Adult Literacy Course as a Space of Empowerment: To What Extent Is It Possible In A Course in People's Education Center In Ankara?

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Abstract

Literacy education for adults, both historically and presently, has often been reduced to teaching a technical skill, disconnected from social practices and broader sociocultural contexts. This limited approach fails to recognize literacy education as a tool for empowerment. This research analyzes the approach adopted to solve the chronic illiteracy problem, which particularly affects women in Türkiye, and evaluates literacy courses for adults at People Education Centers from a women's empowerment perspective. Drawing on a qualitative study of a literacy course in a central Ankara neighbourhood, including observations and interviews with eight women participants, the study uses Stromquist's (2009) empowerment framework and the New Literacy Studies (NLS) approach. The course created a social space for women, allowing them to step outside traditional domestic roles and gain control over their time. While psychological and cognitive empowerment occured, economic and political empowerment were very limited. The article argues that literacy courses designed with a gender equality frame, taught by educators with

adult education perspective, and set within the NLS framework would significantly contribute to women's empowerment.

Keywords: women's empowerment, illiteracy of women in Türkiye, New Literacy Studies

Introduction

In Türkiye, illiteracy disproportionately affects women, the illiterate population is 1,879,329, with 1,573,968 of them being women (TUIK, 2022). In other words, four out of five illiterate individuals in Türkiye are women, framing illiteracy as a critical issue of gender inequality and structural social injustice. Moreover, when these people are given the opportunity to learn literacy, teaching is usually limited to learning the letters and words. This is far from creating an atmosphere in which adults ask critical questions about why they did not receive a basic education. Shannon's (2000) Marxist critique of reading education provides a valuable perspective through which to understand this disconnection. He argues that educational systems, shaped by capitalist ideologies, reduce learning to the mechanistic transfer of information, thereby stripping it of its deeper humanistic dimensions. This approach often overlooks the personal, social and emotional aspects of education that are vital to human development.

In Türkiye, People Education Centers (PECs) serve as the main public education providers for illiterate adults. The educational content, methods, and teacher quality at these centers have been the subject of extensive research, which has critiqued the limited approach to literacy education. Scholars (Nohl and Sayılan, 2004; Kağıtçıbaşı et al., 2005; Yıldız, 2006; Yıldız, 2011; Yazlık, 2013; Gökçe and Yıldız, 2018) argue that literacy teaching in Türkiye is often treated as a

technical skill, disconnected from the sociocultural context in which it is situated. Yıldız (2006) critiques this view, emphasizing that such an approach reduces literacy to a neutral act, overlooking its potential to amplify marginalized voices.

And this is certainly a basic problem of adult illiteracy which is valid for a massive part of the world. Literacy education should not be viewed as just a technical skill, but as a powerful tool for social justice — a means to empower individuals, challenge inequality, and transform society. Freire (2006) emphasized that learning to read and write is deeply political, tied to how people understand and act in the world. Building on this, educators such as Janks (2010) and Comber (2001) have shown how critical literacy can help students question power structures and engage with issues that matter in their communities. More recently, Paris and Alim (2014) argue that literacy should sustain the cultural identities of diverse learners, not just competency.

As Bender-Slack (2018) illustrates in her analysis of the Nicaraguan literacy campaign, literacy serves as a means of empowerment, enabling historically excluded groups to assert their rights, participate in democratic processes, and challenge existing power structures. Failing to recognize these social dimensions risks reinforcing the very inequalities literacy education seeks to address.

Theoretical Background

This study is grounded in two intersecting bodies of literature: New Literacy Studies (NLS) and the empowerment framework, particularly as it relates to gender. Together, these perspectives shape how literacy is conceptualized not merely as a skill but as a site of social transformation.

The New Literacy Studies (NLS)

New Literacy Studies (NLS) views literacy not merely as the ability to read and write but as a set of social practices embedded in specific social and historical contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2012). The NLS framework invites an examination of how educational inequality is rooted in institutionalized practices that historically shaped access to education.

The gap in adult literacy today is not just about whether people choose to learn or not — it runs much deeper. It is the result of long-standing inequalities tied to history, poverty, and exclusion. As Freire (2006) argues, struggles with literacy often reflect the effects of systemic oppression, not individual failure. Building on that, researchers like Prins (2005) and Rogers and Street (2012) show how factors like race, class, and where someone lives can shape whether they ever get real access to meaningful literacy education. These challenges are not new, they have been built into the institutions over time.

Educational systems have often been designed in ways that privileged certain groups—based on race, class, gender, or geography—while systematically excluding others. Uneven access to resources and exclusionary educational policies meant that many communities, and women in particular, were denied the opportunity to gain basic literacy skills. These institutional practices have had enduring effects, creating barriers that continue to impact generations. As a result, current patterns of adult illiteracy reflect the deep-rooted consequences of past educational injustices that still shape access and opportunity today.

In many cases, social, political, and economic structures perpetuate these disparities. Studies made through this perspective aim to move beyond the "autonomus model of literacy" as Street (1984) names that defines literacy as getting a set of cognitive abilities. For example in her recent project about teaching English to children and young adults in India, Uganda and Ghana,

Papen (2023) gets inspired by the NLS approach and moves on with multiliteracies, multimodality and real literacies as concepts developed from the idea of literacy as social practices. Buddeberg, Dutz, Heilmann, Stammer and Grotlüschen (2021) display how low literacy skills affect participation into political discussions and reaching thrustworthy information on health issues. Another dimension of literacy covers mathematical literacy and Gal, Grotlüschen, Tout and Kaiser (2020) discuss the link between mathematical literacy and vulnerability of adults which also intersects with the illiterate groups' chronic problems. Carpentieri (2019) discusses the the evidence problems in studies on adult literacy and numeracy and offers a strategy that emphasizes long term positive impacts of adult literacy and numeracy education. Reder, Gauly and Lechner (2020) study the longitudinal nationally representative data and put forth the prominence of engagement in reading and math practices in daily life. Their findings display the improvement of proficiency in reading and numeracy through daily practice among adults who compose the German component of the PIACC.

On the other hand social change has been mobilized through literacy movements like Cuba's *Yo, Sí Puedo* campaign, which sought to address the entrenched inequalities. As Boughton and Durnan (2014) argue, the Cuban literacy campaign of the 1960s was not simply about teaching reading and writing but about radically transforming the education system itself. The participatory, community-based model of the campaign empowered marginalized populations, especially in rural areas, to become literate and politically active. This model illustrates how literacy can be a powerful tool for social change, challenging historical inequities and offering a platform for broader social transformation.

Empowerment Through Literacy

The connection between empowerment and literacy has been a central theme in critical education literature (Freire, 2006; Shor, 1992; Giroux, 1998; Darder, 2013). Empowerment through literacy is often framed as a process by which individuals gain the tools to better understand and navigate their social, political, and economic realities. As Street (1993) argues, literacy is not just a set of technical skills but a socially situated practice that enables individuals to engage with and challenge the power structures around them.

Through literacy, individuals gain the ability to critically analyze their circumstances and advocate for change. Stromquist (2009) adds that literacy, in this context, goes beyond functional reading and writing. It involves developing critical consciousness, allowing individuals to confront social injustices and work toward greater equality. From a Freirean perspective, literacy becomes a vehicle for both personal and collective empowerment, fostering the ability to understand how power relations shape cultural, political, social, and economic conditions. As Freire (2006) asserts, one must not only "read the word but the world," making literacy a tool for critically engaging with and challenging the structures of oppression in society.

Empowerment, in this view, is a process that requires raising awareness on multiple levels. According to Sadan (1997), this consciousness-raising involves understanding the deep relations that shape both the individual and society and how they mutually interact. Through this process, individuals come to recognize how power relations influence their lives and develop strategies to act upon these understandings, becoming agents of social change.

Shor (1992) argues that an empowering pedagogy should be participatory, effective, problem-solving, multicultural, democratic, research-driven, and active. However, such a pedagogy must also consider the social relations of difference—such as race, class, and gender—that are deeply entwined with capitalism and inequality. As Carpenter and Mojab (2023) note, these social relations shape how knowledge is produced and distributed in educational settings, reinforcing power dynamics that perpetuate social and economic disparities. An empowering pedagogy must not only promote democratic ideals but also critically engage with these inequalities, challenging and transforming them.

Gender and Literacy

Although illiteracy is often seen primarily as a women's issue, the issue is frequently not addressed from a gender perspective that centers women's empowerment. A Marxist feminist approach to education emphasizes the explicit theorization of praxis, consciousness, and ideology as key elements of learning. Carpenter and Mojab (2023) argue that this framework helps uncover how gender, race, and class inequalities shape educational experiences and perpetuate power structures. By focusing on praxis—practical, transformative action—Marxist feminism advocates for education that not only critiques social inequalities but also actively seeks to change them, fostering critical consciousness among marginalized groups.

In many countries, illiteracy is seen as a women's issue, and empowerment strategies often focus on integrating women into existing systems through economic and educational supports. However, critical feminist perspectives, such as those advanced by Stromquist (1995; 2009), recognize that true empowerment involves challenging the underlying power relations that

perpetuate gender inequalities. Stromquist's (2012) framework of empowerment includes four dimensions: cognitive, psychological, political, and economic. These dimensions address the critical understanding of personal realities, the feeling of self-respect, the awareness of power inequalities, and the capacity for economic independence. This article uses Stromquist's framework to analyze the course impacted women in four areas of empowerment exploring the intersection of gender, literacy, and empowerment in their everyday lives.

Case and Methodology

Research Context: Setting and the Participants

This research was conducted at Başkent Halk Eğitim Merkezi (Başkent People Education Center) in the Dikmen neighborhood of Çankaya, Ankara. Originally a shantytown that emerged in the 1950s, Dikmen has undergone significant urban transformation in recet decades (Mutlu, 2007). It now reflects a diverse socio-economic profile shaped by internal migration and housing policy.

Demographics and Educational Backgound

Age range	38 to 66 (one aged 38; the rest between 58-66
Marital status	6 married; two widowed
Marriage age	Most married at 15; one at 13
Education level	6 had never attended school. Two had brief formal education- one attended for a year, the other completed only first grade and had higher literacy skill compared to the rest.
Literacy course attendance	3 were attending for the first time 3 for the second time 2 for the third time

The table provides the demographics and educational background of the participants. Most of the group is over 58 years old and this underlines the problematic of old age in illiteracy. Another critical problem appears in the group is child marriage. Child marriage deprived these women of their basic education right. The responsibilities that come with marriage, having children, having to work due to financial difficulties, pressure from one's spouse or spouse's family, etc. have prevented participants from having the opportunity to learn to read and write.

Socioeconomic and Family Background

The interviewees were 8 women, 7 of whom were born in villages and one in a town. Six of them moved to Ankara after marriage, and their birthplaces and migration histories revealed that illiteracy has become an urban issue. Five of the women had lived in shanty houses after migrating to Ankara but were all living in apartments during the interviews.

The connection between the participants' low literacy levels and their families' educational backgrounds was clear: 7 of the participants had illiterate mothers, and fathers generally had higher educational levels. Additionally, all the participants' husbands were primary school graduates.

The participants shared similar socio-economic constrains. All described their families as economically insecure, living "paycheck to paycheck" and budgeting carefully. Only two women had formal employment histories. One was retired, another was still working. Others had worked sporadically- in a family owned shop, in domestic cleaning, or doing needlework. Three of these women had never worked outside the home.

Yıldız (2006: 83) suggests that illiterate adults are "less likely to work, but work experience often increases the need for literacy". Observations during the study align with this finding, as working women in the study appeared to benefit from the literacy course more than homemakers.

Methodological Approach

This study draws on New Literacy Studies (NLS), critical education perspective related to literacy and feminist approaches to adult learning. These frameworks guided both the research design and the interpretation of data. Given the limitations of theoretical studies alone, fieldwork was essential for centering women's voices and lived experiences.

Data Collection Process

The first researcher attended the literacy course twice weekly during two terms (March-May and November- January). Prolonged field observation facilitated trust-building and allowed the researcher to observe classroom dynamics, teacher attitutes, and informal interactions particularly around issues of gender and empowerment.

Trust was not immediately given, especially since half of the participants identified as Alevi, a historically marginalized ethno-religious group in Türkiye. Participants voiced skepticism about the researcher's intentions. These concerns shaped the two phases of the fieldwork continuously and required sensitivity, transparency and repeated clarification of the research goals.

To build rapport, the researcher shared personal reflections and field notes with the participants, emphasized the collaborative and justice oriented goals of the

study and reiterated the importance of their stories in addressing women's literacy and empowerment.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with women who had attended the course for at least two terms and consented to participate. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes to one hour and followed a semi-structured format focused on life stories, literacy and gendered experiences.

While only two interviews were audio-recorded (with consent), detailed notes were taken for the rest. These were later reviewed and confirmed by participants, maintaining accuracy and ethical transparency.

The researcher positioned herself not as an authority but as a co-learner, fostering an egalitarian relationship. Participants often viewed themselves as "students" in a hierarchical sense, so this reciprocal approach helped open space for more authentic sharing.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data, including field notes and interview transcripts, were analyzed using the ethnographic methods outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011). The process involved thorough reading and memo writing, open and thematic coding, organizing the data around key empowerment dimensions based on Stromquist's (2009) framework. These four dimensions guided the coding and interpretation. Here psychological empowerment refers to increases in confidence, self-awareness, and emotional resilience. Cognitive empowerment refers to gaining knowledge and critical consciousness. Economic

empowerment refers to access to resources, income-generating opportunities, and financial independence. And lastly political empowerment covers active engagement in decision- making and increased political voice. These categories form the structure for the findings sections that follow.

Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment, as a process of gaining control over one's life and environment, is often characterized by a shift in how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others. As Stromquist (2012) notes, it is essential that women first experience a transformation in their self-awareness and confidence before they can fully engage in social or political spheres. This transformation is visible in the participants' stories, where learning to read and write allowed them to gain a sense of autonomy and self-confidence that was previously inaccessible. This change mirrors findings by UNESCO (2000), which indicate that literacy has a significant impact on self-perception, particularly for women who have long been marginalized or disenfranchised.

Furthermore, the participants' sense of empowerment was notably enhanced by their interactions with other women facing similar struggles. Group solidarity and shared experiences played a crucial role in mitigating the emotional isolation that often accompanies illiteracy. The supportive dynamic within the class fostered not just learning, but a sense of collective agency. This powerful dynamic in adult learning here underlines the role of social support networks in adult education. By voicing their frustrations and asserting their right to study, the participants began to overcome feelings of guilt and self-doubt, which are frequently associated with the social stigma of illiteracy (Kağıtçıbaşı et al., 2005). This collective empowerment is consistent with the social-psychological

model of empowerment, which underscores the importance of both personal growth and social interaction in overcoming powerlessness (Prins, 2008).

The experiences of the participants reveal a profound sense of insecurity rooted in their illiteracy, with their daily lives shaped by a deep sense of fear and isolation. As illustrated by Sevda's statement, "For the fear of being made to sign something, I would not open the door," and Firdevs's hesitancy in navigating the city due to her inability to read road signs, it becomes evident that illiteracy not only limits access to practical tasks but also creates a pervasive sense of powerlessness in social interactions. The women expressed a psychological burden where even basic tasks became sources of anxiety, confirming the impact of illiteracy on their psychological well-being. This aligns with Stromquist's (2009) perspective that psychological empowerment forms the foundation of the broader empowerment process, enabling individuals to reclaim control over their lives. For these women, the lack of literacy constrained their ability to interact meaningfully with the world, fostering feelings of inadequacy and helplessness (Stromquist, 2009; Prins, 2008).

Overcoming a Sense of Cognitive Defeat

One of the critical aspects of psychological empowerment in this context is overcoming the sense of cognitive defeat, which can be understood through the lens of Weiner's (1985) attribution theory. When individuals repeatedly fail or are confronted with challenges, they may attribute their struggles to inherent personal flaws, which undermines their sense of self-efficacy. This was evident in the initial stages of the literacy program, where many participants, particularly those like Aysel, felt a sense of defeat due to their prior experiences of failure in education. As Aysel recounts her initial reluctance to participate in the program, her feelings of inadequacy were compounded by her self-

perception of being "too old" or "too incapable" to succeed. These feelings are consistent with Weiner's (1985) notion of "sense of cognitive defeat" where failure leads individuals to believe they are powerless to change their situation. However, the supportive environment within the literacy course, especially the encouragement from the fellow students, played a pivotal role in dismantling these feelings of cognitive defeat. This is consistent with the work of Cobos-Sanchiz et al. (2022) who emphasize the importance of positive reinforcement in learning activities of adults. Despite the traditional, teacher-centered structure of the course, the students benefited from the community-based support, which aligned with Kağıtçıbaşı et al. (2005), who suggest that mutual support and encouragement among peers are critical components in adult learning settings. This dynamic underscores the importance of recognizing both individual and collective efforts in adult education. As Robinson-Pant (2014) asserts, adult education programs must consider both the personal and communal aspects of empowerment. Aysel's eventual success in the program, overcoming her doubts and insecurities, not only reflects her personal growth but also serves as an inspiration to other participants, further cementing the idea that empowerment is a collective process. The role of community in overcoming cognitive defeat is a critical takeaway from this study and reinforces the broader argument that psychological empowerment is foundational to more comprehensive social change (Stromquist, 2009). Forming spaces outside the literacy classroom to enable these women practice their literacy skills socially as NLS offers would also feed their empowerment more.

Improvement of Self-Confidence and Positive Feelings for the Future: "How One Feels, I Mean, Free!"

A major shift in self-esteem emerged among nearly all participants following their literacy education. As Sevda shared, "I used to know needlework and

everything, except reading. I learned that as well, and I am very happy," this statement epitomizes the psychological breakthrough that often accompanies the acquisition of literacy. The ability to engage with written text offered a symbolic form of empowerment, allowing these women to express themselves with greater confidence and self-assurance. This transformation is in line with Robinson-Pant's (2014) findings, which highlight how adult literacy can foster a sense of freedom by enabling individuals to express themselves more fully in social contexts.

Moreover, Selma's comment, "How one feels, I mean, free," echoes the liberating effect that literacy has on self-perception, which is consistent with the work of Kotsapas (2010). Kotsapas argues that literacy plays a pivotal role in dismantling the cognitive and emotional barriers to self-expression, allowing individuals to overcome the internalized shame that often accompanies illiteracy. The participants' renewed confidence also resonated with their family dynamics, as seen in Selma's ability to read fairytales to her grandchild. This newfound capacity to perform socially valued tasks, such as reading aloud, is a direct manifestation of psychological empowerment, reinforcing the idea that empowerment is not just an individual achievement but also a process that enriches familial and communal relationships. Stromquist also highlights (2012) how engaging in communicative educational activities can bolster women's self-efficiency and enhance their social roles within the family and the community. However, the process of empowerment is not without its challenges, particularly in relation to age. As Yıldız (2006) discusses, age-related stereotypes often hinder adults from fully embracing education. This societal perception of adult education as a "youth activity" is deeply ingrained in many cultures, and as noted by Yıldız (2006), overcoming these societal views is one of the primary obstacles to successful adult education programs. For many of the women in this study, their age acted as both a barrier and a catalyst—posing initial doubts

about their ability to learn, yet also prompting them to challenge entrenched cultural assumptions about aging and learning.

Despite the prevailing skepticism, the transformative effects of literacy were profound. Firdevs's dream of reading the newspaper with a cup of tea illustrates how literacy opened up new possibilities for self-actualization, previously unimaginable in her illiterate state. This aligns with the concept of "transformative learning" (Mezirow, 1991), which suggests that learning is most empowering when it leads to shifts in how individuals view themselves and their potential. Firdevs's dream also speaks to the broader idea of literacy as a tool for cultivating autonomy, a theme also discussed by Prins (2008), who stresses that literacy provides individuals with the cognitive tools necessary to envision and strive for a different future.

Cognitive Empowerment

Cognitive empowerment, as explored in this study, is closely tied to women's ability to recognize their marginalized position in society and to challenge the entrenched systems that perpetuate this inequality. As research suggests, raising awareness of gender oppression and empowering women with knowledge about their rights are pivotal steps toward challenging patriarchal systems (Stromquist, 1995; Nussbaum, 2011). This aligns with the findings of this study, where discussions on broader gender relations and marital rights served as critical entry points for the women to reflect on their personal experiences and societal norms.

Gender Inequality and Critical Reflection on Subordination

The participants' emerging awareness of gender inequality is an essential dimension of cognitive empowerment. As evidenced in this study, many of the

women initially held traditional beliefs about gender roles, seeing women as inherently subordinate to men. However, as the course progressed, informal discussions—often sparked by current events or personal stories—played a pivotal role in fostering critical reflection. These discussions enabled participants to challenge deeply ingrained gender ideologies and reconsider their perspectives on gender relations. Selma's statement that "women should work" and "women are superior" encapsulates a significant shift in mindset, indicative of cognitive empowerment through critical reflection.

This shift reflects what hooks (2000) and Freire (2006) discuss as the critical awareness or "conscientization" of the oppressed. In this context, women's recognition of their subjugation and subsequent ability to question and resist these conditions forms the foundation of cognitive empowerment. One of the findings of this study puts forth that discussions of gender inequality led to cognitive shifts in older participants. In other words individuals who initially held traditional views could develop a more egalitarian perspective over time, as they were exposed to different ideas and experiences.

The informal discussions that occurred throughout the course played a crucial role in facilitating cognitive empowerment. According to Kabeer (1999), informal spaces for dialogue are often where the most profound shifts in understanding and attitude occur, especially when these discussions engage with real-life experiences. In this study, discussions on gender-based violence, women's roles in marriage, and public figures who spoke out against abuse provided the participants with an opportunity to connect their personal experiences with broader social issues. These conversations helped break the silence surrounding sensitive topics, such as domestic violence, and empowered the women to voice their opinions and question societal norms.

Moreover, the impact of these discussions is consistent with what empowerment theorists like Malhotra and Schuler (2005) suggest: cognitive empowerment often arises from the ability to engage critically with one's environment and from recognizing that one is not alone in experiencing gender-based oppression. It is also about becoming aware of the role of the governments and instutitions beside their own agency. In this study, the women's collective reflection on gender issues helped foster a sense of solidarity and reinforced their agency, encouraging them to rethink their positions within society and challenge the status quo.

The Shift in Marital Ideologies

During one of the lesson break talks Selma said. "You have the marriage contract, then you have rights. You share it if you have a house. I learnt by hearing from others. I use them. One becomes conscious, when not educated, they think you are blind." The realization that they had legal rights, as exemplified by Selma's comment about the marriage contract, illustrates how access to information can challenge the traditional norms that govern women's roles in marriage. Feminist scholars like Molyneux (1985) and MacKinnon (1989) emphasize that legal knowledge is central to women's empowerment, as it enables them to assert their autonomy and challenge patriarchal control over their lives. While the course materials provided limited information on legal rights, the study underscores how even minimal exposure to women's rights—especially marital rights—can prompt important shifts in women's understanding of their social standing.

However, as Stromquist (1995) points out, while legal reforms can theoretically secure equality, their impact is contingent upon women's awareness of and access to these rights. In this study, the women's limited understanding of the

broader legal landscape highlights a gap between legal frameworks and the practical realities of women's empowerment. The failure of the course to incorporate detailed legal information reflects a broader limitation in adult education programs, which often fail to integrate the complexities of gender equality and women's rights into their curricula (Kabeer, 1999). This lack of a more comprehensive approach to women's legal rights indicates a missed opportunity for further cognitive empowerment.

Nevertheless, the process of learning to read and write, coupled with discussions around gender equality, prompted the women to reevaluate their roles within the family and their expectations of marriage. During informal discussions in the lesson breaks, the participants' comments often revealed deeper reflections. For instance, in April and May, during the first observation period, the women were deeply affected by the media coverage of a famous singer who publicly spoke about the violence she had endured from her husband. The singer revealed how her husband's interference in her career led her to cry out for help during a live TV broadcast. This prompted a discussion among the participants about the broader issues of gender inequality. One participant remarked: "Do you see the situation of women in Türkiye? Even a wealthy woman is beaten by her husband—how tragic is that?"

The discussion surrounding domestic violence, exposed the deep-rooted cultural justifications for gender-based violence, which some women initially defended. However, as these women engaged in dialogue, particularly with younger participants who rejected these norms, they began to shift their positions. This shift aligns with feminist scholarship that views education as a crucial tool for dismantling patriarchal structures and promoting gender equality.

As previously noted, the course materials lack essential information regarding women's rights and the recent legal reforms related to gender equality. When asked about their awareness of their marital rights, most participants responded similarly to Sevda: "We have rights, women are not like they used to be. I don't know exactly what my rights are, but I can learn them by reading."

As the study illustrates, this transformation in marital ideologies can be seen as a form of cognitive empowerment, wherein women gain the awareness and tools to redefine their roles within the family and society. Their newfound ability to challenge traditional notions of marriage and gender roles not only enhances their sense of autonomy but also contributes to a larger societal transformation by fostering critical thinking and resistance to patriarchal authority.

Participation in Decision-Making Processes

The women's increasing participation in decision-making processes, both within the home and in the public sphere, reflects another critical dimension of cognitive empowerment. As the study suggests, the literacy skills acquired by the participants allowed them to assert themselves more confidently in various areas of life. Gaining literacy skills empowers women not only to understand the world around them but also to assert themselves more confidently in decision-making processes at home. However, the extent of this empowerment varies depending on individual traits and circumstances. For instance, Fadik and Selma believe their personalities naturally lead them to take charge and make decisions confidently in various aspects of life. In contrast, Seher, who describes herself as more reserved, reflects on the changes in her approach to decision-making as a result of both her age and the skills she acquired through literacy: "When something needs to be bought, we decide together (with my husband). I make

choices through sharing and consulting. But I don't hesitate as I once did. Now I know how to stand firm in what I say. I used to meekly bow my head."

The shift from a position of dependency to one of autonomy and agency—illustrated by Seher's decision to participate in family decisions—is indicative of the transformative power of education in fostering cognitive empowerment. This shift mirrors the findings of authors like Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), who argue that empowerment is fundamentally about expanding an individual's capacity to make informed decisions and exert control over their life.

<u>A Time of Her Own</u>

The participants also emphasized the sense of fulfillment they gained from dedicating time to themselves in the literacy course. Having spent many years raising children and navigating various personal challenges, they described the opportunity to engage in learning as a source of joy and self-worth. As Stromquist (2009: 70) points out, "Spending time in safe and relaxing spaces, such as literacy classes, that also offer moments of information sharing and enjoyment, can foster feelings of self-worth for marginalized adults."
This time for personal study not only allowed the women to gain new knowledge but also broadened their sense of individuality. For instance, Firdevs spoke about how learning to read and engage with different topics made her more health-conscious: "Since learning to read about health, I've become more mindful of my diet and exercise. I understand more when I read and study at home. I follow the news, and I learn from what I read. And of course, I feel happy when I read."

Moreover, the women began to prioritize their personal time with greater intentionality. Seher, for example, shared how she meticulously planned her

schedule to make room for study despite her busy life caring for her grandchild: "It's hard to find time because I look after my grandchild, but I make it work. I do my housework in the evenings, then I feel responsible and study after 10 p.m. I always come to class with enthusiasm."

Allocating time for themselves to read and learn provided these women with a new perspective on personal autonomy. While not explicitly stated, it is evident that this process helped them develop a greater sense of agency over their lives, allowing them to set boundaries and reclaim control over their time.

Finally, the broader social and cultural implications of cognitive empowerment are evident in how the women's increasing literacy and awareness translated into shifts in their personal and social relationships. As Stromquist (2009) highlights, the ability to assert one's autonomy, access information, and make independent decisions is not only a source of personal empowerment but also a crucial element in challenging broader societal inequalities. This study highlights how literacy can be a tool for cognitive empowerment, allowing women to navigate their social and cultural worlds with greater autonomy and self-awareness. In turn, this empowerment may foster a more equitable and just society, where gender-based discrimination and patriarchy are increasingly questioned and resisted.

Economic Empowerment

Stromquist (2005) highlights the connection between income generation, work, and the application of strategies that enable individuals to act autonomously within the economic sphere. She emphasizes how economic empowerment involves more than just financial gain—it is also about gaining the confidence and agency to make decisions that impact one's economic well-being. Research on women's empowerment and literacy has demonstrated that courses incorporating

income-generating activities tend to have more significant empowering effects. For instance, a study by Beneria and Roldan (1987) involving 140 domestic workers in Mexico revealed that while the link between women's financial resources and decision-making power is complex, women who contributed significantly to household expenses (over 40%) were more likely to participate in household decision-making (cited in Stromquist, 1997: 16).

This finding resonates with the experiences of the participants in this study, as many women with prior work experience described feeling more empowered by their employment. They identified their work experience as a key source of their sense of autonomy and self-confidence. However, the literacy course in question did not provide participants with information or skills related to income-generating activities. Based on both the content of the course and the participants' feedback, it is clear that economic empowerment was not a central focus of the program. Nevertheless, the women appeared to recognize the connection between work and empowerment, drawing from their own life experiences to understand how income can enhance one's autonomy.

Several women identified illiteracy as a significant barrier to securing stable employment. Firdevs, for example, recounted how her lack of literacy skills prevented her from entering a higher-paying office job. She explained, "We worked as janitors in an apartment and cleaned houses. Now, my husband receives a pension, and we live on that. I don't have insurance, just what my husband provides. There was a job at an office where I would have been required to take notes, write, and answer the phone as a secretary. But because of my illiteracy, I couldn't even apply for that position. We were only able to do cleaning jobs. That's all we were capable of." In this account, Firdevs attributes her inability to secure a job to her illiteracy. Interestingly, she frames this limitation in terms of her role in domestic work, saying, "we were just enough for that stuff," rather than directly addressing the broader issue of her denied access to education. This highlights a

critical gap in the course's approach—while the literacy program aimed to address functional literacy, it did not incorporate discussions of the political or structural factors that contribute to women's economic and social inequality. Consequently, the women did not make explicit connections between their personal experiences and the broader power dynamics in society.

Political Empowerment

Adult education focused on women's empowerment seeks not only to address past missed opportunities but also to shape a more democratic and equitable future. It is crucial for women to reframe their negative experiences as sources of transformative knowledge, which can help prevent future generations of women from facing similar challenges. From this perspective, the link between literacy and political empowerment becomes evident.

Political empowerment involves cultivating the capacity for collective action to address inequality and social issues, as well as acquiring the knowledge to participate in such efforts. This form of empowerment requires the effective use of literacy and the availability of opportunities for both individual and collective expression. An ideal empowerment program aimed at fostering political empowerment would cover topics such as voter education, the process of gathering information about election candidates and their platforms, how to engage with political parties or social movements, understanding government services, and addressing issues like corruption, accountability, political freedom, rule of law, and judicial justice (Stromquist, 2005).

However, political empowerment, particularly in terms of democratic participation and organization, entails long-term, complex changes. It encompasses various dimensions, including individuals' political choices, their awareness of political ideologies, and their interest in both personal and societal issues. During interviews, discussions related to political empowerment proved to

be the most challenging and brief. The participants appeared reluctant to share their views on topics such as political participation, voting, or organizing with others to address social issues. Over time, it became clear that their hesitation stemmed not from reluctance but from concerns about their safety. For instance, during the initial interviews, local elections had recently occurred. Afterward, some participants shared that "there were cameras on every street" and "people were immediately detained." When the researcher asked how literacy had impacted their lives, one participant repeatedly inquired whether the researcher was associated with the government and why such questions were being asked.

The political atmosphere in which these women lived contributed to their reluctance to engage in discussions about political matters. Additionally, the structure of the course itself hindered any meaningful exploration of political empowerment. The course materials focused primarily on the idea of "being a good citizen," with no space for topics like active political participation or awareness. As mentioned earlier, just as the textbooks failed to offer updated information on women's legal advancements, they also neglected to address political issues or women's current roles in politics.

Conclusion

The study's findings suggest that while the literacy course succeeded in fostering cognitive and psychological empowerment by giving the women a space to reflect, learn, and share experiences, it did not adequately address the broader dimensions of economic and political empowerment. Through interviews with participants and observations during lessons and breaks, it became evident that learning to read and write significantly reduced the environment's fearfulness, fostering increased self-confidence and a strengthened sense of control over their lives. While the initial stress of learning at a later age was challenging, it ultimately enhanced their self-esteem. Although the course content did not

actively cultivate an empowering environment, the act of women coming together, engaging in dialogue, and sharing experiences with others facing similar challenges created a space for empowerment.

This gap in the course's curriculum aligns with critiques from scholars like Kabeer (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), who argue that true empowerment requires a multi-dimensional approach that incorporates economic, political, and psychological aspects. As Kabeer (1999) highlights, empowerment involves the ability to make choices across various domains of life, including economic and political decision-making. Without addressing these domains, empowerment remains limited and does not reach its full transformative potential.
These findings provide ethnographically rich insights into the necessity of enriching the adult literacy curriculum to better support participants in their everyday lives, as suggested in detail by NLS perspective. Additionally, these results highlight the importance of integrating gender perspectives and empowerment dimensions into the curriculum to promote women's equal participation across all areas of life.

Further research exploring how recent shifts in gender politics in Türkiye have influenced literacy courses could be both timely and thought-provoking. Significant demographic changes in cities like Ankara, particularly in terms of age, ethnicity, and cultural differences, have likely altered the needs of illiterate populations. Exploring these shifts would present an intriguing area for future studies in this field.

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