

# Low Literacy & Women

May 2018

For many of us the idea of literacy is related to a person's ability to read and write. However, "literacy" as a term and a concept is now being used in broader ways to refer not only the ability to use written language but our ability to gain knowledge, solve problems, navigate social systems, use technology and even think critically about our environment.

As a professional in the family violence sector in Tasmania, working predominantly with women, I am compelled to think about how low literacy might impact on women differently to how it might impact on men; and on this subject I will address a few key points.

Given the established links between literacy levels and a range of outcomes for children, women's low literacy has flow-on effects for society more broadly.

Women in our communities are by default the carers. Partly influenced by men's higher earning capacity, it is predominantly assumed that women are primary carers to children: managing the health care for the family, doing the majority of the shopping and cooking in the house and therefore being responsible for the family's nutritional intake. In the 15-64 years age group 72.5 per cent of primary carers are women (ABS).

The time spent caring for children serves to nurture them, provide role models, help with educational needs, and teach life and socialisation skills. This time shapes the child's view of the world and lays the foundations of self-perception and adult potential.

Our educational – and economic – outcomes are associated with our families of origin. A parent's education will partly determine that of their children. As carers, women have the role of shaping and guiding children's education, starting in the early years and continuing through schooling. There are intergenerational influences on levels of education.

Here I will assert that because of the default roles as carers, the consequences of women's compromised literacy has a direct flow-on effect to following generations such that patterns of education and engagement become entrenched and encultured.

The issue behind this may be in part due to the reduced access to the benefits of literacy, but a subtler consequence is the reduced experience of citizenship, reduced confidence and reduced sense of legitimacy – resulting in social marginalisation.

This phenomenon is compounded by society's increased dependence on technology and web-based interfaces and less face-to-face service delivery for many essential government services. Without the competence to access and negotiate our sophisticated and evolving public administration systems, people will find it increasingly difficult to (examples only):

- Volunteer at schools – now requiring a working with vulnerable people card that requires completing an online application, a police check, providing explanation of any criminal charges in writing.
- Navigate judicial processes – this requires understanding of the legal systems and that their highly flexible timeframes can be changed at short notice.
- Attain employment – low level and early entry jobs (labouring, farming, retail, waiting) that used to be considered 'unskilled' now require certification requiring a financial commitment and a high degree of literacy. Job applications for manual jobs can require candidates to reply to complex selection criteria, often via a web interface.

While these factors will impact similarly on men, the broader impact on dependents of female carers are significant.

But there are other consequences to women's compromised literacy.

We now have a clear path that draws a line between gender inequality, rigid gender stereotypes and the experience of family violence.

The systemic oppressions that women face because of their gender are reinforced when they experience compromised literacy, which directly hinders women's full functioning in society. The already-experienced reduced financial capacity, lower paying jobs and scarce access to leadership roles, are compounded when there is a lack of functional literacy skills. Consequently, avoiding abusive relationships or finding safety from violence and abusive relationships is further obstructed if a woman has low literacy (and I refer to both the narrow and expanded definitions).

However, literacy is not a measure of worth nor should it be essential for social participation. We do not yet have full literacy across the whole of community, therefore we need to make sure that the mechanisms to participation don't cut off those with low literacy. People with lower literacy, whether due to educational attainment, intellectual ability, neurodiversity, health or age, should not be at risk of social exclusion, stigmatisation or being relegated to subordinate roles in society.

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*Something to think about: In the course of gaining employment, raising children and developing a career, how might women's experience of low literacy differ to men's?*