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Situating senior women in the literacy landscape of North Africa

LAURA RICE and KARIM HAMDY

If you educate a man you educate one person;
If you educate a woman, you educate an entire family.

Proverb

“Educate a boy and you educate one person.
Educate a girl and you educate a nation.”

A. Ibn Badis, an Algerian Muslim Reformist

“If you educate a man you educate one person;
If you educate a woman you educate and liberate a nation.”

Al-Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (Malcolm X)

“If you educate a man, you educate one person.
If you educate a woman, you teach an entire generation.”

Delegate, UN Permanent
Forum on Indigenous Issues

Abstract

Although literacy programs in North African countries vary in method, management approach, and in content emphasis, their discourse is strikingly similar: It focuses too often on learners' deficits and considers the condition of these “illiterate” subjects, i.e. persons lacking the 3Rs, as a “disease” against which a war of eradication must be waged. For Government Agencies, NGOs, and other institutional actors in literacy projects, such lexicon of combat, in which the lack of print culture becomes a physiological scourge, becomes a convenient framework to develop measurable outcomes for the literacy efforts. However, as will be demonstrated in this paper, there is a serious risk that their reductive discourse will result in their losing a real opportunity to significantly enhance learning outcomes if the

local knowledge of women, and particularly, senior women, are not integrated in the literacy efforts. Senior women are repositories of wisdom in their communities. From life experience, they have developed multiple literacy skills, unrelated to schooling, by which they contribute significantly in caring for the health of their kin and neighbors, in teaching survival and subsistence skills, and in transmitting their pragmatic wisdom to younger generations. Based on fieldwork conducted in rural Tunisia and Morocco, the authors provide examples to demonstrate that including senior women's knowledge in the literacy landscape would strengthen the literacy efforts upon which sustainable development depends.

1. Introduction

As part of a larger study entitled *Imagined Lives: Women, Literacy and Life Stories in North Africa*, “Situating senior women” asks what role grandmothers play in the literacy landscapes affecting their extended families. The book-length study employs a feminist theoretical framework that places senior women at the center of an inquiry into the larger production of knowledge and understanding of literacy in North Africa. We use “grandmothers” in the generic sense to mean those senior women — literal grandmothers, aunts, unmarried women, etc. — whose position of respect and role of advice-giving make them repositories of wisdom central to the communities and cultures they come from.¹ Our focus, then, is on “knowledge production” rather than on a reified set of “facts known” by these women; the questions we ask are about how the literacy practices of these senior women fit into a broader literacy landscape in the process of change and modernization. How does the literacy of the oral world they embody enter into conversation with the increasingly print-based environment of their grandchildren? How is the knowledge and advice of senior women given value in the multiple literacy practices of the extended family and the community? How are these older women included in, or excluded from sustainable development initiatives? How does the role of the grandmother in the social imaginary of North African culture compare with the assumptions made about them in development discourse?

This article begins with the assumption that in Arab culture grandmothers enjoy a unique but ambiguous status because of their association with oral tradition: they are both idealized and criticized because of this link. Orality itself shares this ambiguous status because, on the one hand, the mother tongue symbolizes identity and authenticity, while on the other hand, it is often considered synonymous with illiteracy, and

therefore, seen as a vulgar, uneducated medium of expression (Sadiqi 2003: 42). In North Africa, the orality associated with the mother tongue, be it in Berber or Arabic speech, has aroused the suspicions of outsiders because of its resilience and its cultural rootedness. As Gilbert Grandguillaume (1983) notes in his study *Arabisation et politique linguistique au Maghreb*: “it is remarkable that [the] expressive capacity of [these dialects] did not find itself diminished in the face of modernity”; borrowings from outside languages, especially French, were a true case of appropriation rather than diminution as the foreign word was shaped by local syntax and usage: for example, gendarme becoming Berberized into *agendarm*, and pluralized as *igendarmien* (Grandguillaume 1983: 15). Likewise, the mother tongue as the conduit of the earliest socialization, inserts the individual “little by little into the contained communities of the family, the clan, the village, the province and the nation”; the mother tongue transmits the earliest rules of behavior and the first taboos, as well as shaping the most intimate first notions of an emerging self in relation to the community (1983: 26). The oral world of the mother tongue is, as Grandguillaume explains, seen by outside authorities as having something dangerously uncontrollable about it:

This language, not becoming written, escapes as is from the effects of normalization that writing implies, and so it enjoys a sort of “savage dynamism.”

The same orality, which pushes the mother tongue into an inferior status, also situates it in the field of the abnormal: and this latter fact makes it seem to escape from authority: from the linguistic authority of the written in the first place, but finally from authority as such as well. Through all the warnings against the danger of invasion by dialects, the mother tongue is perceived as suspect and troubling, as if it possessed an uncontrollable power likely to burst forth at any moment and overturn the established order. In this fantastic representation, the mother tongue symbolizes nature, the uncontrollable, the dangerous because it is not controlled. (Grandguillaume 1983: 26–27)

Nonetheless, along with this attitude of suspicion and neglect from the authorities, grandmothers command some respect from society.

In literary texts, grandmothers are often positively depicted as the keepers of family history, the archivists of traditional wisdom, and the tellers of tales that embody the culture’s social imaginary in a living voice. In contrast, in development projects, grandmothers are frequently excluded, marginalized, and even maligned despite their symbolic centrality to the life of the group and despite the knowledge associated with them. Far from being understood as assets to their communities, grandmothers are defined as either literate or illiterate. Some scholars have argued that “people share a mental habit of thinking in terms of binary

oppositions” and that “this human ordering is ‘imposed on a background of real life experience which is continuous in both time and space’ so there are always elements which do not fit and which have to be dealt with” (Jansen 1987: 12).² What is certain is that the reductive binary category of literate/illiterate defunctionalizes the contributions of people without 3R literacy to knowledge production in general, and replaces a landscape composed of many literacies with a grim wall of separation between the haves and the have-nots, between the 3R literate and all others. No one would argue that 3R literacy is not important, in fact crucial, to societies around the globe today. The issue here is rather how to increase 3R literacy without simultaneously destroying the forms of knowledge so strongly associated with orality and the mother tongue. Egyptian scholar Leila Ahmed tells the story, in her autobiography *A Border Passage*, of participating in the advent of 3R literacy to the United Arab Emirates in the 1970s when Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi who presided over the federation offered to use his oil wealth to fund education, housing, and medical care for all the emirates. As one of three or four PhDs in the country, Ahmed (who’d been hired in from London) served as the only female member of a committee whose task was to oversee the development and reform of education throughout the Emirates:

I sensed even then that I was witnessing loss: the vanishing of Bedu culture, its banishment to the edges of life, its smothering by a supposedly superior culture bringing “education.” I sensed this but I didn’t quite understand or trust what I was sensing. After all wasn’t all this — education, modernity, improvement — a necessary and incontrovertible good? I don’t know the answer even now. But I do believe that I was right in my feeling that I was witnessing the imposition of a profoundly different and in many ways inferior culture. In coming to this understanding I would find myself suddenly also understanding one more piece in that central enigma in my own life of Arabness, identity, language, culture. My understanding of the meaning of mother tongue and mother culture in my own life would, as I reflected on Abu Dhabi, be forever changed. (Ahmed 1999: 272–273)

Ahmed senses, primarily, the disconnection between an abstract Arab culture of literacy and modern educational methods being imposed and the living communities upon which they are superimposed:

Rooted in no particular place and in no living culture, from whom does this culture emanate and whose values do its texts embody? Presumably they are the values and worldviews of government bureaucrats and textbook writers of the literate elites of today . . .

Whatever its sources and whoever its creators, it is, as I observed it, a sterile and oppressive culture. I remember my uneasy feeling in Abu Dhabi, as I watched Egyptians and Palestinians trained in this prevailing culture of literacy inculcate it in their young charges, that I was witnessing the tragic imposition of a sterile, inferior bureaucratic culture on young minds and the gradual erasure of their own vibrant and much richer and more humane local Bedu culture. And this was being done in the name of education. (Ahmed 1982: 281–282)

Perhaps the very power of oral knowledge and mother tongue identification causes this need on the part of bureaucracies and development agencies, which most often have their own domination agendas attached to literacy programs, to rationalize and displace orality and local knowledge rather than presenting 3R literacy as one more form of knowledge in an expanding and changing literacy landscape.

The cost of this binary opposition between the oral and the written, the local and the global, the “literate” and the “illiterate” is high. Those who fill the ranks of the “illiterate” around the globe are mainly female, mainly rural, mainly older, and mainly poor. In development discourse, they become the targets, or even worse, the enemy, in campaigns mounted to wage “war against illiteracy, with the goal of *wiping it out* in a decade”³; they become “Typhoid Marys,” or carriers of infection when “the *scourge* in question is not a *disease*, but mass illiteracy” (Watkins 1999). It is important to examine two related issues: first, in this article we look at some of the ways development projects focused on expanding literacy have, through the exclusion of senior women, and reductive definitions of literacy, limited their success and sustainability; second, through an approach focusing on traditional knowledge and empathetic literary accounts, we consider how including senior women in the literacy landscape would strengthen the literacy efforts upon which sustainable development depends. While our specific focus in this article is on the literacy landscape in North Africa with a special focus on Tunisia and also Morocco, some of our examples will be drawn from, and clearly applicable to, the more far-flung borders of the Arab world.

2. Development issues

2.1. *Importance of literacy*

As the epigraphs to this article suggest, educating women in the 3Rs, reading, writing and arithmetic, has been valued for its multiplier effect: educate a woman and you educate a family, a generation, or a nation.

On the one hand, we could observe that this approach identifies women as central to their communities; on the other, we could point out that it treats women merely as the means to someone else's ends. While the connections between 3R literacy and development goals remain murky, a recent "world fertility survey" conducted by the United Nations Population Fund found that "women's ability to read and write was more closely related than even their income to their fertility, use of contraception — and their own children's health."⁴ The "Education for All" conference held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, which brought together many of the leaders in the field of development (World Bank, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, government officials) resulted in a vow to reduce illiteracy by 50% in a decade. "Although the illiteracy rate . . . decreased . . . from 25 percent to 20 percent [between 1990 and 2000], the number of illiterate people has remained the same, in part due to population growth."⁵ In addition, the gender gap in literacy has also continued to grow. Today, following the decade of "Education for All" initiatives begun in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, "there are about 880 million illiterate youth and adults and some 113 million children who are still out of school . . . They are the poorest of the poor and most of them — two thirds of the adult illiterates and 60% of the out-of-school children — are female," so "the map of illiteracy continues to overlap with the map of social, gender and ethnic inequalities."⁶ Although 130 NGOs were invited to Jomtien, the organizers set the agenda ahead of time such that it was difficult for the voices representing the grassroots, voices mainly of women, to be heard.⁷

It is not only who defines the literacy agenda that matters, but how literacy itself is understood. As the keynote speaker at a literacy conference held in 1999 noted: "the term 'literacy' is applied to an extremely wide and diverse number of activities that have no prescribed form or content. The term characterizes verbal, oral, or literary activity." It involves numerous disciplines, and is taking place around the world.⁸ Development agencies tend to reduce literacy to 3R literacy, and then put numbers to it: how many years in school, how many grade levels attained, what scores attained on standardized tests. In struggling to find easily measurable data, they remove literacy from the relatively sophisticated paradigms involving four levels of activity — *skills* such as writing and math that can be measured, *tasks* such as writing checks or voting that take place in real life, *practices* involving multiple literacies needed to understand various norms and protocols, and *critical reflection* which would include "learning how to read the world" (Pierre 1999). Grandmothers who do not have the functional skills of reading and writing may nonetheless be quite astute at the complex literacies involving practices and critical reflection.

The protean nature of literacy in a transhistorical, transcultural, global landscape makes it full of “knotty, definitional, theoretical and methodological problems.”⁹ As one literacy expert noted, “notions of what constitutes literacy, and how best to promote it, remain controversial, and debates rage about nearly all aspects of the literacy agency — indeed about what the literacy agenda should be” (Jones 1994: 400). While at the most reductive end of the scale literacy is measured by the number of years in school, at the more expansive end, literacy is variously defined as “the apprenticeship for the knowledge needed to cope with everyday needs, including the individual’s relationship with the surrounding world” (Ballara 1992: 1), and as “the basic knowledge and skills needed by all in a rapidly changing world.”¹⁰ In his essay “How to eradicate illiteracy without eradicating illiterates?” in *Literacy As Freedom* published by UNESCO (2003), Munir Fasheh considers the literacy skills of his Palestinian mother who is “illiterate and innumerate” according to 3R literacy norms:

[My mother] was a seamstress. Women would bring her rectangular pieces of cloth in the morning; she would take a few measurements with colored chalk; by noon each rectangular piece would be cut into 30 small pieces; and by the evening these scattered pieces would be connected to form a new and beautiful whole. If this is not mathematics, I do not know what mathematics is. The fact that I could not see it for 35 years made me realize the power of language in what we see and what we do not see. Her knowledge was embedded in life, like salt in food, in a way that made it invisible to me as an educated and literate person. I was trained to see through official language and professional categories. In a very true sense, I discovered that my mother was illiterate in relation to my type of knowledge, but I was illiterate in terms of her type of understanding and knowledge. Thus, to describe her as illiterate and me as literate, in some absolute sense, reflects a narrow and distorted view of the real world and of reality. (Fasheh 2003: 53–54)

According to most commonly used measurements of literacy and numeracy, a 12-year-old who can read a formula and use it in abstraction to calculate the area of rectangles and triangles but who cannot put these formulas to work in real world situations would be considered literate and numerate as indicated by a standardized test to be passed. The Palestinian seamstress who can produce the outcome of the math problem in a real world situation but who cannot read the formula or express it in numbers would be considered as not literate.

Some experts suggest we should apply a very down-to-earth, local sort of wisdom to defining literacy: the “bed and blanket approach,” that is to say, simply pull the problem over to your side of the disciplinary bed and

apply considerations that adequately permit you to articulate the object of study.

When you choose how to define literacy, you are really choosing a value system; you are setting up a scale of competence against which a person will be measured.¹¹ Given the important roles grandmothers play in North Africa in terms of household skills and economies, reproductive health, the care and upbringing of children, and the passing on of oral traditions, we have chosen as a literacy model the “four literacies” approach that UNESCO developed for East Africa: body literacy, money literacy, civic literacy, and word literacy. But with grandmothers in mind as important assets and resources for a society, we approach these four literacies with a key difference. Whereas the overall aim of UNESCO’s East African program was “to address women’s vulnerability and marginal status”¹² by bringing in skills from the outside, we see these four literacies as also deeply connected to traditional forms of knowledge that can allow societies to tap into “women’s practical wisdom and central place” in their communities.

In the report “Grandmothers: a learning institution,” the author Judi Aubel points out that as many past development projects have failed, (and we would add, this is especially the case in the “education for all” goals for Morocco and the literacy for adults in Tunisia), development agencies intent on capitalizing on the “educate a woman” paradigm suggested by our epigraphs, have increasingly targeted the individual child and women of reproductive age. This focus has marginalized the senior women who provide cultural continuity, engage in many child-rearing activities, give key advice on child-bearing and family well-being, and who have both time and experience. Instead of isolating beneficiaries and compartmentalizing activities, a development approach that includes senior women would be oriented toward the family and community as an integrated system involving many kinds of literacy that could be used to reinforce one another. In this context, senior women would become an important asset in terms of cultural continuity and the social capital they have as respected elders could be brought to bear on decisions about modernization.

The literacy scholar Harvey Graff, in writing about the politics of large-scale literacy campaigns, noted that the political ends usually outweigh all other considerations:

Historically, large-scale efforts to provide literacy have not been tied to the level of wealth, industrialization, or democratization of a society, not to a particular type of regime. Instead, they have been more closely related to efforts of centralizing authorities to establish moral or political consensus, and over the past

two hundred years, to nation-state building. . . . In the twentieth century, particularly during the period from 1960 on, pronouncements about literacy seem to deem it a process of critical consciousness-raising not as an end in itself, but as a means to other goals — to the ends of national development and to a social order that elites, both national and international, define. (Arnové and Graff 1987: 2)

This pattern of using education as one mode of inventing a national identity certainly fits the case of Tunisia. As the architect of the Tunisian state after independence in 1956, Habib Bourguiba embarked on “a path of political and social engineering, a transformative project initiated from above that required a careful management of institutions to preempt opposition from below. Bourguiba put in place a vast, centralized state apparatus” (Brand 1998: 177). As part of this Western-leaning (Grandguillaume 1983: 45) nation-building effort, Bourguiba developed a new policy in the areas of education and women’s personal status. He put a law into place in 1958 (Law No. 118–58) “which introduced a national educational system open for all Tunisian children. At that time national efforts began to fight illiteracy, and particularly to enable young people to enter the job market.”¹³ The female literacy rate in 1966 was only 18%. In 2002, the youth literacy rate for females was 94%, but for adult women it is only around 63%.¹⁴ As Val Moghadam has pointed out in an overview of women’s rights in the MENA region, “Tunisia is the Arab country usually singled out as a model of legislation for women’s rights, equality, and empowerment — albeit within an overall authoritarian political environment. [And that] trajectory begins with the liberal Family Code in 1956 and President Bourguiba’s encouragement of women’s social participation.”¹⁵ As part of his effort to consolidate his own power and to establish the western-leaning model of a nation-state, Bourguiba excluded his rival Ben Youssef from the Neo-Destour party and eliminated his followers. Both tribal groups and the religious establishment who had supported Ben Youssef saw their political power undercut and their voices silenced. Bourguiba and his political elite undercut tribal groups, in part by instituting a code of personal status that made individuals, including women, answerable to the nation-state. Bourguiba instituted the changes in women’s status in the absence of a feminist movement, and as the Tunisian social scientist Mounira Charrad points out, the new family law can be seen as intending to promote social change while simultaneously marginalizing the tribal communities (Charrad 2001: 201). This formula puts rural women from tribal groups and traditional backgrounds in a double bind: a nominal gain in personal status at the cost of group identity.

3. Tunisia: a case study

At this point, we provide a brief case study about Tunisia in which we illustrate the importance of the four literacies (body, money, civic, and world), i.e. other than the 3Rs. This is the story of three Tunisian women whose lives stretch from the onset of French colonization in late nineteenth century till today's (21st century) Tunisia. All were nomadic Bedouin, illiterate by Western standards. They were taken for granted by their kin, and while shown deference and respect, were seldom viewed as heroes by their community. Nonetheless, each and every one of them has been instrumental in rearing, feeding, educating, advising, healing, and in all manner of well-being of their extended families. We have called them Alia, Bahia, and Cherifa: A, B, C. Like millions upon millions of senior women around the world, in the past and still today, they are the unsung heroes, without whose wise, selfless, and doggedly persistent contributions, their communities would have suffered much more severely from the vagaries of man and nature.

Alia was born in 1891 ten years after France colonized Tunisia, and died in 1966, ten years after Tunisia gained its independence. Alia could not write her name, but had the healing if not medical wisdom, to prescribe, make, and administer life-saving concoctions to countless children in her extended Bedouin family. She was not one of the rare but renowned healers who was sought after by patients from far distances. As an illiterate peasant, Alia was just one of thousands of senior women whose alternate literacy was instrumental in the subsistence and well-being of their families. Alia cared for sick children, advised young mothers on homecare, chastised male relatives when they strayed from communal life or misbehaved, hoarded scarce foods for rainy days, and, by their fantastic storytelling, inspired awe in the sparkling eyes of small children. These "othermothers" commanded respect from all around them.

Notwithstanding the self-proclaimed "*mission civilisatrice*," the French colonial system was designed to dispossess the masses of indigenous population in Tunisia, to keep them uneducated, to co-opt the few local "*évolués*" among them who were humored for their short-term usefulness, and to attract larger numbers of white European colonial settlers to France's North African "possessions," all for imperial dominance and aggrandizement, and for a boost of badly battered morale after the loss of Alsace and Lorraine territories to Germany in 1871.

Alia participated in the twice-yearly nomadic exodus seeking temporary employment in dry land or oasis farming, such as plowing, watering, weeding, harvesting, and various other menial activities for subsistence. Aside from raising two sons of her own, Alia developed an awesome

knowledge to heal most of the ailments in children and adults. She kept little store of medicinal plants but her ingenuity was such that, almost always, she was able to find what she needed to make a medicinal mix. Whether it is a snake or scorpion bite, a bleeding cut, a cold, a cough, a skin lesion, a headache, a diarrhea, etc., the patients or their parents quickly sought out Alia for intervention. Her ability to heal became legendary among her own people, but she was never a snake oil swindler. She was too modest for that. She learned these skills from growing up around her own grandmothers, and othermothers, her own senior women. During her long tenure as the healer of the family, Alia openly encouraged her younger womenfolk to learn some of her skills. After substituting a few times for a young mother in massaging a baby with olive oil and some mountain fragrant herb, she would eventually let the mother do it under her watchful eye, a part and parcel of the cycle of transmission of indigenous knowledge. With her overall wisdom in all four categories of other literacy, Alia succeeded in making it through two World Wars, and later died quietly of old age.

Bahia was born on the eve of World War I, when Alia was about twenty. In 1942, as a young mother of three low-age children, not having had any chance to attend school, Bahia suffered, this time consciously, the terror of a global war forced upon her community by European belligerents. Bahia was no healer, beyond the basics of health care, a body literacy that a good mother was expected to have. She learned the basics from Alia. On the other hand, Bahia's loathing of violence, and her fear for the safety of her kin, made her decide to sneak out, when everyone else was still asleep, in the aftermath of every flare-up in fighting in 1942–1943 Africa campaigns, to collect and bury all abandoned weapons and munitions. Only shortly before she died a few years before the 21st century, did she acknowledge her pacific acts in the height of WW II randomly devastating violence. She maintained, however, that she forgot where she buried the war booty she had collected. In some way, her own wisdom perhaps told her to never share the information with anyone. Bahia's wisdom was also apparent in her highly developed ethics, an ethics that no schooling could teach. She raised a total of six children, another five having died at an early age. Bahia was intent, along with her husband, to provide the best education her children could get under the local circumstances. Both she and her husband were convinced by the experience of malnutrition, misery, and inhuman treatment by the Roumis (i.e. colonial authorities), that education is the only way out. For close to ten years in the 1960s, at noon, Bahia would trek on foot, from home to the distant bus station, so that her children commuting to a faraway school could have a hot lunch. Oftentimes, another child whose mother couldn't

bring them lunch would eat with Bahia's children. It may be hard for highly paid development consultants, to understand how an illiterate woman is capable of making so many right decisions with regard to the safety, health, education, growth, and general welfare of her children and family. No wonder that major initiatives for economic development in the 1960s, 1970s, and even more recently, often overlooked women, and senior women in particular — the othermothers — from their plans.

To paraphrase Patricia Hill Collins who gave us the expression “community othermothers,” [These women] express ethics of caring and personal accountability which embrace conceptions of power and mutuality. . . . Such power is transformative in that [. . .] women's relationships with children and other vulnerable members are not intended to dominate or control. Rather its purpose is to bring people along, to [. . .] “uplift the race” so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance (cf. Collins 1990: 131–132; Belenky et al. 1997: 168).

Cherifa is still living. She is now 72. Daughter of Bahia, Cherifa married Alia's older son. Neither she nor her husband ever went to school. Together they raised ten children, nine of whom are healthy adults, married, and with kids. Cherifa had a privileged position, learning from her elders, mostly mother-to-daughter, and in her case mother-in-law-to-daughter as well. She developed her personality under their tutelage. From the time her first baby was born in 1951, Cherifa never stopped honing her skills and practicing them to care for her ten kids and two dozen grandchildren. When Bourguiba instituted the Code of Personal Status in 1956, Cherifa already had three babies, all girls. Local tradition favored boys. Thus she had several other pregnancies. Of ten children, only three are boys, including the youngest who has Down's syndrome. Thanks to universal education instituted by independent Tunisia, most of Cherifa's children had some schooling. While she and her husband could not help the children with school homework, they have been successful at helping them grow up to be sturdy, creative adults. Cherifa's record as a mother, and now as a senior woman, would make many well-educated mothers jealous. At times, some of Cherifa's children would tease her about not being literate. For example, they tell the story of Cherifa trying to sell surplus grapes from her garden, and requesting a price that is lower than what the buyer suggested.

Indeed, Cherifa was not numerate; she could not dial a phone number, nor read a letter, let alone write it. Evidently such lack of knowledge of the 3Rs presents a significant handicap, as it did for Alia and Bahia. It would be hard to blame these three women for not having mastered the 3Rs. They were not given the opportunity to be schooled, with the

responsibility for this exclusion being shared, perhaps unequally, by French colonial administration and the young nation-state; the heavier share falling on the former.

The resilience of these women is demonstrated by their survival and to a degree by their ability to thrive, without the benefit of schooling. Such resilience is made possible by life skills, unrelated to the 3Rs, accumulated and mastered by women like Alia, Bahia, and Cherifa, then passed on from senior women to their children, grandchildren, and other younger relatives and immediate neighbors, in countless rural hamlets, and Bedouin settings in Tunisia and the rest of the Maghreb. These caring and pedagogical skills about health, nutrition, safety, and of understanding the world and giving a sense to one's role in life, are neither a preferred substitute to the 3Rs nor a marginal set that can be overridden and replaced by schooling. This ill-conceived dichotomy that has persisted in development projects may be one of the reasons these projects often lack significant results, commensurate with the ambitious plans, large funding levels, and seemingly professional social engineering.

In Tunisia in 2006, the 30 percent of females who are illiterate, many of them senior, experienced "othermothers," are not sitting around helplessly, waiting for top-down literacy programs to come to their rescue. They are respected in their communities and consulted as guides by those who are younger. A sustainable development paradigm would value them as assets to the community. They provide cultural continuity and a deep commitment to the well-being of younger generations, and as such are great advocates of all modes of literacy — both those they possess and those they were denied. The onus falls on development experts, government agencies, and other international development organizations, to recognize the human capital residing in these senior women who don't even expect to be paid in order to share their wisdom. Alia and Bahia had done it all their lives. They passed their skills and wisdom on to Cherifa's generation, who in her turn had been sharing them with her children and grandchildren's generation.

4. Morocco: a case study

Dalila, Emna, and Faiza are Berber peasant sisters from the oases of Eastern Morocco. When Morocco became independent in 1956, although, at ages 8, 12, and 15 respectively, they were of school age, none of them went to school. Sixty years and seven husbands later, these three sisters have raised eleven children and participated in the raising of as many grandchildren.

Dalila, being the youngest, and married to a man with strong character, became a housewife with the ambition only to raise her six children and maintain a clean, happy home for them and their father. Until her husband's death she stayed under his shadow, but was skilled at being a mother and a housewife. As a senior woman today, Dalila remains shy and does not take leadership outside her traditionally assigned role. By necessity, she participates in the family activity, which is an alternative healing business. Her role is to prepare meals and feed the patients, but she does not take part in the treatment tasks. The example of Dalila's experience and skills is given to illustrate the diversity among senior women. Not all turn out to be leaders and knowledgeable "senior women."

Emna lives with her husband and her children a few doors down from Dalila's. She raised four children and contributed to family income by weaving and selling carpets. Emna is less shy but is not a community or even a family leader. Her conditions, although with a less domineering husband, did not provide her with opportunities to expand her horizons. However, Emna's handicraft work and her ability to bring in income gave her a chance to develop some numeracy skills and to rely on her own acquired knowledge when buying materials for weaving or taking finished carpets to market. She has taught two of her daughters the art of carpet making, and helped them set up their own home-based works when they got married. She also taught them all they needed to know about taking care of babies. Emna's experience and skills are indeed critical to any literacy effort. The integration of skill-building and income-making training in a program would enhance its positive impact and retention. Emna would be the appropriate teacher for carpet weaving.

Faiza, the elder sister, stands out as a woman of strong character. Some of her relatives may think of her as hard to live with. She married and divorced five times. She now lives alone in her ancestral home in the Casbah. Her only child, a son, lives far away, several hours by bus from where she is, and "does not keep in touch as a good son should." Faiza exerts strong moral authority over her sisters and both their children and their grandchildren. Her wisdom is based on independence, hard work, and pronounced — even inflated — sense of dignity. Faiza has had several run-ins with the authorities during the French colonial period, and as recently as a few years ago, with Moroccan local authorities. From the stories she tells (with great literary skill), it seems like she prevailed more often than not. She persistently tries to inculcate her views on dignity and citizen rights in people around her. The entire neighborhood respects her and knows where she lives. Faiza's charisma and her elevated sense of rights and duties, and her eloquent outspokenness, and talking back to

power, would inspire literacy learners when they are introduced to the civil and human rights of citizens.

5. Conclusion: adult literacy in North Africa — a comparison of Tunisia and Morocco

In a recent message posted to the discussion list *bladi.net* “Les Marocains d’Ailleurs,” a Moroccan living overseas asked “Why is Morocco always last?”

I’ve always asked myself why Morocco, despite the efforts it makes, is always the very last in the Maghreb economically and socially.

In looking at the news, you’d say that it was a country that was overcoming its lagging and that it had nothing to envy its neighbors for . . . But when you look at the numbers . . . it’s something else completely. It’s a real shame, and I’m consciously weighing my words. The GDP per capita is the weakest, the level of literacy is the weakest, the poverty ratio is the highest, as well as the highest emigration, the highest infant mortality rate . . .

Contrary to what some may think, I am not bringing this up as a counter-publicity effort toward Morocco nor to denigrate it . . . just the contrary, I am doing it to sound the alarm. We can no longer let ourselves be the laughing stock of the Maghreb!

Strictly speaking I would acknowledge it if someone said that Algeria has the advantage of hydrocarbons (but on the other hand, that advantage is quickly balanced by 30 years of socialism and 10 years of civil war) . . . But what about Tunisia? It’s had the same handicaps we have had, even more. In spite of that, it has a much higher living standard (even though all is relative, it’s true, it is not a developed country either), and a much more stable economy. While Morocco has seen its economic growth tumble to 2% (it’s fallen so far you could speak of a recession taking into account the demographic growth, and particularly the rise of the price of oil). Tunisia has continued on a sustained rhythm of growth of 5%. What are they doing, or rather what is Morocco not doing, to perform in this way? So far as I know, Tunisia has no oil and is not a tropical country.

How long is Morocco going to continue being the champion of the last place?¹⁶

Needless to say, this message generated a lot of heated discussion. For the purposes of our discussion here of the literacy landscape, it touches on many of the comparisons, and false comparisons, that can be made between Tunisia and Morocco. Certainly the idea that Tunisia and Morocco face the same handicaps is misleading. While both had to deal with colonial invasions, colonial rule and post-independence restructuring, many ethnic, geographic and political facts separate the two countries. Morocco enjoys a greater diversity of ethnic cultures and languages,

covers a much greater area, and has a far more dramatic sweep of topographical variations. Tunisia has benefited from the rapid institution of egalitarian personal status laws, a relatively homogenous population, and a stable if authoritarian government since independence. Of Tunisia's population of about 10 million, around 25 percent are 14 or under, and of those 15 years and older, about 74 percent are 3R literate (males 84 percent; females 64 percent). Morocco's population is three times larger, and of the 30 million about 35 percent are 14 years old and younger; the 3R literacy rate for those 15 and older is only 44 percent (male 57 percent; females 31 percent). As Moha Ennaji summed up the situation recently:

Despite efforts to develop the economy and improve the well-being of the population, the Moroccan economy, in general, has become increasingly dependent on Western economies; Morocco still depends on the World Bank and the IMF, following its adoption of structural adjustment programs, which have been disadvantageous to the overwhelming majority of the population. Additionally, at the social level, all indicators point to a remarkable increase in poverty and unemployment, especially in rural areas, and among the young and women. In fact, Morocco is going through a serious economic and social crisis. Its economy is fragile, with a mere 1 per cent rate of growth in 2000, successive droughts, international debt and illegal migration. (Ennaji 2006: 116–117)

These differences account in large part for the higher level of literacy in Tunisia. Both countries have rich cultural histories and a wealth of local knowledge embodied in literacies of rural peoples. However, both countries have faced some significant failures when it comes to tapping into this kind of wealth.

Both Tunisia and Morocco engaged in ambitious adult education initiatives around 2000 because of indications that literacy levels for adults, especially for rural women, were falling in many ways. Among the efforts made to address adult literacy there were the National Program for Adult Literacy established in Tunisia in 2000, and the coming back into operation after a forty year hiatus of the NGO, The Moroccan League for Basic Education and Struggle against Illiteracy.

In 1992 the Tunisian Government decided to put a national strategy in place to combat illiteracy among those in the 15–44 year old age group, especially targeting those between 15 and 29. The strategy was to tackle illiteracy by a campaign stretching over three five-year plans, from 1992 to 2006. The eighth plan (1992–1996) and the ninth plan targeted classes for 119,000 learners, but was only able to establish classes for 68,000 learners. The illiteracy rate among rural women actually increased during this period. If we look at government reports, the reason more learners did not join the classes was attributed first to *absence of motivation and*

perspective among the learners, and only secondarily to scattered dwelling patterns or lack of time, or lack of flexibility, or lack of teacher training and motivation [our emphasis] (Gharbi 2000: 7).¹⁷ The laying of blame, the focus on a national agenda rather than personal or family need, the exclusion of religion as part of cultural identity, the definition of the learners by means of their lacks (the literacy they do not have) rather than by their ability to contribute, all these elements undermine the success of the literacy effort. The establishment of the National Program for Adult Literacy in 2000 addressed many of these problems, although it still is neither reaching many older rural women, nor including their knowledge and cultural priorities in the literacy approaches.

Morocco faces much larger challenges. Absenteeism in literacy programs is a far greater problem there. According to recent work done by Fatima Agnaou, despite more than a decade since the Jomtien conference in 1990 focused on Education for All, “two million Moroccan children were left out of primary school and female illiteracy has decreased only moderately, as it is still as high as 60 percent at the national level and 80 percent at the rural one . . . [in some literacy programs] the dropout rate was as high as 72 percent . . . Evidently the challenge is not only how to attract girls and women, who due to the gender gap in education constitute the majority of participants in Moroccan adult literacy campaigns and programs, but how to retain them and sustain their motivations” (Agnaou 2004: 1). In Morocco as in Tunisia, the discourse of the literacy programs themselves often focuses mainly on learner deficits. Agnaou notes on the subject of empowerment:

Addressing female literacy provision in terms of practical or strategic gender interests begins from a deficit perspective. Advocates of practical gender need consider women as victims of illiteracy and that their integration could be achieved within a framework that links their emancipation with economic growth and returns. . . . This economic-development-oriented tendency aims at integrating women in society within their accepted social roles. . . .

Within this perspective, non-literate women are regarded as ignorant creatures that retard their countries’ socio-economic development. Thus, they are cured through a “nutritionist” approach by learning the technical drills of reading and writing from texts that deal with good citizenship, patriotism, and family planning. (Agnaou 2004: 18)

While development efforts that consider the strategic interests of women also exist, they too focus on deficits, seeing women as victims of discrimination, marginalization and oppression. Agnaou notes that “advocates of gender equity as a strategic interest in Morocco have succeeded in sensitizing the elite and even some decision-makers to women’ issues, notably

the Personal Code issue, theoretically, it remains a top-down movement which the non-literate majority does not know of or misunderstands. . . . To my knowledge, no study has ever addressed women's strategic interests in terms of literacy provision. Yet, literacy teaching can be used as a means to change the traditional values in society and as a promoter of gender equity among adults and children alike" (Agnaou 2004: 19).

Defining strategic gender issues in terms of deficits, and thus seeing women's rights as unproblematically opposed to traditional values is one of the inherent problems of a top-down, elite-to-rural delivery system. Traditional values and local practices, the kinds of literacies often possessed by senior women in rural areas, do not automatically rule out such changes around gender equity, women's employment in the formal economy or women's increased social mobility. Older women like the Tunisian Cherifa and the Moroccan Faiza, who did not go to school, support those forms of modernization that will improve the lives of their daughters and granddaughters. Including them in literacy planning although they are not 3R literate would broaden the literacy landscape in crucial ways.

The literacy work of the NGO The Moroccan League for Basic Education and the experts on adult pedagogy who work with it have begun to develop the kind of literacy approaches Agnaou signaled whose aims would be not only "to eradicate basic illiteracy, but underdevelopment, exclusion, dependence and injustice as well." In his report "L'Alphabétisation et l'éducation des adultes" written as part of the study *50 Years of Human Development: Perspectives for 2025*, adult literacy expert Lahssen Madi (who also serves as secretary general of the Moroccan League) cites Tunisia's literacy program as one which can compare favorably to Morocco's efforts and which has been relatively successful (Madi 2006). He acknowledges Tunisia for the number of literacy centers established, their certification, the bridges made between different systems of education, the systematization of delivery and evaluation, the integration of literacy into the economic and social realities of learners, and the internal improvement of methods of literacy delivery.

While Madi's report focuses on the many improvements needed in the Moroccan literacy arena, based on our observations of literacy classes delivered by the Moroccan League, their approach seems to have great potential to include the kinds of knowledge senior women have to offer. Its suggested pedagogical program is very much focused on human rights and real-life uses of literacy. Its teachers tend to be from and invested in the well-being of the communities where they teach (Tunisian teachers were often from outside the communities where they taught). In an earlier book written by Madi for the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization ISESCO, *Basic Needs for Women's Education*, the strategic needs of women involving gender equality are neither opposed to traditional knowledge nor Islamic teachings, rather they are seen as rooted in these cultural reservoirs and as continuous with them (cf. Madi 2002). If senior women are to be included in literacy efforts as cultural resources and as the community glue Judi Aubel describes in her "Grandmother project," then it will be through a literacy landscape that has room for their oral knowledge and that builds on rather than eradicating their cultural roots. Literacy programs will be much more sustainable, we believe, when their ABCs include the contributions of senior women like Alia and Faiza and those who learned from them.

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Notes

1. For an extended analysis of the use of "grandmothers" in this sense, and an overview of the important roles senior women play in their communities around the globe, however much ignored by the development establishment, see Aubel, Judi (2005). *Grandmothers: a learning institution*, USAID (August 2005). http://www.grandmotherproject.org/Art.GM.JIC_files/GM.TomeFinal.pdf. See also Aubel's website for the "Grandmother project" (<http://www.grandmotherproject.org/>).
2. On this conflict between binary thought patterns and life experience, Jansen cites Levi-Strauss's structural approach as well as E. Leach's *Social Anthropology* (1982).
3. "War against Illiteracy [sic]," *Egypt Guide* (May 1999). <http://www.egyptguide.net/education/growingup> (accessed 19 July 2001).
4. World Fertility Survey, quoted by Women Aid International. www.womenaid.org/press/info/general/eyesfacts.html.
5. UNESCO, UNICEF (2001). http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/about/sgreport-pdf/07_AdultLiteracy_D7341Insert_English.pdf.
6. UNESCO's Executive Board, "Draft proposal and plan for a United Nations literacy decade" (161 EX/7, sub-item 3.2.1), Paris, 22 March 2001. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/ged.html>.
7. See, for example, Ramdas (1990).
8. Paul Perron, "Towards a socio-semiotic theory of literacy: Opening Remarks of the 21st University College Symposium." <http://lsn.oise.utoronto.ca/Bruce/RLiteracy/Fall99.nsf/pages/Perron>.
9. Perron, "Towards a socio-semiotic theory of literacy."
10. "The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning" (1997). Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. <http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/confintea/declaeng.htm> (accessed 8 July 2006).
11. Perron, "Towards a social-semiotic theory of literacy."
12. UNESCO. http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=26674&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
13. "Literacy Exchange: World Resources on Literacy — Tunisia." <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/UNESCO-UIE/literacyexchange/tunisia/tunisiadata.htm>.

14. http://earthtrends.wri.org/pdf_library/country_profiles/pop_cou_788.pdf.
15. Valentine Moghadam, "Towards gender equality in the Arab/Middle East region: Islam, culture, and feminist activism," an occasional paper, Human Development Report Office (HDR 2004). http://hdr.undp.org/docs/publications/background_papers/2004/HDR2004_Valentine_Moghadam.pdf.
16. Plotsk, www.bladi.net: "Les Marocains d'Ailleurs." <http://www.bladi.net/forum/58620-maroc-dernier-maghreb.html> (accessed 8 July 2006).
17. See also, Ministry of Education, Republic of Tunisia, "Educational development in Tunisia: 1996–2000," n.d.

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