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Sampson Tawiah

Itumeleng Setlhodi

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Advancing Livelihoods and Transformation of Rural Women: The Role of Critical Pedagogy in Bridging Gender Gap in South Africa

By Sampson Tawiah¹, Itumeleng Setlhodi²

Abstract

The essence of advancing livelihoods is to heighten socio-economic transformation among the poor, especially rural women through education. The statement above suggests that locating these women as critical stakeholders and affording them opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge can advance values significantly. In the country in general, rural women generate less income as compared to men. Hence, educational practices geared toward women are to address this gap. Transformation, however, does not come cheap. It takes consented effort on educators, learners, and society to embrace educational provisions, programs, and new teaching methods for a sustainable change, especially for rural women. To achieve these objectives, a reflection of critical pedagogy and stakeholder theories into women's lives is essential. The study primarily investigated the role of critical pedagogy in advancing livelihoods and transforming the socio-economic lives of women in Mthatha, South Africa. Interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis form the basis for gathering data from rural women (n=35) purposely selected for the study. The emergent findings show that the curriculum of ACET does not add value to these women's livelihood because it does not empower them with the requisite skills to fend for themselves. Therefore, the study recommended a robust investigation into the theory of critical pedagogy and the possible benefit of transformative practices in adult education, mainly geared towards women's development.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Adult learners, Livelihood, Rural women, Teaching and learning

Introduction

Advancing the livelihoods of rural dwellers women, in particular, is a significant concern globally. Thus, the rural sector is plagued by poor living conditions and underdevelopment, triggering severe malnutrition because of a lack of means to acquire food (Thakar & Rajpura, 2021). Therefore, there is a need for employing community-building initiatives such as critical theory in advancing shared meaning and altering the state of rural women in society. For decades, men and women, including children, have been living on the edge. According to Odey et al. (2019), these individuals in rural areas suffer from poor lifestyles and malnutrition. Notably, many lack basic social needs such as decent accommodation, access to potable drinking water, and living in a clean environment (Odey et al., 2019). Economic success for these individuals means using available natural and educational resources to generate income for improved living conditions. Therefore, foregrounding livelihood education is pivotal to the empowerment of the disadvantaged. Adult and Community Education and Training (ACET) (DHET, 2013) is an essential educational

¹ Sampson holds a Ph.D. in Adult and Community Education and Training. He is an Associate Lecturer in the School of Education, Adult, and Community Education Unit at the Durban University of Technology. His research interests include Adult Education, Research in Education, Women Empowerment, Youth Development, and Skills Training.

² Itumeleng is an Associate Professor within the school of educational studies, University of South Africa. She currently heads the quality assurance and enhancement unit in the college of education and supervises Masters and Doctoral students. Her research interests are within educational leadership and management, focusing on performance improvement, quality education, collaboration, support, mentorship, and gender.

program instituted in South Africa for this course. However, with improved educational facilities and resources, illiteracy and underdevelopment still saturate most rural areas (Adeoye & Oke, 2019). The authors, therefore, argue that through education, knowledge can increase and skills developed to improve poor living conditions and subsequently bridge gender gaps. The authors posit that teaching and learning must be proactive to the educational needs of the poor, especially women, to heighten the needed change. Nonetheless, according to Romm and Dichaba (2015), adult teaching and learning have been given very little attention to finance and resources. Besides, these authors revealed that most adult education programs around the globe have been poorly managed and not implemented to advance communities.

The essence of advancing livelihoods is to heighten socio-economic transformation among the poor through education. Education is necessary because women, especially, were subordinated by their male counterparts, and the unfavorable colonial ideologies which better served Western economic interests disadvantaged them. The result is the poor educational development of women, especially in developing countries. Critical pedagogy, thus, advocates for gender decolonization and the reformation of the economic gap between men and women. Transformation thrives through collective effort. It takes collaborative effort to develop educational provisions and programs to bring about genuine change (Ravindran, 2020). Therefore, a reflection of critical pedagogy into the lives of women is essential. The study, therefore, investigated the role of critical pedagogy in advancing livelihoods and transforming the socio-economic conditions of women in the rural areas of South Africa.

Although this study area has seen significant advancement in educational resources and developments in innovative teaching methods, many adult educators lag in the skills required to teach their learners. They are stereotyped to traditional teaching methods. Wang and Torrisi-Steele (2015) affirm despite rapid developments in teaching strategies across curricula learning procedures and practices have stayed relatively unchanged. Indeed, educators in adult institutions need to apply new teaching methods to impart life skills to their learners. Being able to do so requires a profound reflection of critical pedagogy in adult teaching and learning. Given the above, adult educators must apply new teaching strategies to enhance practical skills acquisition for life's changes (Karge et al., 2019). Ensuring this will promote economic and social inclusion.

The Socio-economic State of Rural Women in South Africa

The socio-economic state of rural women in South Africa is appalling. Setini et al. (2020) posit that most women lack productive skills for sustainable economic development. Yet, the development of women contributes significantly to building a nation and possibly economic growth. They further expose insincere women's empowerment intentions of these critical stakeholders by the powers that be thus, perpetuating injustices to women advancement programs. According to Dlodlo (2009), an essential enabler to nation-building and economic growth in rural areas is women's right to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). It aligns with the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Declaration – promoting gender equality and empowerment of women (UN General Assembly, 2000). The aim is to reduce or eradicate poverty, hunger, unemployment and promote sustainable economic development (Tawiah & Setlhodi, 2020).

In South Africa, generally, rural women generate less income as compared to men. Thus, they have sought subsistence agriculture to improve livelihoods. However, climate change has negatively impacted women's prospects in agriculture. Nyahunda and Tirivangasi (2020) affirm that the Limpopo province in South Africa hosts rural women who depend on subsistence farming to improve living conditions. However, conditions such as drought, continuous heat-wave, and flooding make women less productive and increase vulnerability. Because of the role women play in humanity and the challenges they face to accomplish such

a mandate, we argue for a more equitable gender-based balance in education. Besides, inequality in the labor market has marred the opportunities of women to decent work. Other constraints hampering better living conditions for women are unequal remuneration packages and imbalanced division of work in the workplace and families, respectively. These limitations are a direct result of poverty and a lack of education, among other factors. Hence, empowering and motivating women to learn can increase economic growth and prospects for themselves and the nation.

On the contrary, most rural women find it challenging to provide for their households, especially food, due to adverse weather conditions beyond control. The findings of the study by Nyahunda and Tirivangasi (2020) revealed a significant decline in agriculture and food production in rural areas owing to climate change. Also, the legacy of apartheid and the failure of the post-apartheid government to sustainably attend to the socio-economic needs of women have increased vulnerability and widespread poverty and unemployment (Hajdu, Neves & Gralund, 2020). Indeed, women in rural areas face poverty, a lack of economic growth and empowerment. Education is the overarching tool used to increase knowledge and skills to capacitate women to change their poor socio-economic state (Ravindran, 2020).

Because of the poor socio-economic conditions of women, there has been an increasing reliance on child support grants. This only source of cash flow into the rural areas has seen a tremendous increase in its delivery to South African mothers (Granlund & Hochfeld, 2020) to advance livelihoods and boost economic transformation. However, the authors argue that with the ever-increasing financial hardship coupled with the demand for a skilled workforce, the child support grant alone cannot sustain livelihoods. There is a need for a more vital skills development drive to empower women and reduce or overcome grant dependency. India has laid down a footprint worthy of emulation. The traditional trade of cloth weaving is passed on from mothers to the younger generation, especially young girls who will grow to carry hefty economic responsibilities in their future households. Besides, efforts by girls diversify and maximize production to sustainably generate more income to advance living conditions (Singha & Singha, 2020).

As food for thought, “women are a potent economic force who can bring growth to the family, workforce, and society” (Mohan et al., 2020, p. 79). Therefore, harnessing such a critical notion empowers women through equal access to education and skills development programs. Ensuring these components can lead to improved livelihoods, increased socio-economic status in society, and financial independence. Against this backdrop, the primary question that this study investigated was: what is the role of critical pedagogy in advancing and transforming women’s lives in rural areas?

The rural areas host women with poor living conditions and a lack of education. As a result, most of them lack the educational skills needed to generate income to improve their living conditions. The result is inequality, segregation, sadness, and ill-treatment in their communities. Therefore, the primary aim of this paper is to investigate the value of critical pedagogy correlated with stakeholder theory in the lives of women in rural areas.

Critical Pedagogy

To advance livelihood and bring about socio-economic change for rural women, we turn to critical pedagogy and stakeholder analysis. Critical pedagogy is a theory that challenges individuals to critically reflect on their own experiences and challenges and thereby taking the necessary steps to reform those experiences and challenges. In highlighting critical theory to women, it is essential to focus, sometimes, on the undoing of our intentions regarding transforming rural women’s socio-economic status in this context by averting and perpetuating the situation (Lather, 1991). Hence the need to carefully understand the strategy in dispensing pedagogy towards emancipation or changing conditions. With the insight into the practices of

emancipating women, it is imperative to address the socio-economic conditions that ground what needs to change to effectively disrupt “self-defeating tendencies, and co-construct pro-change predispositions” (p. 169). Stakeholder analysis theory refers to a model used to identify and group stakeholders according to a common interest and value (Simon, 2016; Preston & Sapienza, 1990). Women are an invaluable stakeholder base without which society will cease to exist (Bailur, 2006). Stakeholders in this context refer to rural women engaged in transformative initiatives to change their livelihoods. Therefore, transforming rural women’s way of life has a greater propensity for communities to derive value from them as their advancement can benefit society. Conceptualizing the stakeholder analysis approach in natural human phenomenon to this end is indispensable (Painter, Perezts & Deslandes, 2021). Women are generally nurturers, and some are sole providers of their families. Hence, pedagogy focused on this stakeholder base advancement intends to advance a socially just realm (Breuning, 2009).

It is essential to understand the three models of pedagogy; transformative, generative, and transmission (Wink, 2005). The transformative, productive, and communication relate to altering progress; procreating desirable Skills, Knowledge, and Values (SKVs); and communicating with the hope to transform, respectively. The present study focuses on transformative pedagogy, which suggests possible practices that can enable new ways of doing, knowing, and believing. It intends to bring about lasting change, bestowing socially just conditions of these rural women to respond to what DiGiorgio and Strongman (2019) deem insufficient investigations on education practices that can help transform livelihoods, particularly in a rural setting. The implication is that education stakeholders can support women to lift from current rehearsals that have sustained them thus far towards sustainable, transformative skills and knowledge. Thus, enabling them to realize what they can and cannot do, then establish what skills they require and how they are supported to learn or acquire skills. Therefore, allowing them to equally realize and state their impediments to learning and overcome these issues suggests that their plight is acknowledged. And they are accorded a platform as the critical stakeholders in society. Thus, critical pedagogy emphasizes the marginalized stakeholders’ injustices by disrupting dominance (socio-economic and male privileges) to bring about social and economic equality (Breuning, 2009; Kress 2011; Asakereh & Weisi, 2018). Kress (2011) and Asakereh and Weisi (2018) affirm the critical pedagogy intent to advance education for the poor (both men and women) and arguably marginalized to eliminate socio-economic inequalities, particularly in a rural context, most of which are within deprived settings.

Reflecting critically on transformative education for women should be based on the belief that women as adult learners join the learning environment with a wealth of experience (Bhandari et al., 2019). Analyzing these critical stakeholder’s conditions in society aims to generate knowledge to understand the generation for appropriate skills transfer that can bring about transformation (Jhala & Christian, 2014). The analysis gears towards unveiling shared values about the environment, access to resources, and skills promote creative knowledge. It will bridge the gap and grant legitimacy to the critical stakeholder base that equally should have power, determination, and legitimacy of affecting the socio-economic performance of society (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011). Tapping into what these women know and advancing their skill set can build confidence and promote learning that can bring about social change (Giroux, 2017; Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015). We, therefore, argue that to achieve a sustainable difference in the lives of the underprivileged, those engaged in teaching and learning should draw insight from critical pedagogy. Thus, a crucial analysis of applying stakeholders’ theory’s principles into teaching and learning can bring about freedom from socio-economic oppression through transformative ways of advancing knowledge, skills and tapping on shared values that reflect shared meaning. Through critical pedagogy, learner’s self-

reflection can enable taking the informed initiative to progress socially, economically, culturally, and politically (Visano, 2016; Templer, 2017), transform, and achieve social justice.

According to Gor (cited in Aliakbari & Faraji, 2011), drawing learner's awareness of the adverse effects of inequalities in society and essentially tapping into their achieved SKVs by applying transformative pedagogy brings true justice. The aim is to enable critical thinking through the co-production of essential knowledge to transform livelihoods. Hence, transformative pedagogy (education that brings about change) must be applied to facilitate the procreation of the SKVs (generative pedagogy) and effective communication (transmission pedagogy). But, on the other hand, critical pedagogy frowns upon the traditional approach to teaching and learning where the learner only receives information from the educator without any engagement. Hence, the transformative, generative, and communicative flow of education to achieve complete change is disabled.

According to Freire (1970:a), such a linear form of educational practice is called banking education. However, many renowned scholars have rejected *banking education* (Freire, 1970b; Joldersma, 2001) as an approach to teaching and learning. We concur with critics of banking education by arguing that teaching and learning is a collaborative process involving both educators and learners. In the process, educators tap on learner's experiences and consequently impart knowledge about practical steps to take towards enriching their lives through available education programs. On the other hand, learners can make informed choices and use the knowledge acquired to their advantage. Degener (2001) affirms that learning is transformative when there is a realization of actual change. Hence, critical pedagogy speaks to women, especially to adjusting and adopting new methods and strategies to advance knowledge and skills to enhance social and economic changes in life. Freire (2005) sums up by emphasizing that adult educators have a central role in assisting learners in becoming agents of their learning to develop a critical awareness of their experiences and challenges.

The stakeholder analysis approach correlates with critical pedagogy in that both theories ply into individuals' development, be it social, economic, or political (Tawiah, 2020). As women critically reflect on their lives and take the obligatory action to improve them, it takes community engagement (stakeholder engagement) to realize those changes required in women's lives. A collaborative application of the theories can enhance community reflection and engagement for socio-economic progress in rural areas.

Methods

This empirical study used a qualitative approach and an exploratory design to investigate the role of critical pedagogy correlated with stakeholder analysis in advancing transformative learning impacting women's lives in rural areas. The theories give insight into educational practices that can develop and empower women to lead productive lives. As a result, educationally endowed women will see themselves represented in educational narratives. Allowing them the opportunity to connect and produce shared values and in building communities. According to Creswell (2014), this qualitative exploratory approach is relevant because it helps the researcher understand the women's experiences under investigation better.

Thirty-five female learners/participants were purposively selected for the study because they directly link to the phenomenon under investigation. Since the study is qualitative, the sample was deemed relevant (Saunders et al., 2018). The researcher selected participants from four ACET learning centers in Mthatha, South Africa. These participants were considered to be information-rich for purposes of the study and registered for ACET courses.

The participants were informed of their rights about ethical guidelines before collecting data for the study (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The ethical issues discussed included informed consent, the right to anonymity, and confidentiality. In ensuring these ethical protocols,

participants voluntarily signed consent forms, and no identifying information of participants was collected or recorded anywhere in the study.

Data Collection

To help collect data for the study, the researchers formulated the following question: what is the role of critical pedagogy in advancing and transforming women's lives in rural areas? The researchers employed interviews, focus group discussion, and documentary analysis during data collection and triangulating the data collected. Triangulation was vital because it helped eliminate a single approach in the data collection process (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). The researchers conducted interviews which lasted 45 minutes on average, with 30 adult female learners, while five female educators engaged in a focus group discussion. The focus group discussion allowed participants to contribute to the study in a relaxed atmosphere and encouraged different ideas. In addition, the researchers use information from adult education policy documents and staff minute books to triangulate the data collected. The data analysis was interpretive (Delgado et al., 2009). Information gathered was transcribed into text and arranged into broader themes. The themes were elaborated based on the study's research questions and objectives, resulting in discussing the findings.

Findings

Adult Education from Critical Pedagogy Perspective

The principles of critical pedagogy require that individuals examine their life's conditions and experiences to suggest ways to improve such poor conditions and experiences (Abraham, 2014; Freire, 2018). Adult learners, women, in particular, are not allowed to contribute their views on designing their learning programs. Since women experience difficulties in their lives, they are in the best position to decide their learning needs. A participant expressed her concern this way:

If we can have a forum where learners are involved in designing the curriculum then we can be able to share our views on the issues concerning the curriculum or programs which can benefit us. But we are not included when the curriculum is designed for us.

Another participant said,

When educators come to our communities to explain to us and register us for the programs, they must also tell us what the curriculum entails. This can allow us to also contribute our views about the curriculum and what we want to study.

The women critically reflecting on their circumstances must form part of curriculum design that concerns them. As recipients of ACET programs, they must contribute to what they want to learn. The findings from the focus group discussion revealed a need for a forum where women can voice their views on curriculum issues and design. She said,

Councilors and the ACET centers must work together to convey meetings that can allow the women to share their ideas on the curriculum or programs.

Indeed, the women know best what they want to learn; hence they must be involved in curriculum design to improve their learning needs. When women are interested in curriculum

development, they can know and acquire life skills for self and community development. The women come to the learning space with a wealth of knowledge and experiences. Critically reflecting on this knowledge and experiences, they can contribute to educational practices and engage in community-based projects to create work opportunities for women. Abraham (2014) affirms the knowledge and experiences brought to the learning environment can encourage individuals to think critically about their lives and promote informed educational practices for socio-economic change.

Critical pedagogy manifests its value towards the education of rural women especially. This form of education seeks to liberate the educationally disadvantaged and correct what is wrong in their education and training. It is for this reason that women have enrolled in ACET programs. The training ACET learners receive, however, does not help them to achieve their learning goals. A participant expressed her frustration in this way:

There are no empowerment programs such as leather works, sewing or plumbing that we receive at the ACET centers. We are only increasing our knowledge of the subjects we are learning at the ACET centers and receive certificates at the end of our studies.

From the above, learners have reflected on what they learn and realize that the current course content does not meet their learning needs. They want to learn life skills such as leather work, sewing, and plumbing. It is, therefore, important that courses such as those mentioned above must be part of their learning programs.

Critical Pedagogy and Teaching Practices of Adult Educators

A critical reflection of adult teaching practices presupposes that adult educators must be proactive in applying new teaching strategies to train their learners better. On the contrary, most adult educators do not possess practical life's skills to teach their learners. Wang and Torrisi-Steele (2015) affirm this notion by indicating that adult educators especially have failed to impact the lives of their learners because of failure to apply and implement new teaching methods that have evolved. This failure, perhaps, as mentioned, is because the educators themselves are not skill-equipped. Thus, using new teaching methods in their teaching practices can be a challenging endeavor. In reality, interviews conducted with educators in the form of a focus group discussion revealed the inability of the educators to teach practical life's skills such as painting, basket weaving, and sewing to their learners. One educator of the focus group discussion said in agreement with the others that:

We are not providing skills training at our ACET centers because we educators do not possess any particular life skills that we can teach our learners. This makes it difficult to include skills training in our programs, although this education provided at this institution requires that we teach them skills like tailoring, shoemaking, plumbing, basket weaving and painting.

This confession has implications for adult learners who require life's skills for survival. Indeed, without adequate training in livelihood skills, they might continue to be cut off from engagement in economic activities to generate income to satisfy their socio-economic needs. The interviews conducted with learners revealed and corroborated the skills condition of the educators. A learner affirmed:

We are not offered any training in livelihood skills. The institution does not provide us with skills-building programs. What we are offered at the moment is just studies in reading and conducting investigations on topics we are given.

The learners lag in skills from the above revelation because their educators lack the abilities and skills to teach them what they want to learn. Thus, critical pedagogy has valuable lessons for adult educators in general and ACET educators in particular. The researchers posit that because the educators reflected on the failure of their learners, they have been able to identify challenges that led to the loss and thus, suggest ways to rectify them to improve their teaching methods. Representing a unanimous discussion, an educator mentioned some of the challenges they face below:

We do not have our learning centers. We are using classrooms for school children. There are no storage facilities to keep teaching and learning materials that provide skills like plumbing when introduced. And finance to purchase practical teaching and learning resources are lacking.

The challenges indicated above are directed towards amending the educators' teaching practices to the good of their learners. Many learners, particularly women, are unemployed, marginalized, poor, and lack life's skills to engage in economic activities (Mayer et al., 2011); therefore, a tough call for a critical reflection on their education is vital. Indeed, to advance livelihoods and ensure transformation in the lives of these individuals, critical pedagogy has an essential role to play in the teaching practices of adult educators.

The Role of Adult Education Providers in Applying Critical Pedagogy

Given the critical conditions that learners, particularly women, face, there is a need for adult education providers to critically reflect on the best ways to improve the lives of these women and the type of education they provide for them. A crucial educational initiative directed towards women's development in South Africa, in particular, is ACET (DHET, 2013). Reflecting on critical pedagogy for women's good, education for women should ensure that they are adequately educated and trained in relevant life skills. Consequently, ensuring equity and social justice and the women's economic changes in their lives.

The findings from the document analysis exposed that the curriculum of ACET has little or no value to the women. There is no evidence that their livelihoods change after undergoing ACET training. What the women want are skills that can help them upgrade themselves socio-economically. The courses provided for them, however, do not meet their learning needs. The courses provided at the ACET centers include the following:

- English (LLC2); Xhosa (LLC1); literacy Education; life orientation
- Early Childhood Development; ancillary

The courses listed above can have minimal benefit to women considering what they need to advance their lives. However, the knowledge, education, and training attained should help them improve their living conditions (Quan-Baffour, 2011). A reflection of critical pedagogy should seek to influence the type of curriculum that adult education providers provide for their learners. The document analysis revealed courses that can benefit adult learners. They include, but are not limited to the following:

- Agriculture (crop and animal husbandry);
- Domestic science: fashion design; catering; sewing;
- Construction skills: carpentry; electrical wiring; painting; auto-mechanics;
- Arts and crafts; ceramics/pottery.

Indeed, the courses listed above are toward up-skilling rural women for advancing their livelihoods. The findings from the interviews corroborate the learning needs of the women as mentioned above. When interviewed, the women said they needed to train in life skills such as painting, basket weaving, and sewing. These skills can help women to engage in self-employment activities to improve their socio-economic conditions. Based on the positive effect that training in livelihood skills can have on women's lives, critical pedagogy has value in the educational practices of adult education providers.

Conclusion

The findings from this study have stressed one critical issue in adult education practices: the theory of critical pedagogy is beneficial for learners, educators, and ACET programs providers especially. A critical reflection of the educational practices of these groups of people can bring about informed changes in education and adult education in particular. The necessary modifications granted can positively impact both teaching and learning. Subsequently, it can improve the wellbeing of women in rural areas who require relevant education and training for advancing livelihoods and transformation in their lives.

This study recommends that a more robust investigation is needed to peer into the value of critical pedagogy theory on education and adult education practices, particularly to the benefits of adult learners in general. Further, stakeholders must reflect critically on the principles of critical pedagogy and stakeholder analysis theory to have insight into productive educational developments and practices to the benefits of women in rural areas.

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