NUN FORMAL EDUCATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Chitra Naik
Non-formal education : Concept

Non-formal education may be described as flexible but well-organized learning arrangements, suited to the needs and convenience of particular groups of learners, in any type of society. In such arrangements, the learning-needs may be conceived in short-term as well as long-term contexts of learner-development. Flexibility being the essential feature of non-formal education, its organization has to reflect (a) a variety of need-based programmes, (b) adjustable curricular units, (c) materials prepared and used in accordance with the learners' purposes and their basic competencies, (d) teaching-learning places and processes suited to learning-needs as well as various local factors, (e) systems of planning, financing, administration, supervision, monitoring and evaluation in which the local community, governmental structures and the learners themselves might participate.

By and large, non-formal education aims at tangible learning outcomes of use to the learner and the community with immediate effect and also by way of an input into further improvement of the learner's personal circumstances along with his or her human and natural surroundings. Therefore, the day-to-day contexts of learning gain importance both for the sake of immediate utility
and as stimulus for further learning, and the non-formal education becomes a improvement of the human condition. If organized thoughtfully in this fashion, self-stimulating and self-sustaining process of learning and development.

Comparability between formal and non-formal education

It is not easy to establish a point by point comparability between non-formal education and the formal system of education, mainly because non-formal education is not a parallel system of education. But non-formal education arrangements can be a healthy influence on the formal system which is conventional, class-room bound, sequential and oriented to those who can enter it at a point of time prescribed by the system and not at their own convenience to meet personal needs. The system insists upon uniform achievement for all in the light of the remote aims laid down by a curriculum which must be transmitted to all learners in a certain 'period of exposure', neither before nor after. These shortcomings are historical. The formal system has originally been devised for the 'custodial care' of children and for the scholastic upbringing of the young belonging to households which can afford to spare them for engaging in full-time studies. In the formal system, the learners cannot expect immediate or short-term rewards. As against the immediate rewards of non-formal learning, the long gestation period of formal education makes it difficult to forecast its contribution to the growth of the individual and society. Taking into account these dissimilarities, the conclusion that there can hardly be any parity between formal and non-formal education, seems
inevitable. While the former has high prestige derived from tradition and the class of society it has been serving, the latter is an innovation and seeks to serve those who have remained beyond the range of traditional academic processes. Consequently, non-formal education is not quite welcome in traditional academic circles. However, it holds much promise as need-based education related to rapid socio-economic change and development. It also shows the path towards further need-based education, the life-long learning which would have to spread developing as well as advanced countries for adjustment to the impact of science on society and the consequent need for the reorientation of its values and attitudes. The concept of non-formal education, therefore, is in harmony with the rapidly changing modern times which are already uncomfortable with the dysfunctionality of conventional formal education.

Non-formal education and development

The conventional, single-track mode of operation of the formal system has resulted in the educational deprivation of large groups of populations, especially in developing countries. This is a great hurdle in the process of development since appropriate information, the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and a general alertness to cope with change are the minimum prerequisites for enabling any individual to contribute to socio-economic development and achieve personal satisfactions and well-being. Among the educationally deprived groups, there is considerable diversity of learning-needs. That is why non-formal arrangements prove pertinent to their situation and enable them to grapple with individual and community
problems. Part-time programmes giving practical knowledge, functioning under various development departments like health, agriculture, energy, forestry, industry and commerce can directly help people to acquire improved production-skills. They can learn managerial techniques and gain knowledge of rules and regulations which facilitate production activities. Non-formal programmes can be geared to local contexts, conditions, and type of learners. Vast numbers of tribal, rural and urban illiterate adults and children deprived of primary schooling, can be covered by non-formal programmes which may often combine academic learning with socio-economic knowledge and skills. A variety of localized learning-arrangements can be organized as part-time, own-time, spare-time, non-formal education related to development. Mobilizing the communities to participate in planning and managing non-formal education can by itself become important investment in local development. The capacity of non-formal programmes to draw support from local resources has been demonstrated in many a pioneering effort in non-formal education. Communities have been stimulated to attempt congruent planning of the growth of local natural and human resources, thus promoting development by the people at the grass-roots level. If perceived as a package of learning which correlates all human resource development activities like health, welfare and environmental protection and improvement, non-formal education can become a significant way for developing countries to move towards their multifaceted goal of development.
The situation of women and girls

In most of the developing countries, the traditional ascription of 'feminine' and 'masculine' standards of behaviour, division of labour, family-responsibilities, and the barriers in the participation of women in the political life of the community, have resulted in denying to women equal educational opportunity and chances of participation in the development effort now essential for converting traditional societies into modern states. Though women carry a heavy load of work for the maintenance and well-being of the family, their contribution is not recognized since, traditionally, the man is looked upon as the 'bread-winner' and the woman as 'housekeeper' and dependent on man for her sustenance. In the rural areas, even poor parents often send the male children to school at a great personal sacrifice, but female children are kept without schooling. The attitude is that their housekeeping can be done without any education as such, and that since girls will be married out of the household, any investment in them would be a waste. The feeling that girls are not an economic asset to the family and neither their education nor their health require any attention, these are the main reasons for the low enrollment of girls in primary education, and their high dropout rate even if they are enrolled. From about age 9, girls are treated as household apprentices to be trained by older women in the skills of washing, cooking, cleaning, child-care, and such other 'womanly' tasks which their future in-laws may demand. In very poor families, girls often work as wage-labourers or are sent out as domestic workers. As a consequence, girls receive only traditional skills and absorb traditional attitudes of inferiority.
subordination and incapability, which prevent them from undertaking tasks requiring thought and intelligent performance. This situation of girls and women not only hampers the overall process of development but has an adverse effect on the management of the day-to-day affairs of the family, their own health, the health and education of their children. It is the general experience that till the age of about five, female as well as male children are cared for by the mother and other women in the household. Lack of education and self-esteem on the part of women adversely affect the cognitive, affective and social development of young children almost permanently. Female children get conditioned to accept an inferior status and the male child begins to underrate women and becomes aggressive.

By organizing non-formal education programmes for girls and women, especially in the rural areas where the situation of women is generally more unsatisfactory than in the urban areas, a better balanced male-female relationship might become possible and help society to progress.

Non-formal education of girls and women: The general picture

In the non-formal education programmes so far tried out for girls and women, some common findings have emerged. These can be broadly summarized as follows:

(i) General constraints in women's participation in NFE

(a) Women rarely have enough home-support to engage in learning activities, (b) their daily chores like washing, cleaning, cooking, fetching water, collecting fuel, and working in the fields or at other family occupations leave them little spare time to think of
educating themselves, (c) frequent pregnancies, confinements, children's illness, malnutrition because of their low status, affect their own health adversely and they have little motivation to improve their lot, (d) even those who aspire to join a non-formal learning group are deterred from doing so if women instructors are not available, (e) they cannot leave home to attend programmes held outside their village or even their locality.

(ii) Motivational factors: It has been assumed that in the non-formal education of women, three elements need to figure prominently: (a) literacy and continuation education, (b) health, (c) income-generation skills. The best approach for getting women to come together for non-formal education has been through health, particularly their own health-problems and child-health. In the sphere of income-generation, skills in food-preserving and food-processing have received a greater response than manufacturing goods and craft-work objects for sale. The lack of skills of marketing and lack of ready markets has been a constraint in income-generation activities.

As regards health, three problems have been noticed: (a) (some useful but some useless and even harmful), (b) superstitious practices related to birth, death, childhood diseases, deliveries, and remedies in general, and (c) irrational beliefs about the properties of different food-stuffs and food-taboos in certain ailments.

(iii) Irregular attendance at non-formal centres: The heavy pressures of household drudgery, looking after sick children or other members of the family, work outside the household, and personal ill-health, seasonal priorities of work, distance of centre from home, unsatisfactory road-communications, hampers regular attendance.
Non-formal education of girls

The focus of the NFE of girls is generally to help them complete primary education. Since younger girls of age 6-8 are often sent to school, it is the older girls (9-14 age-group) who have never been enrolled or have dropped out without permanent literacy that are the clients for part-time NFE courses at the primary stage. This group suffers from most of the constraints enlisted in the foregoing account. Therefore, their NFE has to be designed in a manner which recognizes their difficulties and tries to help them learn with as much speed and facility as possible. The curriculum, materials, learning-place, instructors and evaluation have to be provided in the light of their socio-economic background, but ensuring at the same time that their attainment reaches the expected levels of learning at the primary stage. The question of equivalence with the attainment of pupils in formal primary schools has to be borne in mind in designing NFE for girls of school-going age. An experiment in NFE conducted by the Indian Institute of Education looked into the problems of NFE for girls. A brief resume of the kind of curriculum and other arrangements made in this experiment is given below:

Curriculum

The curriculum attempts to cover the areas of skill, information and knowledge that every primary-age child must possess, viz (a) language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, (b) computation skills of counting, measuring, estimating, and putting these to use in addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, identification of similar and dissimilar sets, maintenance of
accounts, making objects and doing various daily transactions, (c) human body and its health and hygiene, environmental factors of health and hygiene, common illness and remedies, nutrition, care of the sick and first-aid (to some extent), usefulness of exercise, sports and games for good health, (d) concept of history as 'looking into the past human effort to overcome difficulties in development through constructive action' by studying the past of mainly the family and the village (interviews of old people, leaders, officials and others, may be used for this purpose), (e) concept of geography by studying the local environment (flora, fauna, agriculture, water resources, topography, etc.), (f) aesthetic and cultural activities: singing, dramatizing, graphic art, craft-work, (g) reasoning skills by observation of natural phenomena, comparing and contrasting properties and characteristics of natural objects, handling simple science equipment and performing basic experiments.

In a curriculum of this type, there is considerable scope for local adaptations. For example in aesthetics, girls can undertake remunerative craft-work or they can do skilled work in 'making things' as exercises in computing and measuring. Language, history, geography, sports and games can become social activities. Science can be treated as 'play' for problem solving. Relating the curriculum to family and society can lead to automatic social evaluation of the curriculum and of the achievement of the pupils. Formative and summative testing is done through instructors and by pupil-groups themselves is a normal process. But the 'social evaluation' of the learning process helps to mobilize the community towards support to the education of girls.
Instructors for NFE for girls

The problem of finding instructors for girls' non-formal education can be satisfactorily solved if the local community is persuaded to form an 'Education Committee' to look after NFE arrangements. A set of recruitment criteria can be supplied to the Committee, giving it a clear idea about (i) the salary of the instructor, (ii) duration of the teaching-learning programme, (iii) training to be imparted to the instructor, (iv) the curriculum, and (v) the special responsibility of the Committee to mobilize community support to the selected instructor, whether man or woman.

(Another way to find instructors is to identify those who are already engaged in importing some type of instruction or the other in development programmes and orienting them to conduct innovative non-formal education. This is not easy, but could be given a trial if the situation calls for such a step.)

A special quality of the instructors has to be their potential for establishing a rapport with the learners. Since an authoritarian instructor obstructs the learning process, the readiness of the instructor to become a 'senior partner in learning' is of the greatest importance. The instructor's socio-economic status, aspirations, and habits need to be as close to those of the learners to make NFE successful. The language of the instructor has to be the same as that of the pupils or at least akin to it, for establishing direct communication.

Class-size, accommodation, supervision

The questions of class-size, accommodation and supervision are inter-related. In NFE centres, about 20 pupils can learn comfortably
through group-work and individual attention. The class-size determines the number of learning-centres to be established. The accommodation is to be decided on the basis of the surveys of each village and habitation not only to decide the number of centres but the localities in which the pupil-clusters are found in adequate numbers. It has been found that attendance is good if the NFE centres are located as close to the homes of the girls as possible.

The number of centres in a given cluster of villages and hamlets determines the number of supervisors. Supervision by part-time supervisors or by full-time supervisors of day-schools giving some time to supervise about 6 to 10 NFE centres can work well. But the supervisors must be given thorough training in the objectives and processes of NFE.

**Equivalence with formal education**

The question of equivalence of NFE with formal primary education is raised more by administrators than by the parents of girls in the NFE centres. Establishing equivalence is usually a matter of administering formative and summative tests, based on the language and mathematics curriculum for formal and non-formal education which do not differ much. But in case a pupil desires to take the formal certificate examination she can do so, if helped to study the prescribed text-books after finishing the NFE course. A bridge can thus be built between the two.

**Non-formal education of women**

Organizing NFE for women is a more challenging task than NFE for girls. While the custom of sending children to school can
accommodate female children too, permitting women to learn something is a non-customary activity. In a traditional, rural situation, it is very difficult to persuade women to spare even an hour per day to learn something worthwhile. One can argue that to be able to read, write and acquire the skills essential to keep good health for oneself and one's family, are inescapable aspects of creating personal satisfactions; but the arguments do not convince a shy, tired and timid group of women. Often, projects of health-service or religious discourses or entertainment have to break the ice before more or less regular NFE can begin.

The general aspects of women's NFE may be briefly stated as follows:

1. to reduce women's drudgery by introducing them to suitable technology for use in the home and the workplace
2. to promote income-generation activities
3. to improve health, hygiene, sanitation, and home environment
4. to promote better child-care, child-nutrition, and reduce the incidence of childhood diseases and child-mortality
5. to make for a more satisfying social and cultural life
6. to promote greater adjustment within the family and with oneself through intelligent analysis of one's situation and problem-solving
7. to acquire skills in literacy and numeracy

The roles of development departments concerned with agriculture, cottage-industries, food-processing and food-preservation, health and nutrition, cooperation, social welfare and education, are important for the promotion of NFE for women. If the roles are
combined as and when necessary and possible, truly need-based programmes of NFE can emerge. This implies a 'project' approach to women's NFE and micro-planning of NFE at the level of village-clusters, individual villages and population-groups. The project-approach facilitates identification of the socio-economic needs of the local population, local resources and constraints and the types of clients for whom NFE would have to be designed.

It is the general experience that identification of highly motivated 'animators', supported by the community leaders, can persuade women to participate in learning activities. The first step in the NFE of women consists of bringing them together for some familiar activity or the other, like making preserves and pickles, singing together, listening to a religious discourse or for relaxation activities like watching a film or a play. Use of audio-visual aids helps women to open out and speak. Once they get used to coming together as groups, they begin to participate in discussions and learning activities. Beginning the learning programme with information on health, particularly child-care and maternal health, has always been found useful.

For organizing women's learning centres, the pattern of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) supported by UNICEF in India, is useful. In these centres, not only health but many other matters of interest to women can be discussed, information imparted on savings and credit systems, skill training or craft-work can be undertaken, and mass-media can be used for orientation towards development ideas and programmes.