

Gender and Analphabetism in the Comoros

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Abstract

This article is the result of a study carried out on the problem of illiteracy in the Comoros, between 2015 and 2018. Comorian girls are the most affected by this scourge, but the most worrying is their high rate of adult illiteracy for multiple reasons.

This work consists of verifying the influence of family, school and individual factors of school dropout among girls depending on the area of residence and identifying the factors that contribute the most. The literacy rate tends to increase among young people between the ages of 12 and 25, unlike adults who have a significant number of illiterates. This lets us say that the country has improved access to school. There are many explanatory factors for improving the literacy situation of young people. According to research carried out with education stakeholders, personal, socio-cultural, economic and educational factors influence school socialization in general and youth literacy in particular. Despite the efforts of the authorities, illiteracy remains a major problem in Comoros. We found in our study that nearly 70% of illiterates are adult girls and almost half live in rural areas. Several countries are struggling against illiteracy and the Comoros are no exception. The study of the determining factors remains an increasing priority in our study to guarantee equal opportunities, to ensure that each young person can build their personal and professional future.

Keywords: Gender; School dropout; Girl; illiterate; under-education; Comoros

INTRODUCTION

The Union of the Comoros, like most Third World countries, is not spared from the difficulties of illiteracy¹ and analphabetism². A large part of the adult population cannot read or write. In recent decades, there has been a slight improvement in the situation, probably due to the increase in schooling and adult literacy. How can illiteracy and illiteracy be combated in the Comoros? It should be noted that 67% of the people in our study are without stable employment.

The various causes of illiteracy among adults are generally interrelated. They create a multitude of obstacles that are often difficult to overcome. The illiterate person often leads a social life. He has difficulty helping his children with their homework. In the world of work, the illiterate person finds himself in a precarious employment situation. Learning a foreign language of communication or computer skills, indispensable tools for today's social life, is almost impossible for the illiterate.

Being illiterate today is a major source of difficulties in social and professional integration. What does illiteracy mean? What are the consequences?

According to UNESCO, an illiterate person is « a person who is unable to read and write, with understanding, a short and simple statement of facts relating to everyday life »³.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our study was conducted in selected regions of the Union of Comoros between January 2019 and July 2020. The objective of this study is to provide some clues that will enable education stakeholders to act in time to considerably reduce the illiteracy rate, especially in rural areas, and to institutionalize informal education throughout the territory.

¹ L'illettrisme concerne un adulte qui a été scolarisé mais qui n'a pas acquis une maîtrise suffisante de la lecture, de l'écriture et du calcul pour être autonome au quotidien, selon l'Agence nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme

² L'analphabetisme concerne un adulte qui n'a jamais été scolarisé et qui doit tout apprendre, selon l'Agence nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme

³ UNESCO

Our investigation concerns the problem of informal education and illiteracy in Comoros. Specifically, this study aims to demonstrate the importance of informal education and to raise awareness among the population of the danger of illiteracy, which affects adults in particular. We interviewed 22 people working in the education system, 12 religious leaders and 25 women, most of whom were affected by our study topic.

Data collection tool

During the survey, interviews were conducted using a pre-established questionnaire with the people mentioned above. It allows us to identify all the constraints and assets in this area. An individual survey was conducted with the women most affected by this study and with practicing lawyers. We also consulted documents related to our research theme. All the women in our study were targeted according to age and place of residence. They ranged in age from 13 to 46 years old. Nearly 64% of these women live in rural areas and are not formally employed.

RESULTS

Illiteracy in Comoros

In general, our study is intended to contribute to the fight against illiteracy in Comoros. Specifically, its mission is to denounce the most serious cases of illiteracy and to anticipate preventive actions in order to advocate for youth literacy through awareness raising.

(55%) of the seventy-five (75) million children who do not have access to school are girls and seventy-five (75%) of the illiterates are women. The phenomenon of girls' under-enrollment is explained by their lower access to school and higher dropout rate.

Throughout Africa, and particularly in Comoros, girls face particular obstacles throughout their schooling, such as the traditional social philosophy that a woman's future lies in marriage, early marriage, security conditions and sexual violence.

In our case, girls' illiteracy is mainly due to the social roles they play, which prevent them from accessing the same opportunities as boys, such as early marriage, the girl in the doghouse, and the

incompatibility between Islam and the Muzugu⁴ language, among others. It is in this context that our theme "Illiteracy in the Comoros" fits.

From our study, the causes and socio-economic consequences of illiteracy are multiple. 70% of the people in our survey are illiterate for socio-cultural reasons such as a belief that a woman's future lies in marriage or domestic work for girls etc.

Unwanted pregnancies are also one of the factors of school dropout and/or illiteracy represents 19% of our case.

Repeated repetition of school is a significant indicator and represents 13% of our sample. At the same time, violence against girls in schools, especially corporal punishment and sexual violence, makes families wary of sending their children to school. Unfortunately, we do not have an exact figure on these cases because few people agree to answer us. The taboo aspect of sexual violence hinders our investigation of sexual violence in schools and Koranic schools.

It is important not to overlook family factors among the causes of illiteracy. This is reflected in the low income of parents, the consequences of polygamy, single parenthood, the number of dependent children, the level of education of parents and household poverty.

This situation has important economic, behavioral, social and psychological consequences.

DISCUSSION

a) Schooling and illiteracy

Illiterate people are people in a situation where they do not have a sufficient command of reading and writing. The causes of this phenomenon are multiple and are most often linked to the individuals' backgrounds.

Among the causes of illiteracy, we can cite the lack of schooling or premature school dropout. This is due to several main factors. Either they are linked to the distance between the school and the localities, or by the absence of school and on the other hand because the poverty of the families does not allow the schooling of all the children or even worse, at a time when the school was reserved for

⁴ Mzugu est un nom d'origine africain qui désigne toutes personnes de couleurs blanche

the boys. This situation favors child labor, which is seen as a necessity for the survival of a family, especially in rural areas. Our survey reveals that illiterate people have the impression that they have been rejected in certain activities of community life. They live in absolute insecurity

In all societies, school is considered to be the best way for children to succeed in their future adult life.

b) Difference between illiterate and illiterate

There is a big difference between an illiterate and an illiterate person. A person is said to be illiterate if he or she has been educated but has not reached a sufficient level to master reading and writing. An illiterate person is one who cannot read, write or count. It is a person who has never set foot in an institution dedicated to this purpose.

According to UNESCO, illiteracy is described as « the inability to read and write, with understanding, a short simple sentence related to one's daily life (...) not only as the inability to read and write simple sentences, but also as the inability to "engage in all those activities for which literacy skills are required for the effective functioning of one's group or community ».

III.1 The economic consequences of illiteracy

In the world of work, skills management is essential. As a result, illiterate people have difficulty finding decent work. They often live in absolute poverty with their families.

These consequences are not only for the individual with this problem but also for the society as a whole. The individual has to contribute to the development of his community while the illiterate is often with fewer resources. How can he contribute to the shaping of his population? The illiterate person risks losing his job at any time, especially if the job requires computer skills.

In terms of work organization, there is a shift from organized work to non-routine, informal work. In a formal job, the employee reproduces the same tasks in relation to the skills required to accomplish the tasks assigned to him or her and according to the employer's needs. In contrast to informal work, the employee performs the tasks he or she finds in order to find the day's bread.

Literacy is a fundamental right according to the provisions established by the United Nations Human Rights. Every country

considers that "knowing how to read and write" are basic values on which the human development of a society is based. We note that nearly one third of the population is illiterate, according to UNESCO, the vast majority of whom are women. The rural area has a higher percentage of illiterate people than the urban area. For this reason, literacy projects should be popularized with the support of the Ministry of National Education in order to eradicate this scourge.

The illiteracy rate in Comoros is high at 40.9% according to the MICS 2000 survey. According to the Comoros 2015-2019 DWP report, illiteracy affects more adults than young people and more women than men: the adult literacy rate is 56.2% and the school enrollment rate is 47%. This phenomenon affects 46.6% of young girls at the national level. The adult literacy rate is 78.1%, but we record an illiteracy rate of 58.7% among women. Among older women, 64.5% are illiterate.

In Anjouan, for example, the NGO Naipenda Comores located in Shitsangani in the Anjouanese capital, Mutsamudu, created in 2012 launches projects in favor of literacy in the island. According to an official of this NGO:

We give priority to women in rural areas, as this is where the illiteracy rate is the highest. As for socio-economic reasons, girls leave school earlier than boys, we admit young women from the age of 15 into the classes. However, men are not excluded⁵.

This phenomenon, which affects women in particular, has negative implications for sustainable human development and has only ever been taken into account and treated as a priority by the authorities during the period of the Comorian cultural revolution between 1976 and 1978. Comorians who are literate in their mother tongue or in Arabic have very limited benefits. They find themselves almost isolated in socio-professional and even political life. They often take refuge in a status of notable or religious leader for those who have made the great marriage and those who have studied in depth in Koranic schools. Illiteracy and lack of training affect young people who have dropped out of school and/or are not in school, as well as adults, and is a serious problem.

⁵ Coralie WEBER, « Lire et écrire, un droit pour tous », http://www.interaction-schweiz.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/interaction/dateien/Dateien/Projekte/16_04_Projet_Partneraid_Comores.pdf

The absence of literacy programs aimed at reinforcing the acquisition of basic tools (reading, writing and arithmetic) disadvantages out-of-school and out-of-school youth, especially girls and women.

The country has no facilities for the education and training of illiterate adults, whose numbers are constantly increasing due to the high dropout rate. However, given the youth of the Comorian population (more than half are between 15 and 30 years of age), illiteracy affects a large proportion of this active population.

a) Adult education between 1976 and 1978

It should be noted that two major actions were undertaken in the country for adult education. The first was the mass literacy program conducted between 1976 and 1978, and the second was the National Institute of Education (INE) experiment conducted between 1985 and 1993, with the support of the CNDRS and in partnership with the Canadian Cooperation (CECI), UNESCO and UNICEF in 1992. For this occasion, booklets for learners and guides for literacy teachers were developed and distributed. Literacy trainers and facilitators were trained and pilot centers were opened to teach adults, especially women, to read and write.

In the absence of facilities for the education of out-of-school youth and adults, the only possibilities that exist for the moment for the training of this category of the population are offered in the informal setting, through specialized workshops (car mechanics, carpentry, sewing, masonry, jewelry, welding, plumbing, electricity, etc.).

III.2 Social consequences of illiteracy

An illiterate person encounters serious difficulties on a daily basis in building his or her place in society. According to this study, an illiterate person has difficulties in obtaining and understanding information about community life if it is in a foreign language. According to the same study, the rate of unemployment among illiterate adults exceeds three quarters of the unemployed.

They are surrounded by prejudices about know-how and have difficulty in obtaining civil status documents such as marriage certificates, birth certificates, etc. Illiterate adults are often assisted by a literate person for all activities related to community or village

life that require writing or reading. They are mostly absent from banking operations such as the use of checkbooks or an ATM.

a) Gender and illiteracy

The gap between girls' and boys' schooling is widening, mainly between primary and secondary education. There is no development in a country without the education of the population, especially women. An educated woman is still able to help her children with their homework, to follow their treatment in case of illness and to correctly help the elderly.

Thus, illiteracy is a major obstacle to the emancipation of women and to human and social development. They can get a well-paid job and gain autonomy and reduce their dependence on their husbands. Gender equality in politics, human rights, employment, health, education, local legislation and tradition depends on it.

b) Illiteracy and children's rights

The children, like the adults, have inalienable rights. The children have the right to special protection, especially in the case of the disabled or refugees.

We know that every child has rights:

1. Right to education
2. The right to protection from violence of any kind
3. The right to be protected against any form of discrimination because of his race, religion, origin or sex
4. The right to have a name and a nationality
5. The right to adequate and healthy food
6. The right to health care and to receive age-appropriate care and treatment
7. The right to education
8. The right to be fed, housed and to grow up in good conditions
9. The right to play, to laugh, to dream
10. The right to access information, to express one's opinion and to be heard
11. The right to be protected from violence and exploitation
12. The right to special protection for all refugee and/or disabled children
13. The poverty of illiterate households cannot guarantee the full range of children's rights.

Illiteracy is a factor of political, economic, social and cultural exclusion. Thus, people with low reading and writing skills find it difficult to exercise their rights and participate in community life.

The social and economic consequences of illiteracy are more worrying. They generate social exclusion of a part of the adult population as everywhere in the world. Women are the most affected by this phenomenon⁶.

c) Illiteracy and new technology

In the field of digital technology, illiterates are not able to use the internet unless a third party helps them. Their cell phones are often simple, even if they have the possibility to get android phones for example. Ordinary, online shopping and all other digital devices are a world apart. Comorian illiterates are unable to understand a television program in a foreign language. So illiteracy is not an individual problem, it is first of all a social fact to be eradicated. It is necessary to learn throughout life to reduce the existing gap to this effect.

d) Illiteracy and health

When it comes to health, an illiterate person has difficulty understanding and/or reading the doctor's instructions in medical prescriptions. She could endanger her own life, that of the children and the elderly under her responsibility by ignorance.

In the professional world of Comoros, where unemployment is rampant, the majority of the unemployed, 75% of our study, are illiterate. With no social assistance from the government, they often live on assistance from their relatives, often from the diaspora. They are never financially autonomous and live in absolute precariousness and are often exploited by their employers because an illiterate person is unaware of either labor rights or social benefits.

⁶ Abderemane Soilihi DJAE, *Promouvoir l'égalité homme et femme dans le développement humain et sociale aux Comores*, [thèse de doctorat en sociologie], Université d'Antananarivo, 2019

CONCLUSION

In view of this situation, it is necessary to offer young people and adults the appropriate conditions for their integration into working life. In order to do so, it is necessary to consider the creation and implementation of structures to take charge of their education and professional training. This option would make it possible to fight against idleness, precariousness and delinquency to which young people are exposed and, consequently, against poverty, one of the main challenges of the millennium. Promoting the education of young people and adults who are illiterate is the major challenge for this sub-sector.

"Illiteracy is a subjective notion. It varies according to place, time and the economic and social development issues of the society.

Illiteracy is a subjective notion that depends on arbitrary norms that vary according to place, time and the stakes of economic and social development of the society. In the 19th century, knowing how to sign was enough to avoid being labelled illiterate. Today, with a lower secondary school diploma in one's pocket, one is considered insufficiently trained for the current needs of society. Since the definition of illiteracy is subjective, there can be no scientific measure of it. The extent of the phenomenon will depend on the type of tests used to measure it and the level of difficulty of the tests.