacy levels and to improve their chances of having a voice in decisions that affect them. Besides, the fact

that women traders, artisans, stay-at-home mothers, household helpers, and public servants struggle to acquire education shows that women in every facet of life have come to realize that they have more to offer in their homes and societies when equipped with education. This result is consistent with existing studies exploring adult education and the livelihood of women as agents of change. Studies conducted by both the Millennium Challenge Corporation (2016) and Egenti and Omoruyi (2011) demonstrate that basic literacy skills help women to acquire both the knowledge and skills required to improve and develop in all fields, as well as empower them socially and politically.

The study shows that many women face challenges, while others report no challenges (75% affirmative and 25% negative). The responses are likely to vary, as some women are still young mothers with children and husbands and multiple demands that divide their time, especially in the evenings when lessons take place. In addition to the challenges presented by family demands, other challenges including the time and duration of classes, financial issues, lack of support at home, and the stress associated with housekeeping and employment were mentioned as the leading reason for them to drop out, which the interviews confirmed. These results affirm the findings that the roles women play as wives, mothers, learners, community members, and workers could seriously affect learning for real academic achievement and adult development (Harp, 2010).

The confirmation that the adult education participants have classrooms, desks, and chairs in the local government areas studied indicate availability of basic learning facilities. The fact that they do not have access to the school libraries and ICT rooms located in their learning centres shows an uncomfortable gap in today's learning experiences, which sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 emphasized for inclusion for equitable quality education. This opposes the SDG's mantra of "leave no one



behind” in today’s learning resources in information society, which is characterized as one of the prerequisites for a 21<sup>st</sup> century learner (Osuchukwu, 2016).

Chained chairs and desks affect sitting positions and can result in ineffective learning. It takes an enabling environment for desired learning to take place. The interviews confirmed this result and highlighted the fact that adult evening school students are restricted in their use of the facilities as dictated by the morning school staff. These restrictions could have impacted the women’s satisfaction with their learning experience (25% not satisfied). Some of the women stated that they have never touched a computer nor been in a library, but would love to access these resources, potentially impacting their satisfaction levels. The implication is that the developmental benefits of education and information, which could have added values to their learning, will elude them in achieving all around quality education as SDG4 proposes. The theory on women’s adult learning needs to be expanded to consider gender sensitivity in the planning of curriculum and programs in order to make it more accessible and satisfactory. Hence, adjusting resources for learning can help facilitate learning and active participation and reduce the incidences of overwhelming situations.

The responses on the perception of challenges women face in adult learning centres established the fact that missing the opportunity of basic education at a prime age can pose serious difficulties in trying to regain that opportunity as an adult. Nonetheless, the women still derive satisfaction and broaden their knowledge through adult education programs. This participation shows that all hope is not lost for these women. They can still attain their goals and improve their lives through adult education.

## **Conclusion**

The need to acquire basic education and access to information acts as a bridge from misery to hope. Being literate in today’s information society will help in improving knowledge and eliminating social exclusion. It is critical that women are supported to seek education irrespective of the difficulties in order to be part of sustainable development. Literacy will enable them to have a voice, participate, and contribute as first class citizens in decision-making processes. Hence, this study discovered that:

1. Many women participate in adult education programs, from the stay-at-home mothers to the traders, and from various age brackets. Even though some of them are still in the primary level, they all look forward to achieving success and writing certificate examinations.
2. Many women face undeniable challenges, which include family demands, stress, finances, time, and the duration of classes, among others.
3. Although the availability of classrooms, chairs, and desks is appreciated, the resources for learning should include accessibility of library services and ICT lessons, which these women agreed would add value to their learning.
4. The majority of women anticipated that they would encounter challenges, but they persevered despite these overwhelming challenges because they knew it would improve their social and political standing in society.

## **Implication of the Study to Library and Information Services**

When women cannot attain basic education, marginalization and social exclusion continue to relegate them to the background, perpetuating the gendered economic and educational gap for women and their children. This gap can be closed through the various stimulating learning

experiences library engagement can offer. This study found that adult women learners desire access to libraries, with their resources and technology, in order to enhance their education and their educational experience. This study revealed that not having access to these resources affected the women's perception of the adult learning programs. Enhancing education with proper learning resources will improve learning. Therefore, library and information services should be extended to the women in adult education centres to create the right attitude for active involvement in society and the economy.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The government, policy makers, and other stakeholders in education should regularly assess the adult education program for improvement and inclusion of all necessary resources.
2. There is a need for women's groups like National Association of Women in Academics (NAWACS), Association of Women Librarians in Nigeria (AWLIN), and other highly respected groups to form partnerships with NGOs and agencies for the purposes of empowering women and advocating for better learning experiences for them.
3. It is important that libraries and other information centres extend their services to the adult learning centres for successful integration of equitable quality education.
4. More needs analysis should be carried out in order to come up with solutions that are relevant to the needs of women in adult education programs in order to guard against unnecessary difficulties in participating.

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