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**WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LITERACY PARTICIPATION IN CAPE TOWN,
SOUTH AFRICA:
Six African women tell their stories**

Margie Bertrand

**A Thesis
in
The department
of
Educational Studies**

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LITERACY PARTICIPATION IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA: Six African women tell their stories

Margie Bertrand

This thesis explores the experiences of six African women participating in literacy programs in Cape Town, South Africa.

In order to understand the present context in which the women live and study, it is important to consider the historical, political, economic and cultural factors that have shaped their lives, and those of their ancestors. From here, the paper explores the present social position and material condition of African women living in the Western Cape Province. By becoming aware of the important underlying factors that hinder and/or support women's education, teachers, policy makers and program directors may be able to respond to a reality that is often overshadowed.

Using qualitative research techniques, I present the perspective of six women and their experiences as mature students in literacy programs. As "illiterate" people are often portrayed as being helpless and deficient, this study unveils a reality far from the stereotypes that are common in the dominant discourse on literacy. The African women that I interviewed, though deeply affected by their gender roles, historical context and economic constraints - revealed strength, determination and confidence in their ability to learn, raise children and confront the harsh realities of South African society. The women in this study continue to pursue an education against all odds and with little support. They speak well of themselves and their abilities to survive and nurture their children and communities. These conclusions are different from studies carried out in other contexts, such as India (Medel-

Anonuevo, 1996), Nova Scotia (Horsman, 1989), U.S.A. (Rockhill, 1985) where women echo low self-esteem and a sense of helplessness.

It is important that our assumptions about "illiterate" people be challenged. In order for this to happen, it is helpful to seek the perspectives of literacy participants themselves. Their voices must be central to any discussion on literacy practice and theory.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my son Mischa.

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WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF LITERACY PARTICIPATION: Six South African women tell their stories.

INTRODUCTION

I began this paper with the intention of exploring the factors in women's lives which facilitate or make difficult their participation in literacy programmes. Further to this, I wanted to consider what literacy participation means to women. Research (Edwards, 1993, McCaffery, 1985) on women and education investigates how undertaking further studies is often in addition to a full load of responsibilities which reflect women's socialized roles. Women's roles as mothers, workers, wives, daughters, friends etc., often leaves little time or energy for other pursuits (Smith, 1990). Concurrently, there can be an internal driving force that meets and surpasses the barriers in order to fulfil a personal desire to learn.

I chose to carry out the study in Cape Town, South Africa for particular reasons. Firstly, I was inspired by the literature of the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education at the University of the Western Cape. I wanted to experience the environment of educators making major contributions in educational practice and theory within the context of a transforming society. I also wanted to get a different perspective of literacy participants than the one I had been most exposed to; I had a hunch that South African women could provide such an alternative. Tired of the "illiterate as deficient" and "woman as disempowered" models, I chose a context where my limited knowledge of African women informed me that dominant stereotypes would be challenged. And so they were.

Women in literacy programmes are often spoken and written about as being "disempowered" and therefore needing to become "empowered" (Heng, 1995, Ellis, 1995, Lepphoto, 1995). Yet the women I spoke with already were

empowered in many ways. South African women may best be described as disadvantaged but the question remains as to whether they have internalized the oppression. I met women who were born into very disadvantaged positions based on their gender and colour, underlined by the history of colonialism and apartheid. Contrary to dominant discourse, the six women who form the basis of this study revealed that literacy learners do not necessarily have low self-esteem, feel ashamed or blame themselves. They were highly independent, resourceful, strong and self-assured. They may recognize that the material reality of their lives is difficult and unjust, but it is false to assume that disadvantages necessarily translate into subordination, dependence or lack of self-worth. This observation echoes Hilda Bernstein's (1985) extensive research on women under apartheid carried out between 1975 and 1985. She concluded that while African women were historically the most oppressed group under apartheid, they were not silent, suppressed or fully internally 'colonized'. Their history is one of active resistance and conviction. She affirms:

Despite their background of patriarchal society, African women have never occupied the position of subservience that still exists in some parts of Asia and Africa. (p. 82)

I compare my observations with other research (Horsman, 1989) which documents the extent to which some literacy learners have internalized their subordination. While I began this study steeped in the work of Horsman (1989) and others who document women's literacy experiences, I have journeyed far from their position. It is clear now that one cannot generalize findings from one social context to another. Horsman may well be correct about the women in her study but their experience is far from that of the women I got to know in South

Africa. All this is to say that feminist theory must be seen as context bound; anything beyond that is to patent and too easy.

Inherent in this study are three interconnecting themes: the context and history of South Africa, the social position and material condition of women and literacy participation. By exploring these themes, I aim to uncover the complexities and interconnections which affect women's literacy participation.

This paper is organized in five parts. Chapter I reviews literature on women returning to studies in North America and Europe. Chapter II discusses the historical forces which defined women's position and the actual current position of African women. The Chapter III presents the methodology used to gather the data. Chapter IV is the heart of the paper as it recounts the six women's stories. The conversations with the women focus around their early lives, their relationships and their thoughts on literacy participation. The conclusions in Chapter V discuss the paradox of South African women being among the most disadvantaged while also being independent , strong and self-assured.

CHAPTER 1

STUDIES ON WOMEN AND EDUCATION IN NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE

Gender and development theory provides a helpful framework in which to analyse women's social position and material condition as they relate to women of the South and the North. Young (1991), asserts that women's relative position and condition is perceived in the context of men's relative condition and position. The condition refers to the material state in which women live; the position refers to the social and economic standing relative to men (Walters, 1993/4). Discrimination is understood to be a *symptom* of women's oppression; women's condition and position in society provide the context for discrimination to occur (Bazilli, 1991). Gender refers to the socially constructed roles which women and men live by. Within this, relationships are marked by inequity which is manifested in all areas of life, especially in the division of labour in the work place and domestic sphere. Literacy participation is therefore a gendered experience, affected by women's position, social roles and relationships. As Stromquist (1995) remarks:

We need not only to examine education as it relates to women, but to see it as a gendered experience with its own dynamics and consequences. (p.ix.)

The literature on women's relationship to education in North America and Europe illustrates a number of similarities to the experiences of women students in Southern Africa. Despite vast historical, geographical, political and economic differences there are striking similarities related to the role that family, culture and socially constructed gender roles play in women's lives across continents. Women's gendered position and condition in developing and developed countries determine, in complex ways, their capacity to participate successfully in educational pursuits. This section will thus briefly review how

North American and European women live their gender roles, and how this impacts on their education.

Public and Private Life

A generally accepted belief is that women live more in the private sphere and are discouraged or prevented from playing a role in the public sphere. In a study concerning the experiences of 31 mature women students at polytechnics in England, Edwards (1993) investigated the separations and connections between the two spheres. As a carry over from their childhood the women continued to see families as structured around women's emotional caring and as adults they assume full responsibility for this role. Edwards examined how these two spheres interact in the area of education.

Public and private worlds generally, and specifically here in the form of education and family, are not separate entities. They interact and impinge on each other, with particular implications for the opposition of women within each. (p.15)

Edwards noted that women's responsibility to care *about* and *for* their families affected other areas of their lives. Their family responsibilities determined much of their relationship to education. In most cases the institutions chosen were nearest to where the women lived, so as to 'fit into' family commitments. The women usually studied full-time rather than stretching their studies over five years because they felt it would be too difficult to maintain motivation against the backdrop of family responsibilities. The women also needed to be full-time students to be eligible to receive much needed grants. They did not want their families to suffer financially because of their studies.

Edwards noted that the women returned to school not out of dissatisfaction with the family, "but because they were dissatisfied with their

public world position" (p.56). The overwhelming reasons stem from employment prospects and the hope for better paid work in the future. About half of the women "stressed how their children provided an added impetus to study and to gain qualifications so that they could apply for better jobs" (p.57). The women believed that education would increase their 'prestige' and help their self-esteem. They also stated that education gave them an 'objective' view of the world. Edwards commented: (1993)

It was about becoming knowledgeable in an objective way and about individual achievement, but it also meant being different - as students in higher education, as mothers, and as members of the population generally. (p.60)

Edwards contrasts this view with the "overwhelming meaning of family life as grounded in the local and particular, in emotions, subjectivity and in the women's own caring about and for other people" (p.60). Inherent in these two worlds are interconnections and separations that must somehow be balanced. Education can be a point of integration between the public and private spheres.

Students' individual concerns may find a public voice in a group of learners where many of the women live common experiences and problems related to home, family and community. The literacy class may be a site where women can discuss their problems in the private sphere (too many family responsibilities, not enough support) and link them to greater social structures in the public sphere (women's inferior position in employment institutions and the political arena). Through discussion on the nature of problems which stem from the gendered structuring of society women may become aware that they are not alone with their concerns, nor are they the cause of their problems. Stromquist discusses this linking of the public and private sphere in relation to a mothers' group which raised concerns about their daughters' education. By

bringing the private life concerns to a public group for discussion, individual concerns were expressed and debated. Interviews with women (Horsman, 1989, Stromquist, 1992) provide a glimpse of the central role that motherhood plays in women's lives. For the most part, it is a private role. Can literacy classes provide a forum to bring the private aspects to public debate?

Motivation

Motivation, or the lack of it, is a constant in most discussions of literacy; it is sometimes misunderstood as a determining feature inherent, or not, in learners (Rockhill, 1987). Horsman perceived the need to dig deeper into the private worlds of the women to see how their lives affected their 'motivation'. Rather than looking at 'personal' reasons or attitudes, Horsman wanted to go beyond what may appear on the surface as 'lack of interest'. While investigating theories about women's participation in literacy, Horsman noted:

There is an absence of an acknowledgement of power differentials in these theories, in particular the authority men may wield in patriarchal power relations which define women's roles as mother and wife. (p. 83)

Rockhill also explored how issues of power affect the language of motivation and what is understood as motivation. She noted the gaps between women's desire to participate in literacy programmes and the common discourse on motivation. How do women's private and public lives produce attitudes about themselves, family, work and community? This is important because the attitudes are then 'read' as 'motivation'. Patricia Cross (1981) explored the area of motivation without a gender analysis. She described three areas of life which affects learners' participation as dispositional, situational and institutional. However, she did not analyse how gender 'constructs' or defines these categories.

Rockhill cautions against looking at women's participation in literacy programmes as a problem stemming from motivation. Rather, she describes the 'situational factors' that confine and define the extent to which a woman may, or may not, participate. She argues that participation is not an isolated act but one which reflects the complexity of the person's life. It is important to look at how women's condition and position in society lays the groundwork for the 'situational factors' to manifest themselves.

The psychological, as opposed to sociological, understanding of motivation places responsibility for participation squarely on the women's shoulders, as well as the resultant lack of participation. That women perceive their lack of participation as a lack of motivation is evidence that they have internalized their roles and become accomplices in their own oppression. Some researchers (Horsman, 1989, Smith, 1990) believe the underlying reasons lie in the ways that women's lives are structured - around other people. As Horsman states:

Unless women can articulate alternative discourses which expand the ways in which they can see their own participation in literacy programs or lack of it, they are left blaming themselves for their lack of motivation. (p.163)

A consideration of women's roles as mothers should not be interpreted as a further emphasis of the 'reproductive' stereotype of women's function in society. However the reproductive role of women, as mothers and caretakers, weighs heavily on women's time, energy and resources, which in turn influences women's participation in education. Raising children may limit women's participation in literacy programmes at the same time as it provokes and motivates women to participate. Horsman noted:

Men, children and friends influence, both through their attitudes and through their material existence, whether the women participate in adult programs. The institutions with which the women come into contact, for example, the social services and medical system, also influence the possibilities for attending programs. (p.115)

The issue of women's *time* is central to their ability to participate in programs. Medel-Anonuevo's (1996) study of women's literacy programmes in India reported that many aspects of the program were not appropriate to the reality of women's lives. The program, designed for women and focused mainly on food and nutrition, overlooked the fact that many of the women were unable to participate in the programs because so much of their time was taken up with cooking and other household duties.

Dorothy Smith (1977) discussed how women's time is organized around the needs of men, children, their school schedules and extra curricular activities. Horsman validates this theory:

The organization of space, time and resources are usually located outside women's needs and control. (p. 115)

Smith (1981) believes that the way women's lives are organized is political and systematic, and results from the negation of women's authority to define their experience. Drawing on the work of Kathleen Rockhill (1983), external authority may be considered as external power; as other voices which influence and shape the way experience is conceptualized.

To study how power operates to maintain domination, we must take into consideration the concrete, everyday material practices and social relations which regulate our subjectivities, as well as the symbolic and ideological meaning structures through which we interpret our experience. (Street, 1993a, p.159)

Anne -Louise Brookes (1992) expands this to demonstrate how a lack authority makes women ideologically subservient to *other* peoples' voices of authority.

Research in England has confirmed the systemic nature of barriers to women's participation in further education (McGivney, 1993). Women with young children are severely restricted from studying full-time; part-time study depends on accommodating to available childcare. Institutional lack of consideration concerning childcare and appropriate class timetables mirrors cultural attitudes towards women in general and cannot be treated in isolation from women's inferior social position.

McCaffery's study in England (1985) reveals how family needs so structure women's lives that women have difficulty finding the time or money for their own educational needs and desires. Where support exists to enable women to participate, this support itself is also "gendered".

Mostly it is women friends and relatives who tell each other about programs, go together to classes and support each other during the often painful process of returning to school and participating in training programs. They help each other with childcare and with homework and encourage each other not to give up and not to see themselves as stupid. (p.133)

Horsman's interviews also reveal the extent to which men's power in the home acts against women's literacy participation in subtle and overt ways. Some men resist childcare, others threaten and carry out acts of physical violence to control and inhibit women's participation. Rockhill (1987) investigated the perceived threat of women's education on men and the ways in which male power actively limits and controls women's educational pursuits in overt and covert ways. The Wimbush study concerns activities of women with preschool children in the U.K. (in McGivney, 1993). This research demonstrates how male partners use their power to discourage women from

participating in activities outside the home. McGivney concludes that women's self-development and educational development continue to be a perceived threat to men's power position in the family, and often results in the women dropping out of educational activities to avoid domestic strife. While not wishing to generalize the role that women's education plays in marital discord, McGivney notes: "There appears nonetheless to be a strong link between marital strife and women's attempts to do things for themselves which are not connected with their family role." (p.20)

Interestingly, Wimbush (1988) remarks that single mothers expressed a greater sense of independence and autonomy in their personal lives, despite economic constraints. While single mothers may struggle with financial problems and a lack of any outside help with domestic responsibilities, they may experience more independence in their homes. McGivney (1993) noted that unequal power relations in the family often surface when the woman attempts to participate in any activity that is not seen to be related to her domestic role. This confirms other research (Wimbush, 1988) which exposes the extent to which women with families internalize notions that their personal interests are secondary to the needs of their family members.

It is important to look at the entire life context of when women begin and drop out of an educational program. Often, it is not about 'choice' but about the convergence of a number of factors which make participation possible or impossible. Horsman explored the many ways that financial assistance, family, and work have influenced women's participation practices. When women stopped participating, it was often the result of factors such as a withdrawal of financial assistance, pressure from the husband or lack of childcare etc. But teachers often felt that the women were simply not 'serious students' when they

left a programme. The women sometimes blamed themselves and internalized the image of the 'drop out'.

Calls for literacy are often coupled with the concept that isolation and marginalization are a consequence of illiteracy. They are not but women's roles which confine them to the private sphere are marginalizing. Literacy classes can be a vehicle to help reduce the isolation in which women often live. The multiple responsibilities of private life confine women to their homes. Household duties, children's schedules, men's demands, and certainly, lack of financial resources inhibit women's participation in public life. Education can offer opportunities to integrate into public life, as can childcare facilities and shared domestic responsibilities. Being 'illiterate' is not the cause of isolation, but is often cited as a key factor, playing into the 'blame the victim' discourse.

Horsman maintains that women are often 'torn' between being 'a good mother' - which means always putting children first, and 'improving themselves', which may mean becoming more educated. Within this, even 'improving' oneself is perceived by the women as something that is ultimately for their children. Better literacy skills will set a good example for the children and also enable the mother to help children with their homework.

Women are often caught between two very strong societal messages. A good mother puts her children first, and a good mother is a literate mother. This value is 'supported' by data that 'shows' the link between educational achievement of mothers and educational achievement of the child. (J.W.B Douglas 1964). Typically, this link does not consider economic and social circumstances, and feeds into 'blaming the individual' rather than societal structures.

These recent studies in North America and Europe which explore conceptions and misconceptions regarding women's participation in education

help to unveil the often buried realities of women's lives. The studies confirm that women's inferior position in society must be analysed in order to to understand women's relationship to educational activities and pursuits. Studies based in Southern Africa on literacy participation and its consequences share a number of similarities with studies in other parts of the world. This study has attempted to add to this overall picture by focussing on the lives of a few South African women.

CHAPTER 2

THE POSITION OF AFRICAN WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA

The position of African women in South Africa can be viewed in at least two ways: from one set of perspectives, they are amongst the world's most oppressed; at another level, however, one can perceive them as strong, independent agents of their own destiny who resist and struggle against oppression while seizing opportunities where they do exist. This section aims to highlight the many factors that make up the complex and contradictory perspective that views South African women as oppressed *and* strong.

This chapter will lay out the context of African women's lives, past and present. In the first section, I highlight two historical practices that have affected, and still do affect women's lives: traditions and apartheid. I discuss three particular areas that relate directly to women's lives under apartheid; education, migrant labour and political struggle.

The second section discusses the current position of African women with particular reference to the Western Cape. I present factual information on the women's current position based on occupation and income. I then present information about literacy learners gathered through quantitative and qualitative research.

The South African Context

By exploring the historical factors which underlie and perpetuate African women's disadvantaged position in society we may better understand the roots of resistance. This is often lost in the simplistic discourse of "the poor illiterate". The intersection of race, class, culture, and gender, interwoven with the consequences of colonization, apartheid and neo-colonization underlie the oppressive conditions of women's lives. At the same time, women's resistance in the face of these conditions underlie their determination and strength.

South African history is marked by waves of colonization and exploitation of the indigenous people. The arrival of the Dutch in the late 1600s, followed by the English in the late 1700s (Thompson, 1995), marked the beginning of a decisive process of European expansion. The settlers forcefully and brutally dispossessed the African people of their land from the 17th century onward, consolidating their power as a privileged white minority. The steady land grab during the 1800s was reinforced by law in 1913 with the "Native Lands Act" which limited African ownership of land. A series of segregation laws followed, deepening and extending settler rule (Beinart, 1994).

South African Traditions

Certain values and attitudes in African society have contributed to women's inferior position of which low literacy skills are one element. Traditional values which define gender roles have limited girls' and women's educational pursuits. The values are imbedded in the past and still influence women's lives. Women's roles have been defined by family, husbands, subsistence farming responsibilities and their provision of cheap service to white communities.

Traditionally, women have been the primary sources of labour in rural African societies which relied heavily on subsistence agriculture and the raising of livestock. Under customary law women are minors, and children and cattle are the property of men. The 'ownership' of the children is a key element to men's control over women. Without the right to own property or land, and thus without control over labour, rural women were, and continue to be trapped like slaves in production.

Although women are responsible for most of the agricultural and domestic work, it is not considered "work" in the traditional sense. Women's

labour is often to provide for family consumption and is regarded as a supplementary income to the meager wages of male migrant farm labourers. Because women's agricultural work on communal farms is unremunerated, it is not recorded by census forms; thus it is not validated by society (Chlebowska, 1990). Ballara (1991) notes that daughters in many developing countries serve as an investment; their production and reproduction capacities contribute directly to farm and household labour. In the culture of rural Africa, where food and material resources are scarce, women's and girls lives are a priority for maintaining the family and the subsistence economy.

Parental attitudes favoured education for boys. Girls were the last to go to school and the first to be forced out due to lack of money, early pregnancy and to fulfill domestic duties. The unequal distribution of household and agricultural chores along gender lines resulted in further subordination of women in society and exacerbated disparities in educational opportunities. This history of gender roles still influences how women perceive their future.

If young women consider their role as primarily in the domestic sphere this will also affect their levels of motivation to study academic and/or vocational subjects. (Wolpe, 1994, p. 12)

Bernstein (1985) notes various agents which continue to handicap women's education:

They [agents] operate in the home through parents' attitudes and expectations for their male and female children; in the physiological field, where lack of access to birth control and abortion leads to an extremely high rate of pre-marital pregnancy among African schoolchildren with a resulting high dropout rate. (p. 77)

Schoolchildren in rural areas still have to walk many miles to school. This further impinges on the "time" factor because girls are expected to help with cooking, child care, farming, and fetching water and wood, both before and

after school. The unequal distribution of household and agricultural chores serves to further subordinate women in society and exacerbate unequal educational opportunities.

Apartheid

Apartheid philosophy and practice was used to disenfranchise Black people of their land and use their labour for capitalist exploitation for the benefit of the White settler minority. The South African economy was based on super-exploitation and relied on a series of laws to consolidate the inferior position of Black people after colonization (Tabata, 1960).

Apartheid was officially instituted by the Afrikaaner National Party in 1948 and was only dismantled completely in the early 1990s. White domination and racial segregation was legislated through a series of laws that were the hallmarks of apartheid. The position of people in South Africa was determined at birth, based on skin color and sex which determined their location in a highly classed society. The apartheid state followed a philosophy and policy of "separate development" which divided non-whites into groups: African, Coloured and Asian. Africans were the descendants of pre-colonial aboriginal inhabitants and under apartheid were defined as having only African blood. Coloured refers to the descendants of members from more than one population group (mixed) and descendants of the Malay people who were brought to South Africa as slaves. 'Asian' refers mainly to descendants of indentured workers from India who arrived in South Africa during the 19th century (Bernstein, 1985).

Africans represent about 78 % of the population, whites 12%, Coloreds 8% and Asians 2%. During the apartheid years a number of laws were used to divide the country into segregated zones (Group Areas) in adherence with the policy of "Separate Development". The "Group Areas Policy" divided the

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country into separate areas for each race. Africans were largely restricted to rural areas called "bantustans". Cities and towns were reserved for Whites, Coloreds and Asians who lived separately from each other. By 1985, the country was divided so that Africans were designated to live on 13.7% of the land while 87% was reserved for Whites, Coloureds and Asians. Coloureds and Asians were also restricted to specific areas.

The "Influx control" policy restricted the movement of African people and was regulated through "Pass Laws". Africans had to carry identification documents called a "Pass" in order to travel out of a bantustan. Africans could only live and work outside of a bantustan where labour laws and housing laws permitted it. A job enabled an African to live outside of the bantustans. Africans who worked in cities or near industrial or commercial areas had to live in "Townships", crowded shanty towns with limited or no electricity or water supply. Many migrant labourers lived in "Hostels", single sex dormitories located near mines or industrial areas. Women and children were not allowed to live in hostels (Bernstein, 1985).

The government apparatus employed the police and the South African Defence Forces to carry out "forced removal" of people who lived outside of their designated zone. Forced removals took place in rural areas, towns and cities. Entire communities were uprooted and forced to live elsewhere, in the case of Africans, either bantustans, townships or hostels for migrant workers.

Labour laws played a definitive role in defining the demographics of the population in the Western Cape Province. In the 1960s, the Western Cape was declared a "Coloured and White Preference Labour Area". Skilled labour was reserved for Coloureds and Whites while farm labour and domestic work was reserved for Africans (Platzky, Billy, 1996).

Apartheid laws on education. *Lack of access to education is another important factor, particularly among women in rural areas.* (Bernstein, 1985. p. 77)

African men and women's access to education was severely limited under apartheid. The National Party which ruled from 1948 - 1994 actively perpetuated adult illiteracy among the African population by providing the most inferior education to African students. The large population of 'uneducated' African people fed into the grand scheme to provide cheap labour to the mines, factories and white homes and farms of South Africa. Africans were confined to what was known as 'Native Education' from the early 1900s until 1953. In 1936 The Report of the Departmental Committee on Native Education (Tabata, 1960) summed up the ideology behind Education for Africans:

The education of the White child prepares him for a life in a dominant society and the Education of the Black child for a subordinate society....The limits of Native Education form part of the social and economic structure of the country. (p.14)

In 1948, the Afrikaner National Party was elected to power and the former Minister of Native Affairs Dr. Verwoerd became the Prime Minister. Apartheid laws followed and Native Education which became 'Bantu Education' further excluded Africans from decent education. In 1953 Verwoerd described the position of Africans (Tabata,1960):

there is no place for him, the African, in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour...Until now he has been subjected to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he was not allowed to graze. (p.14)

Bantu education later became the Department of Education and Training (DET). State schooling for Africans supported the National Party's right wing

ideology "literacy for domestication", which grew out of the ideology of its predecessors. Eventually, opposition to Bantu education became a catalyst for mass political mobilisation among black students throughout the country, culminating in the Soweto Uprising of 1976. As the struggle intensified during the 1980s, school boycotts, government brutality and detentions kept many students out of schools while local civic organizations and liberation movements grew in numbers and defiance.

Migrant labour laws *Migrant labour deeply disrupts the lives of South African women. The system itself makes it virtually illegal for many African women to live with their husbands, except during the annual two-week holiday when migrant workers may go to visit their wives in the bantustans.* (Bernstein, 1985, p. 15)

The practice of migrant labour is another determining factor in women's lives. Africans working outside of the bantustans were automatically considered migrants within their own country. Poverty often forced men into migrant labour as industrial or farm workers. The tendency for men to leave the rural areas in search of work in the cities, mines and factories, left the women with the entire burden of agricultural and domestic duties, whether on white farms or in bantustans. The apartheid laws made it almost impossible for women to live with their husbands which distorted family life and overburdened women with responsibilities. (Beinart, 1994)

According to Lind, (1995) the migrant labour system also has had the effect of decreasing women's dependence on men and necessitating greater self-reliance. As heads of households women have greater incentive and need for literacy skills. In the absence of men to handle money affairs women have had to rely on their own numeracy and literacy skills for the buying and selling of produce. While left alone in the rural area their communication with the

distant relatives depends on their ability to read and write letters. The migrant labour system thus has had a somewhat positive effect, although not by design.

Currently the migrant labour system less and less assures work for the men leaving the rural areas. Increased unemployment among the male population has contributed to domestic problems, alcohol abuse and violence.

Lind (1995) observed:

The increasing number of unemployed men probably feel that their traditional position of superiority and power within the family is being threatened. (p. 3)

Political Struggle. *Although there is no doubt that the overt leadership has been dominated by men, the seemingly unacknowledged and informal segment of society controlled by women has been the key to many of the most significant mass movements in modern South African history.* (Bernstein, 1985, p. 81)

Colonization, some traditions and apartheid laws left African women with a legacy of oppression ingrained in their families, communities and society as a whole. These conditions were met with fierce resistance. Women were often the backbone in political struggle, within the civic organizations, trade unions and liberation movements. Women were instrumental in bringing about political change (Bernstein, 1985).

Years of resistance campaigns, demonstrations, boycotts, detentions, imprisonment, exile and forced banishment to bantustans has marked the lives of the women political activists and 'ordinary' members of the community. To name but a few examples where women were involved: the anti-pass campaign that began in 1913, a work stoppage on May Day 1950 where women were among the protestors who were fired upon, the Defiance against Unjust Laws campaign of the 1950s, the demonstration against pass laws in 1960, which came to be known as "Sharpeville" where women were again among the masses that resulted in a blood path where 69 men and women were killed. Throughout the long period of apartheid women were involved in the struggle for liberation.

Apartheid created a culture of resistance *within* a culture of oppression - resisting *and* surviving oppression still overrides much of African women's lives. It is the tradition of resistance that creates the paradox of African women as oppressed *and* strong. An important point to this paper is that despite repressive forces, African women have not been silent, suppressed or fully internally 'colonized'. Bernstein (1985) states:

Despite their background of patriarchal society, African women have never occupied the position of subservience that still exists in some parts of Asia and Africa. (p.82)

THE CURRENT POSITION OF AFRICAN WOMEN

This section will situate African women's position in society according to occupation, income and educational levels.

African people make up about 78% of the population of which 57% are considered poor (monthly income is less than household subsistence level). The poorest Africans are women living in the rural areas who represent 50.8% of the population. Of them, the majority (64%) do not have enough income for the minimum necessities such as food, clothing and fuel (Kerrshoff, 1995).

The Western Cape is wealthier than the rural areas and has the lowest proportion of the country's poor people. The demographics of this region are somewhat peculiar due to apartheid laws which excluded Africans from living and working in the Western Cape. Here, Coloured people represent 57% of the population while African represent only 18%. There are 4% more African men than women.

Occupation and Income in the Western Cape

About 60% of working African women are employed in elementary occupation (cleaners, street vendors, domestic workers) and the

majority are domestic workers. About 21% of African women work in wholesale, trade, catering, retail and accommodation. Only 6% of African women are factory workers, reflecting the legacy of apartheid where factory work was reserved primarily for Coloured people.

African men and women in the Western Cape have similar economic status. Just under one quarter of Africans make less than R500 per month (\$130.00 Canadian). Almost 40% earn between R500 and R1000 per month. Just over 30% earn between R1000 and R2000 per month. A typical income for a domestic worker is about R1000 (\$300 Canadian) per month for a forty hour work week. Transportation from the townships to the city and back costs about R8 - 10 (\$2-\$3), therefore, a domestic worker would normally spend up to quarter of her monthly income on transportation. (Platzky and Billy, 1996)

Demographic Data - literacy learners

In South Africa, literacy programmes come under the broader title of Adult Basic Education and Training. Between 1990 and 1996 quantitative and qualitative research projects were carried out on adult basic education. The University of Natal (Harley, et al, 1996) undertook a major research project including information on literacy in terms of learners, rates, enrollment and provision. A working definition of functional illiteracy was established as 'an adult who lacks basic education therefore less than 7 years of formal schooling (less than Standard 5 level)'. Varying studies have come up with various rates of illiteracy in South Africa. A number of studies report an estimated 15 million functionally illiterate people in South Africa, about one third of the population. The University of Natal research came to a different analysis:

In broad summary, there are nearly seven and a half million adults (aged 15 and over) who are illiterate or severely under-educated. Nearly three million are totally unschooled and another over four

and a half million have so little primary education (itself of poor quality) that they are barely literate. (p. 29)

Therefore, the University of Natal study referred to in this paper estimates that 29% of the adult population is illiterate while 71% are literate.

According to race and gender. Africans are the least literate people in the country. Approximately 15% have no education at all, compared to 7% for Coloureds and .03% for Whites. About 27% of Africans have from 3 to 5 years of schooling while 40% have from 6 to 9 years of formal schooling. Within the African population there are also disparities. Rural Africans are reported to have an average of 4.5 years of education while Africans in townships generally have 5.6 years. KwaZulu-Natal province reports proportionally more people with less than Standard 5 education. Statistics from the former bantustans are incomplete (Harley et al, 1996).

In developing countries the difference between men's and women's literacy rate is 21%, in developed countries the difference is only 1%. It is noteworthy that South Africa, like other developed countries, shows very little disparity in literacy rates according to gender. Although men are generally more educated than women in all racial groups the difference is negligible. There are huge disparities in literacy levels between racial groups.

The majority of literacy learners in non-profit organizations are women (72%). Company literacy programmes are comprised mostly of men (77.2%) because most workers in companies are men, only 32.7% of learners in company programmes are women. State night schools that provide literacy programmes have almost equal representation of male and female learners. In general, most adult learners in literacy programmes are in their thirties (72%). (Harley et al, 1996).

In the Western Cape. About 23% of African women have no education at all, while 20.5% have 5 to 7 years of schooling and 33% have 8 to 10 years of schooling. Slightly more African women than men have no education, but slightly more African women than men complete at least 10 years of formal schooling.

There are more African women than men with diplomas, usually in teaching or nursing (Platzky and Billy, 1996).

In general, the population distribution according to race is unique in the Western Cape but the position of African women is similar to that in other parts of the country. African women are mostly in low paying jobs such as domestic work which requires low levels of education.

Ethnographic Research on Literacy in South Africa

Research carried out by the University of Natal (Harley et al., 1996), included field visits to question learners about why they attended classes. The following factors emerged as motivators:

- Learners were concerned with getting a job and coping on the job.
- Learners sometimes felt shy and ashamed about being unable to read and write personal letters.
- Learners wanted to help their children with homework and were concerned that their children would not respect them if they were illiterate.
- Learners had problems with everyday activities like shopping, going to the clinic, post office etc.
- Learners expressed concern about being cheated in money transactions and being taken advantage of by officials.
- Learner's practices related to church required reading skills.
- Learners wanted to be able to write their name which was connected to a sense of pride.

The researchers concluded that more research should be conducted on why learners attend and drop out of programmes. The women whom I interviewed gave similar reasons for literacy participation. However, underlying these reasons were more complex and varied motivations as shall be discussed in chapter four.

Obstacles to literacy participation: access and time and stress. In 1992 Hutton carried out research on South African adults' participation in literacy programmes. He found that in urban areas, factors which contributed to high drop out rates among male and female participants were: "excessively long days of commuting to and from exhausting manual labour, adult responsibilities that make it difficult to attend night school, depression and anxiety suffered by the unemployed." (p.70) Given the previously described African women's position, it is reasonable to assume that all of these factors play a larger role in women's literacy participation.

Rural South Africans have the least access to literacy classes of any people in the country. For rural women, (Ellen Gumedde, 1995) the lack of access to literacy classes contributes to the marginalization of women. Gumedde states that in the case of urban women, even where evening classes are available, schools are often far from townships and transportation is inadequate, time-consuming, costly and unsafe at night. Reddy (1991) cited the lack of safe and reliable transportation as the number one obstacle mentioned by African men and women. African townships are located far from educational facilities and have less of their own facilities. In addition, she cited "poor roads, absence of street lighting, escalating violence" (p.210) as inhibiting Africans from attending night classes.

Quigley (1990) has also suggested that the values presented through materials and trainers in literacy programmes reflect the values of the

'dominant' white culture, and therefore may alienate African learners. Reddy's interviews in Natal revealed that people often did not know that educational programs exist.

Regarding the gap between what is offered and what people want or need to know, Gumede (1995) notes:

their education rarely gives them sufficient skills to be marketable in a world where technology is advanced. Thus it does not serve as a mechanism for social mobility and is not as inspiring as education which gives marketable skills. (p. 2)

Rarely are the learners asked to construct their own curriculum. Gumede stresses that women especially may be tired in the evening from working, walking, carrying out chores, and finding ways to make ends meet during the day. The scheduling of classes may be at odds with people's preferences.

An recent study carried out in South Africa, the SoUL Project is worthy of note as it exposes some of the complexities of literacy as a social practice.

Social Uses of Literacy (SoUL project in South Africa) . The SoUL project , funded by the Joint Education Trust (JET), was carried out by the adult education departments of the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape (CACE). In this project Prinsloo and Breier investigated a number of examples which expose the complexities and variations of literacy as they are practiced and mediated in communities in South Africa.

This project provided an alternative perspective to the dominant discourse on literacy and illiterate people. The SoUL Project used qualitative research techniques and it compliments the largely quantitative study carried out by the University of Natal (Harley, 1996). The SoUL research attempted to redefine and expand the meaning of the term 'literacy', to expand it from a uni-dimensional term towards a more realistic, organic act. The researchers

explored the literacy capabilities and uses of people within the complex context of their daily lives. The results of the study revealed that higher education and better literacy skills do not automatically result in better wages or upward mobility in the workplace, at least not for women.

Included in the SoUL project, Gibson (in Prinsloo and Breier, 1996), studied the social uses of literacy on three fruit and wine farms in the Western Cape, and relied on the ethnographic research methods of participant observation, open-ended interviews and life history interviews. She found that gender relations override women's and men's lives and literacy does not necessarily alter their subordinate condition or position. This study revealed the harsh reality that the women's comparatively higher education as compared to the male workers still did not improve their condition or position in the workplace. Women's wages were regarded as 'supplementary', while the men's wages were regarded as the 'real' income. Women's primary functions related to reproduction and domestic duties in the private sphere and they were not allowed to do 'men's' labour that carried more social and economic value. Gibson reported that even where the women had achieved higher levels of education than men on farms, they still had lower wages and were confined to lower status jobs. Clearly, there is more at stake than education in maintaining the status quo in gender relations.

All women received the same low wages irrespective of schooling, and had few opportunities to reach positions where they had a least some control over what they did. For them, academic qualifications and literacy had little use in the workplace. (1995, p.59)

This study supports the work of Lind and Johnston (1990) who arrived at a similar conclusion:

Literacy in itself does not, however, present a way out of the existing submission of women, due to hindrances of poverty, religious and cultural traditions and the political milieu, which impose a strict enforcement of the economic and social subjugation of women. (p. 112)

Nonetheless, the literacies of the women on the Cape fruit and wine farms were evident and meaningful in other ways outside of the workplace. Reading and writing were used in 'women's' areas of life including the home, church, shops and clinics. The literacy that women used revolved around women's responsibilities: taking care of children, helping with homework, taking care of the sick, handling prescriptions, making appointments, administering medicines, taking care of the elderly, filling out government pensions forms, carrying out domestic business, banking etc. The researcher stated that women's use of literacy is private except for religious practices involving church participation. Here it is evident how prescribed and constructed female identities lock women into roles where they lack power and control over economic advancement and public life: literacy on its own does not counteract this.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study of women's experiences with literacy participation set out to explore how women learners understand themselves and their experiences of literacy participation in the broad context of other factors in their lives. In particular, I sought *their* perceptions of their situation and, the role of participation in literacy classes in this.

Because my aim was to gain understanding of literacy participation from the women's perspective, I chose a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methodology is dynamic and fluid, enabling theories to emerge as the stories unfold; it is a process of theory-building. The work was guided by feminist researchers who have used open-ended interviews as a research technique. The study of Horsman, (1989) Gluck et al. (1991) have contributed in particular to my own thinking and to the analysis of my own data.

A tentative and flexible plan allowed for a methodology to emerge which best suited the unfolding of the women's stories. The research techniques used were designed to consider the experiences and perceptions of literacy participants as the focus and base of the study. The data was collected using open-ended interviews, observations, discussions with other literacy researchers and analysis of previous studies on literacy .

Through open-ended interviews, the journey back through the key informants' lives brought critical information to the fore as well as provided a glimpse of how the women understood critical events in their lives.

Choice of Literacy groups

For the seven months that I was in South Africa, I was based at the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) at the University of the Western Cape. I was provided with a list of literacy groups, documents, contacts

with literacy researchers and resource people in the Cape Town region. I chose literacy groups that were accessible by public transportation and in areas where I was advised it was safe to go to in the daytime. I initially contacted about fifteen literacy groups and one state night school for adults. I presented myself as a Canadian student interested in learning about the experiences of South African women participating in literacy programmes as part of my Masters programme. I stressed that I was a learner in the field, not an expert and that I did not represent anyone but myself. I also stated that I was not researching the literacy groups, or their programmes, rather that I approached the groups in order to eventually meet key informants. The reactions of groups to my proposal ranged from disinterest and suspicion to enthusiasm and curiosity. Many of the groups were finishing the school year at the time I made contact and were overburdened by work, making it inconvenient for them to meet with me. Eventually, four groups were identified as sites where I could meet literacy participants.

The first group was Use, Speak, Write English (USWE) a community based organization that became very involved in designing literacy programmes for companies during the educational transformations beginning in 1994. They maintain their connection to community based literacy by providing two in-house literacy classes per week. St. Francis Night School was the second group. It is one of the largest adult education centers in Cape Town (5000 students)and serves an almost exclusively African population from the surrounding townships. Administrated by the Department of Education, it provides classes of basic literacy up to high school certification level. The third group, the South African Museum English Literacy Programme, was developed in 1995 to serve the Xhosa speaking population and the curriculum includes history, stories, art and traditions of Xhosa culture. Participants learn English

literacy skills through the exploration of their own knowledge of their history and culture. Finally, the Masifundisi Literacy Organization is a community based literacy group that was ideologically linked to the liberation struggle and continues to promote community development and empowerment through literacy. Almost all of the learners at Masifundisi are women.

These literacy groups teach reading, writing and speaking skills in English as well as basic life skills such as filling in forms and following instructions.

Choice of Participants

The main criterion for choosing participants was that they be current or recent learners in a literacy programme. The literacy group directors and/trainers presented the literacy learners with the research proposal to participate in interviews based on their thoughts about their literacy participation. Initially, twelve to fifteen participants volunteered to meet with me for interviews at specified sites. Due to complications including lack of transportation, busy schedules, no telephones, etc. only five women were able to meet with me. I later met a sixth woman who was a friend of one of the learners. The women interviewees are Alda, Regina, Joyce, Nomsisi, Lungelwa, and Nombulelo.

Data Collection

I collected data through exploratory, open-ended interviews, observations, informal discussions with literacy researchers and analysis of documents.

The interviews were conducted between November 1996 and March 1997 at various sites: my home, the participants' homes, the literacy programme site, in parks and cafes. I tape recorded all the interviews which were transcribed verbatim. I interviewed three women 4 -5 times for thirty

minutes to one hour and three of the women once for one to two hours.

Although I initially began with a semi-structured questionnaire format, I discovered that centering the discussions around themes better facilitated the emergence of important details and thoughts. The themes consisted of :

- family histories, early schooling,
- literacy classes, use of literacy in daily life, what participating in literacy means,
- relationships with children, husbands, boyfriends, parents, siblings, employers, co-workers and friends
- work life, social life, community life, family life,
- health, culture, safety
- problems, fears, desires, and hopes connected to literacy

As much as possible, I allowed the women to lead me into the areas discussed. I wanted what was important and relevant in their lives to dominate the content and flow of the interviews. I attempted not to presume that I knew anything about what was important to the women or their thoughts on literacy participation. Part of building an open relationship involved revealing certain aspects and circumstances of my own life. Sharing ideas about being older students and single mothers helped to bridge the gap that already existed between myself and the women based on differences including culture, education, economic position, language, race etc.

Apart from the interviews, I spent as much time as possible with the women. We sometimes went out for coffee together, took bus rides together, and met in parks just to chat. Significant time was spent outside the interview situations with three of the women where we did not discuss literacy per se. Often it was in the informal conversations that pertinent information surfaced

which helped to define the social context in which the women lived. Thoughts on these meetings were recorded in a notebook after each meeting.

In addition to individual interviews, I observed six literacy classes at the Museum, two classes at USWE, and I conducted a two hour group interview with twelve literacy trainers at Masifundisi. I also had discussions with several literacy researchers from the University of Cape Town, and the University of the Western Cape.

Data Analysis

I listened to the audio tapes of the recorded interviews several times while taking notes of statements that seemed important without knowing why. I noted the need to make changes in the pace of the interviews, to allow for longer pauses and to find ways to understand the meaning behind certain comments (Rockhill, 1985, Horsman, 1989). Sometimes I went back to the participant to ask her to speak more about the subject that I felt had not been adequately explored. I then transcribed all the interviews verbatim and gave each participant their copy so that they would have a record of the meeting and read it if they wished to (Harding, 1987). This also provided an opportunity to go back and discuss with the participants sections of the interview that were unclear or raised new questions. When the interview stage was complete, I used color codes to mark key themes such as family, work, literacy, childhood, relationships, problems, and so on (Gluck, 1991). Gradually new themes emerged from existing ones while other themes overlapped. The colors blended and the "categories" were redefined. The data analysis began with a structure that later dissolved as all themes seemed to overlap and melt into each other. Words about work were interconnected with words about family, money, literacy and so on. It was a difficult to consider areas for analysis as separate from each other. The initial structure for analysis which consisted of

'categories' gave way to considering the interconnections in the women's lives. In the final stage of analysis, I retained the original categories, followed by a new set of categories that emerged to represent another layer of analysis.

I also held a group interview with twelve literacy trainers from the literacy group Masifundisi for two hours on one occasion to provide their alternative perspectives on learners' literacy participation (Gluck, 1991). In addition, as an observer in several literacy classes, I made journal entries on my perceptions about the classes, the learners and the trainers (Horsman, 1991). I also kept notes on my own perceptions and experiences in Cape Town.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Six Women tell their Stories

Five of the six women I interviewed were participating in literacy classes, while the sixth stopped attending 2 years previously and had returned by the end of the interview time frame. The six women range in age from 26 to 42 years. Five are Xhosa-speaking and one is Zulu-speaking. All the women are domestic workers, either actively employed (4), or looking for work (2). None of the women grew up in Cape Town, but they have lived in or near Cape Town from 3 to 18 years. Two of the women live near the centre of Cape Town, while 3 live in surrounding townships (Langa, Guguletu, Khayelitsha) and one lives in a previously coloured area of Athlone. All of the women interviewed would be considered 'poor'. All of the women have completed from 3 to 6 years of schooling. One woman is married while the five others are divorced or never married. All of the women except the married one have children. Two of the women have young children under 6 years, one has five adult children in Port Elizabeth, one has school-age children living in Johannesburg with an uncle, one has three young children living with the father. All the interviews were conducted in English. Each of the respondents is briefly described below.

ALDA

Alda is a 38 year old Zulu-speaking woman. Her father died of a stomach illness when her mother was pregnant with her. Her mother died when she was nine years old. Alda then moved to Germiston near Johannesburg to live with her aunt and uncle and their children. She left school in Standard 4 at 15 years due to illness. She has never married and has three children; her oldest son is 18

and her twin boys are 14. She had her first son when she was 18. In 1974 Alda moved to Cape Town to look for work and her children stayed with her aunt and uncle. She now works as a domestic worker in an apartment building in downtown Cape Town where she lives. In 1995 Alda started night classes at St. Francis School. She also attends church regularly.

REGINA

Regina is a 42 year old Xhosa speaking woman from Port Elizabeth who raised five children on her own. She now lives in Cape Town in a room below an apartment building where she is a domestic worker. She grew up in a township, had her first child at 13, married at 16 and raised five children. She was married for ten years, separated for ten years, and then her husband died. She lived with her husband's family at first and was completely dependent on him financially. Later she worked as a shop steward in a glass factory. Five years ago Regina was laid off from the factory so she left her grown children in Port Elizabeth and moved to Cape Town to look for work. In 1995 Regina started literacy classes at Use, Speak, Write English (USWE) and at the South African Museum.

JOYCE

Joyce is a 39 year old Xhosa-speaking woman whose parents come from the Transkei. She grew up first in the Transkei and then in Paarl (60 K. from Cape Town) and speaks English and Afrikaans. She has four brothers and five sisters. Joyce stopped school at 14 when she became sickly. She stayed home until she was 19. In 1976 her father died and she went to Durbanville (near Cape Town) to work as a domestic worker. She has worked in various homes since then. Last year she married and moved to Guguletu township near Cape Town

with her husband. At the time of the interviews she worked three days a week and attended evening classes at St. Francis School and the South African Museum literacy classes.

NOMSISI

Nomsisi is a 27 year old Xhosa-speaking woman living in Langa township outside Cape Town. She grew up with her grandmother and her brother and sister in the Transkei. Her grandmother could not always afford to send her to school and in 1982, when she was 13, she went back to her parents home to continue school. Money problems and poor transportation prevented her from continuing school and she had to leave school when she was 15 years old in Standard 2 (grade 4). She stayed in the Transkei until 1986, when she moved to Cape Town to live with her aunt. At this time the apartheid laws had somewhat relaxed, allowing entry for Africans into the Western Cape. Again, lack of money prevented her from going to school and caused much disruption and interruption of schooling. In 1992 she had a baby and in 1996 she began evening classes at St. Francis School and literacy classes at the South African Museum. At the time of the interviews, Nomsisi was looking for employment as a domestic worker.

LUNGELWA

Lungelwa is a 25 year old Xhosa-speaking woman from the Transkei. She has one sister and three brothers. Her parents were very poor so she went to school for only three years, until she was 13 years old. At 15 she married and later had three children. She came to Cape Town from the Transkei with her husband and children in 1988 to look for work. In 1995 she divorced and she now lives with her sister in Khayelitsha township near Cape Town. Her children

live with her ex-husband and his new wife (ie. the man "owns" the children - even very young ones). Her children are nine, seven and four years . She started literacy classes at the South African Museum in 1996. She is also looking for work as a domestic worker.

NOMBULELO

Nombulelo is a 33 year old Xhosa speaking woman. She stopped school at the age of 12 or 13 because there was no money for school. She was raised by her aunt after her parents died when she was young. Her one brother died in 1988. When she was 13 she was sent to look after a cousin's children. When she was 16 she went to East London to work as a domestic worker with a white family. In 1978 she came to Cape Town and her first child was born in 1979. She lived illegally in hostels or in the homes where she worked and frequently had to evade the police who demanded permits from Africans in the Western Cape. Because of these unstable conditions she sent her son to live with his grandmother while she continued working. In 1991 she started literacy classes at USWE. She stopped for a few years when she had another child in 1993. By the end of the interview period, Nombulelo had returned to literacy classes.

Analysis: How women's lives affect their literacy participation

I rely on two levels of analysis to explore how women's position, their gendered roles and their relationships affect their literacy participation.

The first layer discusses themes in women's lives: schooling leaving, returning to school, men, children, transportation, and work. The second layer explores the perceived benefits of literacy participation: learning, independence, self-concept, breaking the isolation, organizing oneself, opening up the world. Throughout the analysis, I consider women's perceptions of their

lives and how the perceptions are formed. Feminist theory guided my analysis (Horsman, 1989, Rockhill, 1985, Smith, 1977, 1990, Brookes, 1992).

Theory: The social organization of women's lives. The structuring of women's lives based on their position in society and gendered roles begins at an early age and underlies the context of early school leaving. As adults, when women return to school, their lives continue to be structured around female roles and responsibilities (Horsman, 1989). The six African women's experiences discussed in the interviews concentrated on key areas which affected their literacy participation. For example, school leaving was affected by poverty, illness, marriage/pregnancy; returning to school was affected by poverty, men, children, transportation, work; and their meaning of literacy was affected by perceived benefits, self-concept, other peoples perceptions.

I explored what literacy participation means to the women I interviewed, and its effects on relationships of family and work, as well as on self-concept. Because I use Horsman's thesis as a comparative framework within which concepts are explored, I will give a brief description of Horsman's thesis as outlined in: Something in my mind besides the everyday II/Literacy in Women's Lives in a Nova Scotia County, (1989). She conducted a series of interviews with 23 Maritime women who were involved in literacy and/or upgrading programmes. Horsman set out to 'explore their experience of literacy'. In the words of Horsman :

I wanted the women to talk about their lives as they saw them; how they came to be in their program and what they sought by their involvement. (p.20)

Horsman (1989) observed and analysed women's words through open-ended interviews. Their words reflected underlying socially constructed belief

systems that had been internalized and integrated with the women's perceptions and understandings of themselves. She concluded that often when women lack 'authority' over their own experience, they are vulnerable to other peoples' interpretation of their experience. In addition, due to social conditioning, women in particular may lack 'authority', which prevents them from interpreting and understanding their own subjectivities. Horsman discovered that the women she interviewed often spoke about their experiences with the vocabulary of the dominant discourse, a demonstration of the extent to which their perceptions are defined by the voice of the larger society.

Horsman examined the meaning that the private world of home and the public world of work and community had on women. She theorized that women's lives were organized around other people, which, in her terms, is a form of disorganization. The 'disorganization' of women's lives acts as a barrier to their participation in literacy classes and other forms of public life. Horsman determined that 'literacy' was difficult to focus on because the way women's lives were organized or 'dis/organized' defines to such a large extent their literacy experience.

Horsman found that the women she interviewed were relegated into traditional subservient female roles when they were young girls. Their roles as adult women continued to revolve around the private, domestic sphere which caters to other peoples' lives, at the expense of their own. By investigating the material circumstances of the women's lives, she discovered that their attendance at literacy classes was dependant on material conditions out of their control , and was mitigated by other people in their lives. Their participation was not dependent on their own "choice" or "motivation", as dominant discourse assumes. More disturbing, Horsman noted that:

Because this stress on "choice" is the way school leaving is commonly spoken of, the women speak within this discourse even though it obscures the social organization of their lives. (p. 129)

Horsman attempted to explain the intricate meanings and consequences of literacy experiences from the perspective of the women that she interviewed. She found that they were negatively influenced by the label 'illiterate' and had internalized and adopted the same vision of illiteracy as the academics who wrote about 'them' or the politicians who lamented 'them'.

There are some important differences between the women I interviewed and the women Jenny Horsman interviewed. The women I interviewed were literate in their mother tongue, Xhosa and in one case, Zulu. They attended English literacy classes within a second or third language context. The women in Horsman's study were learning English literacy as their first language. None of the women I interviewed received government assistance, nor were they following medical supervision at the time of the interviews. Most of the women in Horsman's study were receiving government assistance (welfare) and therefore had regular intervention from social workers. Many of them were seeing doctors regularly and receiving medication, often tranquilizers.

Theme 1: School Leaving

This section is a comparison of Horsman's findings with my own, highlighting commonalities and contradictions.

The Maritime women in Horsman's study often referred to themselves as 'stupid' and believed that their illiteracy was their fault, because they had 'quit school'. Dominant discourse defined their own understanding of 'quitting school'. When Horsman probed, she found that their situation was the result of

a history that was not their choice, where they had had very little *real* choice in leaving school early. The women often said they quit school because they were not good students, a decision which they regretted and deemed 'stupid'. Horsman uncovered very concrete circumstances in the home, the community, and at school which demonstrated that they had not made a choice to 'quit', but rather, that circumstances prevented them from continuing school. Nonetheless, the women appeared to have been affected by the dominant ideology around illiterates. When Horsman spoke with the women, many reasons for leaving school emerged, which included: oppressive homes, constant parental fighting, violent and abusive homes, alcoholic parents, pregnancy, extreme 'shyness', medication for psychiatric problems, transportation problems, authoritarian and abusive teachers who had literally told them that they were stupid. Horsman recounted:

Barb's experience of school, like Frieda's described earlier, was one of being constructed as stupid. (p. 123)

..when I quit school - well left school for reasons I just don't want to talk about - because it was stupid I guess to do that. (p. 122)

I couldn't take the criticism of the teacher, he just stood me up in class, I just couldn't do math at all. He used to call me retarded in front of the whole class of children. (p. 122)

All of these factors contributed to 'silencing' these women when they were girls, and eventually forced them out of school. Later, as adults, Horsman noted their lack of "voice" around their own experience.

As girls the women were often absorbed into the families' domestic work, a role which they often continued when they later married and had children.

I was housekeeping, babysitting for mum because she was working. The rest of them were in school. And then my younger brother came along. At the time Dad took me out of school and Mum had my younger brother. (p. 123)

Horsman states that:

The social organization of the family was a key element in preventing some of the women from continuing school. The gendered division of labour in the household meant that when help was needed within the home - especially when the adult women were at work - girls were expected by their family to be available to help out. (p. 122)

School leaving: The Cape Town women.

There are striking

similarities *and* differences with the women whom I interviewed and the women Horsman wrote about. She remarked:

The liberal ideology of "choice" is one that is all pervasive in an advanced capitalist society but also one that is being deconstructed in many fields. This work is an attempt to look at one area where the ideology of "choice" moves the blame to those who are judged to be illiterate on the basis that they could have "chosen" otherwise. The school drop out and "illiterates" of society are blamed for having failed to "choose" to stay in school and work hard, and then for failing to return to school to remedy their past failure. (p.119)

The South African women who grew up in a township or a bantustan do not appear to possess the same 'liberal ideology of choice'.

Alda stopped school at 15 due to poor health. She fainted whenever she had an exam at school and therefore could not keep up. She doesn't know what made her sick and blames 'nerves'. I had the impression that the sickness was related to her mother's death because of how she told me about it. When I asked her to tell me about herself, the first thing she said was that she grew up with no family and that her mother had died when she was nine so she went to live with her uncle's family.

The conversation unfolds in this manner: [I refers to the researcher.]

A: My mother die when I was nine years old.

I: When you were nine years old?

A: Yeah, nine years old, my uncle look after me. But all the time I didn't go to school, I have sick all the time...I don't feel o.k.

I: Did you miss a lot of school because of that?

A: I miss, I don't go to school all the time. All the time be sick. Thats why I grow old like this. I go to standard 4. Don't write exams. Every time I go for exams I faint. I go for hospital. I faint.

Alda did not talk about her school leaving using a discourse of "choice", nor did she believe that it was her fault. She located the reason for leaving school in her illness, which was beyond her control. The comment "thats why I grow old like this" may suggest negative feeling about herself in relation to literacy.

On another occasion weeks later, I was talking with Alda about the future and her goals in life. Rather than reply to this she began to talk about the loss of her parents. Then she realized I was asking about the future so she switched. It was clear that the past was very important to Alda so I suggested we go back.

I: Just now you were talking about the past...when you were a child, you said it wasn't good because your mother passed away...what were you going to say about that?

A: My mother passed away and my father...mmm some things hurt me...think about my mother...(pause) something sore for my heart I think about my mother. But all the time I didn't go to school, I have sick all the time...I don't feel o.k

Clearly the loss of her mother at nine and the consequent move to a new family was traumatic for Alda. It totally disrupted her school life because her grief made her sick. When asked about her sickness she didn't seem to really know. However, it was not a physical illness, but rather she referred to 'tension' and 'nerve.' (Just as the women in Horsman's study often referred to their 'nerves'.)

Alda said :

A: But since I'm young got a tension for the headache. Something for the brain or nerve...what I don't know.

For a long time Alda was afraid to return to school. Her childhood experiences of becoming ill before exams and therefore not doing well had put her off entirely.

A: I'm scared ya..

I: Of going to school?

A: Ya, I'm scared to go to school.

I: Why?

A: But when I was young I don't have school, I failed it. Thats why I'm scared.

Behind the mysterious illness which forced Alda out of school is the devastating loss of her mother and the lifelong absence of her father. She did not seem to blame herself for leaving school and yet she recognized that she suffered the consequences of it.

Regina stopped school at 16 because she got married. When asked if she had a choice in this matter she replied:

R: No, our culture, if you're married you must just look after those people. After my man [husband] family.

Regina still feels this as a loss and an injustice which she relates to her culture. Leaving school is one thing that Regina has always regretted. Months later Regina discussed some more details about her early life which revealed that her school leaving at sixteen is more complicated than only the cultural influences she first cited. Regina had a baby at thirteen and returned to school after the baby was born. She had very little support from her family, her mother was angry with her for becoming pregnant as it reflected badly on the image of her as mother. Regina found it overwhelming to look after the child on her own and go to school. At the time she loved the father of her child whose family was very supportive of her so she agreed to leave school, get married and

go to live with them. Getting married was also 'expected' of her. Soon, she found herself trapped in the role of domestic worker for her in-laws. Regina left school due to the burden of taking care of a baby, an unhappy home life which she wanted to leave, and marriage. Still, Regina interprets her school leaving as something for which she had no choice. She expressed anger rather than shame about leaving school.

Regina appeared shy in literacy classes and in the first interview. But when she described her life she spoke with authority, in other words, as *she* experienced it. This is somewhat different to the Horsman study where the women sometimes described their lives through the perceptions of other people (social workers, literacy trainers, doctors).

Joyce stopped school at 14 due to poor health. She fainted often which she attributed to a spell cast upon her by a cousin. Joyce appeared to accept this fate and stated it matter-of-factly. In the rural areas of the Transkei where her family comes from, belief in the spirit world is quite strong and influential. Things that cannot be readily explained may be attributed to the supernatural. If Joyce had had a choice she would never have quit school because she enjoyed it and did well. She simply states:

J: When I was smaller i was sick, sick...couldn't get an education.

I asked Joyce about this sickness and she said that she would be at school and then would suddenly, find herself at home in bed. Her constant fainting caused her finally to leave school.

J: But all the time I didn't go to school, I have sick all the time...I don't feel o.k. [past tense]

The 'school leaving due to illness' is within a context where girls' schooling is not a priority. With four brothers and five sisters there was limited

money for schooling and ample work to be done at home. Joyce's leaving school may have been convenient for her family as she immediately assumed domestic responsibilities in the home. This prepared her to later work for other families as a domestic worker. Joyce did not dwell on her leaving school early, and spoke about it as if it was quite ordinary.

Joyce spoke with confidence and authority about herself, her ideas and her life. In the literacy class and in the interview she was talkative, self-assured and very positive towards her life in general. She asked me personal questions about my life, offered advice, inquired into why the interviews interested me, and cautioned me to the dangers of Cape Town.

Nomsisi started school at 10 and left at 13. She is very clear about why she left school and that it was *not* her choice. Like many children in rural South Africa, Nomsisi grew up with her relatives, in this case, her grandmother. Her grandmother was too poor to send her to school.

N: But its not every day going to school.

I: Sometimes you went to school and sometimes you didn't?

N: Yeah, stayed home. My grandmother is not...not.. is not money.

I: For you to go to school.

N: Ya.

I: So when she had money...you could go to school?

N: Aha

I: But when she had no money, you couldn't?

N: Aha.

It is not difficult to imagine how her schooling was disrupted by starting and stopping, depending on money. In rural Transkei her grandmother did not work outside of the home, so she had to rely on Nomsisi's parents to send her money. When money was not available, as was often the case, any financial resources were consumed on basic survival.

When Nomsisi was 13 she returned home to live with her parents, and she went back to school. Transportation was a major problem. Nomsisi's village

was a long distance from school and she had to depend on buses which often did not work at all. There were no tarred roads and during the rainy season the rivers flooded making transportation next to impossible from her village. Money for school was always a problem too. Poverty and poor transportation eventually forced Nomsisi out of school completely when she was 15 years old.

For Nomsisi, the discourse around motivation and literacy participation has nothing to do with her material reality which literally made completing school impossible. She is the first to say that it was not her choice to leave school and she did not give the impression that it was in *any* way her fault. Nonetheless, she felt sad about her lack of schooling.

Nomsisi was shy in the literacy classes and in the interview. Her English is limited and it was difficult to delve deeper into her life.

Lungelwa had only three years of schooling because her parents were too poor to pay for school books and uniforms. Lungelwa grew up in the Transkei:

L: In Transkei ohhhh, most people is verrrry poor.

I: More than in the Cape?

L: Yes, on Transkei.....my parents verrry poor.

(Later)

L: No money for school.

I: No money?

L: Yes .

She describes the pain and humiliation she experienced as a child too poor to afford school uniform and books. I asked her how she felt when she had to quit school:

L: Ohhh I feel bad, very bad. Because when I leave [school] ...at home...ohh my friends.

She then imitated in a child's voice as she repeated what her friends said:

L: Why you not go to school today? "My mother was ill, I've no money today to pay me uniform, shirts everything." Sometimes they laugh at me, sometimes food...no food at home...now, ohh, how shame.

She describes these days with a great deal of pain.

Lungelwa knows that poverty, rather than "choice" forced her out of school. Her mother cleaned and baked for a hotel and her father was not employed, because "he was drinking". The family subsisted on a very meager income. The fact that Lungelwa was a girl made her schooling a low priority. Her older sister left school after just a few years, but two of her brother's had five years of schooling and one is still at school at 18, after seven years of schooling. Boys' schooling was a priority.

I asked Lungelwa what she did after leaving school:

L: Ahhh, sit at home, then after, I think 15 years old, I get married.

When I met Lungelwa she was very worried about her children and her financial situation. When she described her life, it was a factual recounting of what had happened infused with a great deal of emotion. She never gave any indication that her life was problematic because she was not motivated, or stupid or unworthy. She was quite clear that poverty was the underlying reason for her limited schooling.

Nombulelo grew up in the Transkei and had only three years of schooling because her parents were very poor and they died when she was young. Her aunt sent her to school only for a few years.

N: I stopped because there was no money to go to school anymore.

The patriarchal culture that she grew up in also played a part. I asked Nombulelo if it was the same for her brother.

N: My brother no... no didn't stop school...we went together to Standard A to B1 then he go further than me because my aunt raise us up..she use to say

"girls not supposed to go to school because (laughter) if you can read and write its enough for you.

Nombulelo laughed at this idea, which to her is absurd. She clearly does not accept that particular ideology which she grew up with. I asked her if it was common that people thought that girls do not need education.

N: I don't know why did she think like that. Cause now in these days thats the only thing that I regret in life. A good education.

When Nombulelo was 13 she was sent away to help look after her cousin's children.

N: That time I was still young and my aunt, she told me that I must go with her to her cousins sister's children. Yes, so had to look after those kids, I stopped school to look after those kids.

Nombulelo was streamed into domestic duties at 13 which prevented her from doing anything else. She assumed the role of domestic worker for room and board at her in-laws until she was 16. Although 'poverty' was the first reason that Nombulelo gave for stopping school, underlying this was girls' social roles that made her leaving school normal, unquestioned, and uncontested.

Nombulelo spoke with a great deal of self-assurance and authority. She clearly located her school leaving as an event beyond her choice and control.

All of the women I interviewed were subjected to the Bantu Education system. Although education was 'provided' by the state, parents had to pay additional school fees (sports etc.), as well as for school uniforms and books. In many cases these extra costs made continued schooling impossible, especially in the poorest rural areas such as the Transkei where four of the six the women are from.

None of the women I interviewed said, or gave the impression, that they left school by "choice." They were all very clear that it was neither their choice,

nor their fault and could readily discuss the circumstances which prevented them from continuing school. They did not blame themselves. None of the women referred to themselves as stupid. This indicates that they were not influenced by the dominant western discourse about illiterates, either because they haven't been exposed to it or because they have resisted it and are able to interpret their own experience objectively. Mwansa (1996) cites other studies (Charney and Jones, 1976) of illiterate people where similar observations were made:

the shame of illiterate people arose from the absorption of middle-class values and progress in learning, and that this shame increased as they became socially mobile and made contact with new reference groups. (p. 189)

The women I interviewed located the reasons for leaving school as beyond their control or desires while Horsman's interviews revealed the opposite:

The women I spoke to usually blamed themselves for leaving school, for having made a bad "choice" about what to do. They expressed the dominant discourse of "choice" and "motivation", even though it did not appear to be very explanatory for their lives as it made invisible the social organization of their home and school life. (p. 128)

Brookes (1992) presented the idea that women may benefit from

a way of knowing that can be learned: a way which enables us to know ourselves as producers and users of knowledge with the very fabric of being, and to know ourselves as creators and dismantlers of ideologies. (p. 31)

This implies an un-learning of the dominant ideologies that hold authority over women. Perhaps the women I interviewed benefitted from never being exposed to 'advanced, capitalist, liberal ideology', allowing them to develop their own authority which better reflected their reality.

The "primary" reasons of poverty, pregnancy and ill-health forced the women to leave school at an early age. Underlying these factors is a cultural context that supports girls leaving school early. It is evident that gender roles have been a constant undercurrent in the themes of their lives as young girls, and this cultural aspect, along with poverty, made continuing school impossible. Even where the women were raised by women - aunts or grandmothers, girls' education was neither a priority nor desirable.

Even where money was very scarce, the boys in the families went further in school than girls. The cultural context of rural Transkei placed greater importance on boys' education than girls', as girls were relegated to domestic work, which they could begin around 13. Boys were not ready to work in the mines and factories until 16 or 17. There are economic reasons which support the gender biases of girls' and boys' education in rural South Africa. This neither excuses nor supports the gender bias; however a contextualized understanding of the prevailing economic conditions of rural South Africa in the days of apartheid is important. If the political economy of the bantustans is not considered, there is a risk of falling into the "African culture as sexist" mind-set which may reinforce existing racist attitudes. The women I spoke to often spoke about sexist attitudes in their culture and their constant opposition to it. They did not find gender bias acceptable, only very common.

Horsman found that even where the Canadian women were eager to return to school the circumstances of their lives made it very difficult. The dominant discourse on motivation doesn't adequately consider the events and people in women's lives which can act as barriers or facilitators to their participation in literacy programmes.

Theme 2: Relationships with Men

In the Horsman study when the women spoke about themselves as young women, they thought that marriage would be a happy escape from unhappy homes. They idealized married life according to the prevailing ideology of the "happy middle-class family". Horsman noted that: "Women grow up to believe the myth of marriage and living happily ever after" (p. 232).

Men were often cited as holding the emotional and psychological power in the home, which they wielded over their wives/girlfriends. Sometimes this power was overt in the form of violence, and sometimes it was passive non-cooperation - for the most part men gave little or no domestic support to women which limited their study opportunities. In some cases, the men were supportive and "helped out" in the home, but this was so rare that the women expressed "gratitude" when it happened. The women felt that family responsibilities were *theirs*, and that if something went wrong in the family it was *their* fault. In discussing the influence of men on the women's literacy participation, Horsman stated:

Their attitudes to whether the women should attend a program had an impact on whether the women felt able to participate or not. Whether the men were supportive or in opposition their views were influential. (p. 130)

Horsman concluded:

But if women's participation looks threatening to the power balance of the family, then men's hostility may come in many forms - from failing to "help" with the women's work of children, housework or preparing meals, to outright violence. (p. 132)

Men in the lives of the six Cape Town women. Only one of the women I interviewed, Joyce, age 39, is married and living with a man, and she has only been married for one year.

Alda has never been married and never wanted to be. I asked her a general question; what the big problems were facing women today in South Africa and the following dialogue illustrates her thoughts on marriage.

I: What do you think are the biggest problems facing South Africa women today?

A: Big problem for women?mm big problem for women...talking about the married or single..talking about any woman.?

I: Any woman..well, do both, for single and married women. For single women, what is the biggest problem?

A: Ahh, I don't know.

long pause

I: For married women?

A: Ohh...too much problems, the married women. For the husband? The husband...sometimes he thinks he can take another girl...single one. Can take one single girl and choose another single girl again...but its a problem now for the man this time...he don't want to work. You see. But he married a woman...woman looking for the husband this time...but he can disappear, get divorced, take another woman...can take another one, can take another one,...its a big problem this time.

I: So...do you think a big problem for women...is men?

A: Its a very big problem this time, but its a very big problem.

Alda described married women who live with fighting, men not working and not looking after the children. Alda's ideas about men blocking women's progress and education comes up in the next conversation when she talks about her co-worker, an unhappily married woman.

A: But its better to go for school now. I tell this women for the work...why don't you go back for the school? I tell her already, I tell her already from last year. Why you don't go back to school? (Alda imitates the women's angry voice,) Don't [go]back school...I got a lot of problems. Which problems? My husband not working. Say, its your husband not working, you must go for school, you come in late, your progress come, it might begin change..your life. It might begin change your life, I tell you, it might begin change...it can change like this...she don't listen.

Alda is very wary of marriage as she perceives women around her blocked from moving forward in the way that she has moved forward - by returning to school. Paradoxically Alda was first urged to go back to school by her boyfriend, who had himself returned to studies at St. Francis Night School. With prodding from her boyfriend she finally decided to go to St. Francis evening classes in

1995. He tried to persuade her to return to school for about one year before she took the initiative.

A: Siphso talking all the time about school, all the time for me to start.

I: He really wanted you to go back?

A: Yaa, but all the time he know my problem and worry for me. But he want marry me, I don't married. I don't think about married. But I don't think about married, I don't know why. So, o.k., say don't marry Alda, musn't force, but go back for school. Musn't force marry. Go back for school but I'm scared to go back for school but why...I'm scared I'm fainted, I get sick.

Alda made her own decision to remain single despite pressures to marry from society, family and her boyfriend. She maintains her independence, her work, and her studies. Her boyfriend has been encouraging and supportive of her studies, yet she still links marriage with hardship and oppression.

Regina was married to the father of her five children for ten years, and he died after they had been separated for ten years. She does not look back on her marriage with any fondness. She worked and raised the children on her own with no support from their father. She makes a direct link between lack of education and marriage.

R: I was married at 16, thats why I'm not educated.

I: Because you stopped school when you got married?

R: Yes, I stopped school.

I: Why did you stop when you got married?

R: It's our culture...yes.

I: It's not a choice? When you get married you stop school?

R: No...our culture, if you're married you must just look after those people. After my man family.

I: Oh...your husbands family?

R: Yes.

I: His whole family?

R: Whole family...I was staying together.

I: What kind of things did you have to do?

R: Maybe my husband is working and I must go look after these people. I must cook for these people and all the washing and ironing...something like that. You can't sit the whole day, you stand up, if you...I don't...I don't know what I can say.

I: Just always working?...for them?

R: Yes.

I: And your children too?

R: Yes.

For Regina, marriage came with a set of relationships and obligations which left her no time for herself. Regina spoke about her husband not being financially or otherwise supportive, and we continued that discussion:

I: Ahh...when you were with your husband did you ever talk about going back to school to him?

R: Not...because my husband was not worry to me.

I: What do you think he would have said if you said I want to go back to school?

R: (laughter) ummm I think about that really.

Like some of the women in Horsman's study, when Regina was younger and living with her parents, she thought that marriage would provide a more supportive environment than her family at home.

Joyce adamantly expressed that as a younger women she never wanted to marry. Eventually she changed her mind for a situation that seemed to be compatible and accommodating. Her husband is educated and spent many years in the navy which allowed him to travel a lot. He has an adult son at university and Joyce respects this.

Joyce and I discussed family violence, which she said is prevalent in marriage and one of the reasons that she avoided marriage for so long - she said she would never tolerate this. Joyce made a point of telling her husband before they married how much she wanted to continue school. It was something in her life that she would not have been willing to give up.

J: He said fine...no problem.

Joyce said her husband was happy for her to be at St. Francis School and the Museum classes "because he knew that it was something good." Her husband is apparently not threatened by her studies, and she said she would not have married him if she thought that would be a problem. Joyce believes that her husband is "not like some men", and she discussed at some length the

problems that other women have with jealous husbands who want their wives to stay at home, uneducated and without income.

One thing that has changed since her marriage is her social life.

J: Now that I'm married, I don't see my friends so much..but its o.k....like this. The fact that she doesn't see her friends much is an 'accommodation' which she can tolerate. She maintains a public life through literacy class rather than socializing with friends. Joyce never had an idealized notion of marriage, even as a young woman.

Nomsisi is not married and does not make any reference to the father of her child, except that she receives no financial support. I was not able to discover her thoughts about marriage.

Lungelwa was divorced last year, and her husband remarried and took the children to live with him and his new wife. This event, her unemployment, and her starting literacy classes were interrelated. The end of her marriage meant economic disaster for Lungelwa, but it also motivated her to go to school.

I'm Lungelwa and I live in Khayelitsha or Crossroads, because my sister have two houses..on Crossroads and Khayelitsha. Then um, last year I... I married last year but this year I not married...my husband, he's at Khayelitsha and my children. I'm staying on my sister. Now,..I learn..to know English at St. Francis and at the S.A. Museum. Now, I have big problems because I'm not working and...at Cape Town, its difficult to get, to get a ...work. But I have big problems because, when I came from Khayelitsha to Langa school, sometimes I have no money.

Lungelwa explained that she doesn't have money for the bus to go to school, and relates this back to her marital status.

L: I try but...its difficult...everything for me, cause I'm not married and I'm not working.

In Lungelwa's case literacy participation is partially a consequence of her divorce, but now that she is single and therefore penniless, it is difficult to continue literacy participation. Her material reality after marriage inhibits her literacy participation in different ways from those of her previous marital status, which also limited her participation. She does not always have the money for transportation to attend literacy class. The underlying class conditions, which are inextricably bound to her position and condition as a woman, trap Lungelwa in poverty and literacy appears to be her only hope.

Similar to the women in Horsman's study, Lungelwa was financially dependent on her husband and was destitute when he deserted her. She believed that what had happened to her was unfair.

Nombulelo has no interest whatsoever in marriage, and never did.

I: And did you ever get married?

N: No. O.K...my first son's father...he wanted to get married. I tell you..thats how African people do...that..like...our great great grandfathers do...even if you don't agree to marry they will force you to marry.

I: Force you?

N: Yes, because you have a child.

I: So, men use to force you to marry?

N: Yes.

I: Like..take you?

N: Yes. I was going out and I had a child, but I didn't like him to be my husband. (laughter) No, I didn't want him to be my husband. I fall pregnant by mistake...but, that we must get married eh ah. So. o.k.

This reference to traditional female obligations indicates that despite Nombulelo's youth and 'not knowing' she indeed knew something very important; she made clear choices to avoid a situation that did not suit her. Also, marriage in South African culture can mean that men own the children and should the marriage end, men can 'take' the children.

I: When you were young did you want to get married?

N: No, never, I just wanted to be on the street.

In a later discussion we talked about men's influence on women's schooling.

I: Do you think...have you heard of this...that some men don't like their wives to go back to school?

N: Ya, I heard about this.

I: Is it common?

N: Sometimes, but I think brave men will let his wife go back to school...they say if you educate a woman you will educate a whole nation...if he's brave enough he must make his wife go back to school.

Nombulelo speaks with authority and has her own views on the subject of men, marriage, and what is good for her.

The above comments suggest that for many women, it is rare that husbands and boyfriends support the women's return to studies. The women I interviewed had perceptions and sometimes fears about how men could negatively affect women's literacy participation. They were aware that men could be a limiting influence from past experience, as well as through observation of other women's lives. Where men were supportive of their participation, it appeared to be understood as uncommon, as in the case of Alda and Joyce.

Five of the six women I interviewed were not living with men but they had perceptions about how men could affect their lives nonetheless. They often spoke disparagingly about the men that they had children or relationships with, and this fostered their resistance to marriage. They felt that relationships with men could infringe on their independence and further burden them with responsibilities. However not all discussion around the men in their lives or communities was negative. The women often spoke highly of supportive uncles, fathers, sons and brothers who encouraged their studies and sometimes helped out financially. In contrast, the women in Horsman's study provided confusing responses to questions of men's responsibility:

Women often take on major responsibilities in the household. However the discourse that men are

"responsible" for the family can lead to the appearance that women are more dependent on men than is actually the case. This, then makes it hard for women to articulate the level of responsibility they do have, because their work becomes invisible. (p. 184)

Only one of the women I interviewed was financially dependant on her ex-husband; none of the other women spoke of any kind of dependence on men, nor did they suggest that men were responsible for the children. Very often they stated that the men *should* act more responsibly towards their children and that it was unacceptable that they did not. Bernstein's (1985) impressions from her research in South Africa confirms what the women I interviewed told me.

The fact that there is a gross contradiction in terms of who is *supposed* to take responsibility and decisions, and who *actually* does, often makes marriage an unviable option for rural women. (p. 44)

In contrast to the women in Horsman's study, not surprisingly, the women I interviewed did not grow up with western ideology about happy, middle class, nuclear families. Although marriage was the tradition and the norm, resistance to it was also strong. As Bernstein states "more and more women are finding marriage a burden to them". (p. 45)

In one discussion with Regina, the topic of race with racial overtones was brought up:

R: Sometimes men...he respects wife..woman..but other men does not and I think its another problem. (pause) Sometimes your husband beat you, another problem...hit the wife...most time its Black people.

I: You think it happens more in the Black community?

R: Happens more. The Black man say "I'm the man of this house."

I: But we have this problem in Canada too.

R: Is it?

I: Ya.

R: True?

I: Ya.

In several interviews there was the suggestion that somehow, men's lack of respect for women was more prevalent in Black communities. They linked this problem to male unemployment which has its roots in the the history of apartheid and colonization. The women reacted with surprise when I said that women in Canada have similar concerns, suggesting that for South African women, gender, race and class relations may serve to 'explain' women's lack of education. Differently, in the North American setting, dropping out of school, making bad choices and generally being 'stupid' serves to explain why some people have low literacy skills.

Theme 3: Children

Horsman found that all the women with children whom she interviewed wanted to improve their literacy skills for their children's sake as well as for themselves. The women transferred their hopes for a better life onto their children, which acted as a motivator to participate in literacy programs to set a good example.

Many have ceased to believe that life can really be different for them, education or not. Instead they look to their children to live out the easier life, which will be more comfortable and more meaningful. (p. 205)

The women blamed their poverty on their lack of literacy skills which they blamed on themselves. The women were highly susceptible to guilt and feelings of inadequacy as mothers because they could not provide the ideal North American childhood for their children within a nuclear middle-class family. Horsman notes that the dominant discourse by which the women judged themselves does not cite poverty and inadequate resources as having an impact on women's mothering. Therefore, the women's self-criticism "fits into a long

tradition of the discourse on mothering which blames working class women as bad mothers." (p. 181)

Arlene McLaren (1996) discusses how the notion of 'good' mothering which is embedded in Western culture is based on the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. She notes that most women can only aspire to be 'good enough'. Writers including Wendy Luttrell (1990), Nancy Carmack (1992) criticize the 'deficit assumption' which labels 'illiterates' as deficient. They note that this leads to their belief that they are deficient as mothers. Sondra Cuban and Elizabeth Hayes (1996) state:

Women are considered risks to their children if they lack the skills and values considered necessary for their children's success. It is assumed that women do not communicate correct educational messages if they are less educated, poor, on welfare, or single or in other ways fail to conform to societal norms for "good mothers. (p. 8)

Added to the pressure of societal values is a common belief that raising children is largely the women's responsibility. The time, energy, and presence that mothering requires limits other activities in women's lives. Horsman noted that children also created barriers to women's literacy participation:

However, the presence of children and the full-time role many mothers must play in the care, feeding, play and schooling of their children, with no relief through daycare or other adults, can leave women with so little time, energy and sense of self that participation in a literacy program may be difficult. (p. 143)

The Cape Town women and children. Superficially, the women who do not have children, or who have grown children, or who have children who live with other family members, are automatically freer and have the 'space' to participate in literacy classes. Children's age determines, to a large extent, when women have the 'space' in their lives to return to school. At the

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same time, the women said that having children was yet *another* motivating factor to return to school, to set a good example for the children, to help them in their school work, to gain their respect, and to be a better 'provider' for their future.

Alda came to Cape Town to find work which meant leaving her children with her uncle and aunt who looked after them and supported them while Alda made a modest living and sent them money every two months. Alda was able to work full-time and attend classes four evenings per week because of the 'space' she had without her children.

Alda did not express guilt about being unable to raise her children under her own roof. She believed that working in Cape Town and sending money was providing for her children in a responsible way. She also felt that her children were well taken care of by her uncle. The ideology of "middle-class, nuclear family" did not emerge in discussions with her.

Regina's five children live in Port Elizabeth, the youngest is 21. After Regina was laid-off from her factory job and when her children were older, she had the 'space' in her life to go back to school. Regina speaks with clarity about how the children affected her 'space':

I: So, how old is your youngest child?

R: 21, Standard 10.

I: O.k., your kids are grown up. So...do you have more time...for yourself...now that your children are grown up?

R: Yes, I can say so.

I: When they were young, would you have had the time to go to a literacy class?

R: No, no not really, because, unless I can find people can look after...because a lot of things happen now, with the children. I start my lesson, my children is grown up now.

I: When they were young, did you think, when they grow up, then I'll go back to school?

R: No. But later...umm, things make me I must come to the school...its a suffer I have because...the time I was stay with my husband, he was not supporting me.

I: You mean financially..or in other ways?

R: Financially ya, I was really suffer and my husband was working and I was not working, I was staying with his parents and looking after my children. I was suffer...because if I was learn...but the suffer I had tell me I must go back to school.

Regina and her husband separated when she was 23. She raised five children, mostly on her own, and worked full-time as a shop steward, and so could not have gone back to school as a younger adult. There would have been no 'space' in her life in which to do so. She said she had struggled a lot: "When I think about those days ..ohhh, I think god helped me....it was verrrry difficult." Regina spoke with pride about having survived those days as well as she did against so many odds.

Regina was also concerned about the dangers that children face when left on their own, or with unreliable people. Even if she had had the time to go out to classes, she would have been worried for her children's safety. In a third interview Regina was asked what she felt was a big problem for women in South Africa today:

R: Umm to my side the big problem for the women is the kind of things happen..the women is going for work...does not feel well because is leave the kids at home...is not free."

We discussed the prevalence of child abuse and rape and the fear that women have about leaving their children with other people when they must go out. This appears to be a constant worry for many South African women.

When Regina's children were young they restricted her possibilities of returning to school. Now that the children are adults they can play a supportive role in Regina's education.

I: What does your family think about you going back to school now?

R: Umm I told my brother before he died, last month, I was in holiday in September I told him I learn now, I'm a student...he must help me if I want help. Because I'm not full-time at job. I like being a student.

I: And what did he say?

R: He was...great, it was great to him...to go back to school.

I: He was happy?

R: Ya, he was happy.

I: And what about your children...how do they feel...they're happy?

R: Oh yes.

I: What kind of things do they say about you going back to school?

R: Ah...they feel alright. Before I write my first examination, he called me and wished me good luck...he's happy.

Regina felt entitled to take care of her own needs after all the years she supported her family. She did not depend on anyone for support or to motivate her.

I: Has your family helped you in going back to school in some way?

R: No.

I: On your own?

R: laughter) On my own...yes.

I: But have they made it more difficult for you to go back to school?

R: No, not really.

Lungelwa has three children whom she was unable to support because she did not have a job. This left her 'defenseless' before her ex-husband who was financially able to provide for the children's basic physical needs. This was the most painful point in Lungelwa's life and her deepest regret. Her only hope is that improving her English skills will help her find a job, which would give her a chance to reclaim her children from their father and his new wife. Although she had the 'space' in her life to attend classes, Lungelwa's loss permeated her entire being. Her desperation to get a job and her children back motivated her to attend classes, but it also exhausted her and at times she felt it was hopeless. I suggested that maybe her situation would change.

L: But maybe...things will change later...and...you know...

R: Yes...sometimes...look...but I'm not sure about that.

Realistic or not, literacy classes appeared to be her only hope.

Nombulelo became pregnant accidentally at 17 and sent her son to his grandparents' home to be taken care of.

N: When I came to Cape Town in 1978, I started working in Parrow, near Cape Town. Then I fell pregnant with my first child in 1979, was stop working. After

that, I sent the child to his grandmother, his daddy's side. But I was so young...I didn't know what to do.

As an adult Nombulelo developed a sense of responsibility for her children which was linked to an interest in returning to school. She did what she felt was best for her first child by sending him to live with the grandmother who could take care of him.

N: Was 16, 17 and I sent him home and I stayed in Cape Town because I was working, buying myself clothes. Not keeping money because I didn't know must keeping money (laughter).

I: Working as a domestic worker?

N: Yes, just spend the money, buy clothes. oh.. but as I grow up I notice I must keep some money for my kids, for the future. Now I'm working in Athlone.

I: For a family?

N: mmm good people. I stay with them...there is small kid.

I: You live with them?

N: Yes, we live as a family...that is nice. But hoping for the future, I plan to have my own house for the kids. If I have time, save,...want to go back to school, doing night school or part time classes.

Nombulelo's dreams for her future are linked to her children, and it is partly for her children that she went back to school. But school was secondary to her goal of having her own family. Nombulelo constructed her own ideal of family that does not reflect the western paradigm of male headed household. Her ideal of family consists of a mother, two children, and a house. The absence of a male figure in her "family" reflects an alternative; perhaps an emerging African family based on different values.

N: I wanted to have the second baby so that I can also have a family...because I was thinking now I'm alone, no mother, no sister, no father...let me make a family of my own, because I'm still young...so I decide to have two kids...and I have a family. (laughter)

Nombulelo does perceive her children as posing barriers to her education, but having children did motivate her to continue her education, so that she could one day provide them with a house. When I probed, I realized that she had left literacy classes for four years because she had no one to look after the younger child. But Nombulelo constructed her interpretation of the

circumstances. Her choice and her priority was to have a child, and then return to school when the child was older. In her interpretation her child is not a barrier to education.

Nomsisi has one child whom she often brought to the literacy class at the Museum. When I asked her why she didn't return to school earlier, given that it was such a high priority for her, she stated that among other reasons (lack of adult schools, no money etc.) she had a child in 1992 so: "it was not possible to start school during that time." In 1996 Nomsisi began classes at St. Francis School and the South African Museum. The flexibility, small group of learners, and openness of the classes at the South African Museum allowed Nomsisi to bring her child with her to class which made her participation possible.

Similar to the Maritime women, the women I interviewed assumed the full responsibility of child-raising. The Maritime women seemed to accept this as part of their designated sex role whereas the African women challenged this notion. They often complained, criticized and lamented men's irresponsible behaviour as fathers and felt it was unacceptable. At the same time they did not regret the absence of male partners in their lives, or their status as mothers. There was often discussion around their lack of confidence in men's ability to be responsible, and in contrast to Horsman's study, reference to men's dependence on women.

N: They can't look after themselves. We look after ourselves, we look after our kids..but this...we can live on our own without them...they can't live on their own without women...thats what makes women.

Nombulelo believes that women's role as mothers gives them more power.

I: For you, what does it mean to be a woman?

N: Oh, I like to be a women because I think we got more power than male.

I: In what ways do you think we have more power? In what ways do you feel powerful?

N: I feel powerful because I don't need the man on my side to tell me what to do...with my life. ..And more stronger than them in many ways...like raising your own children, on your own, without the man...that is powerful...with your children by yourselves...without the man...I think that is more powerful...because they can't do that.

I frequently encountered this kind of self-assurance during interviews. It was not based on material comfort or social status, but it was present as an 'embodied' knowledge of personal strength. Sometimes it was linked with the concept of motherhood as powerful rather than binding. Nombulelo's comments are in stark contrast to one Maritime woman's comment to Horsman "I'm just another dumb housewife, don't know nothing." (p. 146)

The women I spoke with did not believe that they 'needed' men in their lives to take care of them financially or emotionally and they were not 'male-identified'. They resisted traditional models of family which place men in the position of authority. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) cites a comment made by Kagendo Murungi:

African women's relationships with men, within and outside conjugality, are not central to their self-inscription or to an understanding of our stories, lives and desires." (p. 13)

She continued:

Women in Africa have also always known the option of making de facto families, consisting only of themselves and their children, even within polygamy. (p. 15)

Nombulelo's and others' comments around their choice and preference not to marry, and to raise children on their own strongly supports this concept of a different notion of family. Bernstein's (1985) research also supports this finding:

A significant number of young women regarded marriage in entirely negative manner. They said they did not care about marriage as an

institution, nor did they think it was of any particular use to them. (p. 44)

Discussions with the African women regarding children frequently raised the issue of violence against children and how this is linked to motherhood. Nombulelo commented about what she thought were some of the most difficult things facing South African women:

N: ummm I think its violence in South Africa...against women...and child abuse...because it comes back to the mother when the child has been abused...then the mother suffers, the child suffers..I think its the most [difficult thing] facing women in South Africa.

I: Why do you think there is so much abuse against women and children in South Africa?

N: (long pause) cause a lot of men doesn't work...have nothing to do, sitting in the back room...whereas the women...the women work.

The women's self-image was often connected with their strength to cope on their own as mothers amid such harsh conditions. To some extent, there ability to cope was in opposition to men's perceived inability to cope.

In contrast to the Horsman study, the women I interviewed did not express guilt regarding their children or their mothering. In African culture it is acceptable for children to be raised by members of the extended family. Moving away to find work (migrant labour) was often the only way to support the children, and the women did not blame themselves for these circumstances. The women did not denigrate their mothering or themselves because they had not finished school. This is in stark contrast to what Horsman noted:

Women themselves rarely acknowledge the practical constraints which they are very much aware of, instead they blame themselves for their failure. (p. 177)

Although the women I interviewed wanted to be literate for themselves as well as for their children, they did not blame themselves for their lack of education.

They understood that circumstances beyond their control including the apartheid system, poverty and gender roles limited all their opportunities.

R: We didn't have opportunity you see, it was apartheid, and there was no choice. Now, maybe it can come different...because I have a suffer, but I don't want my children to have suffer.

This is very different from Horsman's remarks on the effects of the dominant discourse on poor and working class mothers:

Rarely has there been any acknowledgment of the role played by poverty and inadequate resources in the way in which their children can be brought up. (p. 181)

Theme 4: Transportation

Transportation in the rural areas of the Maritime provinces in Canada is problematic and has been a block to women's literacy participation. The only available transportation was frequently the "man's" car and thus, another instrument of power which men could use against their wives' participation in literacy classes.

The South African women I interviewed also had transportation problems, as they lived mostly in townships at least twenty kilometers from the city. Transportation is slow, costly and frequently dangerous. The main source of transportation for the black population are communal taxi's and buses. The mini-van taxis continue to be a site of much violence since the two major taxi companies began a turf war in 1995. Many women told me they were afraid to travel by taxi and that the buses are infrequent and very slow.

J: The problem with taxi is...you don't know...sometimes fighting..people can be killed...but you can't know.

This uncertainty around safety and transportation hampers women's freedom to come and go, especially in the evening. There are some literacy programs in townships, St. Francis School is at the entrance to Langa township and is a very popular site for adult learning. This school provides buses to return students to the townships after class ends at nine at night. There is no doubt that this contributes to their high enrollment and popularity.

The South African Museum provides private transportation from Langa to the Museum, but from other townships to Langa transportation is slow and costly. I accompanied Lungelwa to Khayelitsha township one day. We left the Museum at 11:30 and got a ride with the Museum driver to Langa which took about 15 minutes by car. From there, we walked through Langa to the bus station where we waited 45 minutes before we gave up and walked to the taxi stand for a taxi to Crossroads. From Crossroads we waited another 30 minutes for a bus to Khayelitsha. That bus passed through five different townships before we arrived in Khayelitsha at about two o'clock in the afternoon; a two and a half hour journey of approximately 20 kilometers.

The cost of transportation from townships to downtown Cape Town is about 8 Rands return (\$3.00). Many of the women work for about 5 to 7 Rands per hour.

Theme 5: Work

Horsman's study demonstrated that in the context of Maritime life work opportunities were scarce for women, especially for those who did not have formal qualifications. Despite high unemployment, women often believed that it was their fault if they were unemployed. It was a vicious circle which left them feeling responsible - they blamed themselves for their lack of education which in turn was the cause of their unemployment or under employment. The

media perpetrates the voice of dominant discourse through the slogan of "No literacy means no jobs".

The implication of the dominant discourse that education and work are connected is that if you have no job it is because of your inadequate education. (Horsman, 1989, p. 242)

Horsman found that the arbitrary grade 12 matriculation requirements for many jobs excluded people unnecessarily. Typically, the women she interviewed focused obsessively on the elusive "grade 12 matric" as a rite of passage of into the job market. The dominant discourse does not consider the weak Nova Scotia economy, which has revolved heavily around male dominated jobs in the fishing, forestry and mining industries.

Horsman also noted the "ghettoizing" of women in low wage employment. Maritime women were often relegated to female stereotyped jobs, "caring" professions that revolve around domestic activities, cleaning and childcare or serving all of them as extensions of the roles and work they learned as girls.

Most of the women Horsman interviewed were not working outside the home and were dependent on government assistance or husbands for their survival. Most of them wanted to work to decrease their dependence on their husbands and to reduce their husbands' control over them.

Work and the Cape Town Women. The women I interviewed were also concerned with employment issues and hoped that better literacy skills would enable them to find work, or better work but their situations were very different from those in Horsman's study. Four of the six women were employed at the time of the interviews, none were financially dependent on men. The two unemployed women were staying with other family members and received no money from the father of their children - they had no income. In South Africa when marriages collapse other family members frequently help to

house and feed women and their children. For the most part the women I interviewed were used to working and supporting themselves and their children. Employment was often cited as a motivator for attending literacy classes.

Alda worked every day cleaning the apartment building which she lived in, on Saturdays, and Sundays she finished work at noon. She attended St. Francis school four evenings a week from 7 pm until 9 p.m. Her work hours were regular, albeit long, and so she controlled her free time during which she chose to study.

Regina and Alda noted that English literacy helped them in their work situations. Alda said her boss's attitude towards her changed as her command of English improved:

A: But you know for my boss in the office now...before my school now, he talk anything in front of me but now take me out now. He say clear your brains [you are smart now] now...must go out...before don't take me out...talking, talking, but now I want to know what is happening. [boss asks her to leave the room when he has something say that he doesn't want Alda to hear, as he know that now she understand English well.]

The fact that Alda's boss sent her out of the room to discuss private matters meant that Alda was no longer invisible...she was recognized as a thinking, competent individual, and the boss was aware of her increased power because she understood English. The fact that he sent her out of the room was a compliment to Alda - a 'validation'. Alda was proud of the new recognition that she had gained from her boss with improved English skills. When asked if her boss noticed that her English had improved:

Yes, all talking now, discussing anything now. (laughter) I'm...I'm great now.

Improved English skills gave Alda greater status at work, she could be heard, defend her point of view, and understand what was going on around her.

A: Very talking English now, but before not talking, but clear now, before just very tight. But I want to talk back, its not tight now.

Alda enjoyed the value of two-way communication - the ability to "talk back" improved her status as a worker. Since returning to school she began to keep track of her hours and expected time off and insisted that her work schedule be respected.

Alda did not speak as if she expected literacy class to transform her work opportunities, rather she was encouraged by how her improved English gave her more status at work.

Regina is a domestic worker who has worked for the same woman for five years, two days per week. Although she hoped to one day work as a hairdresser, for which she was certified, she did not equate literacy class with automatic employment possibilities. I asked Regina if what she had been learning in class was helpful in her job.

R: Yes...the time I was came there, I was not perfect to speak with this lady, but I was hearing what she saying, but I can't answer properly... I can sit down now if there is something wrong...to ask...between us...and talk...and make right if it is wrong.

This two-way dialogue improved working relations and enhanced Regina's power position in the work place by changing the way her employer related to her. In the second interview a week later I asked Regina to tell me more about her work.

R: Now, its nice now, my boss is nice now, not like time before.

I: How was she before?

R: Horrible...but now is very very nice. Because I sit down with her..talk and think about maybe I don't like. Maybe before she didn't understand me because I didn't speak English well. Now understand me.

I: So has...is English classes helping you in that way?

R: Yes, she's accepting me.

I: And does your boss...does she listen to you...when you talk to her?

R: Yes yes..very much. And she must answer me and I understand what she say.

I: And what made the difference between how she was before and how she is now?

R: I think before the difference...she didn't understand me...because I'm not speaking English.

I: So did your English improve...since you began to work with her? From the beginning...when you first met her up to now?

R: Is true really, I can say, she understand what I'm saying, that's why it's different. Before...I can't speak well, I can't understand what she says.

I: So does she see you differently from when you first started to work for her?

R: Yes. Because I asked her...I ask her

I: What did she tell you?

R: I ask her, my English is better than before. She says "you do well, you do well Regina".

In this discussion Regina revealed a sense of increased status based on her improved English communication skills in the work place. Regina gained respect from her employer which translated into being listened to, considered, and recognized by her employer. A couple of months later, Regina told me that her employer invited her to have lunch with the family for the first time in the five years she had been working there. It was not the invitation per se that Regina was pleased about, rather, as she put it: "You see, now they are respecting me."

In a third interview Regina discussed the frustrations with her job as a shop steward in Port Elizabeth five years previously. She said it was difficult to intervene when her boss was talking rubbish, or when she wanted to defend her position and that of her co-workers. The boss used English against the factory workers to disempower them as active participants in decision making. She described what happened at the factory.

R: If I would say...if I see the wrong thing you know [perceive something happening that is not in the workers interests]...maybe the whites can say, o.k....do that...but it's wrong, you can't do that...I say "no guys, don't do that" but I can't speak English you know...even say "no guys, it's wrong, it's wrong" and everybody can see it's wrong, but the problem, I can't speak English but I saw it...the wrong thing.

I: It must have been frustrating.

R: Yes it is.

I: Because you've got no power?

R: But I've got power but I can't speak, I can't speak, I can't make a talk like communication.

Regina believed that English communication skills would have enabled her to use her position as shop steward, to negotiate for the workers' benefit. Similar comments abound in research about women in the labour movement (Lawson ed. 1992). A woman worker made a similar comment regarding the problem of English in the work place and the union: "English words! I can't understand them. That's why I don't feel like speaking. When we go to big Cosatu [national trade union of workers] meetings we only speak English and we feel small." (p.10) The dominance of English is widespread, and without it workers can feel marginalized, even in their own unions.

Work also had an effect on Regina's literacy participation. She could not afford to turn down work, so she gave up literacy classes on Wednesdays and took on another job. For Regina there were two priorities - work and English class, and sometimes it was impossible to do both. There was not enough space in her life. In the end, financial needs dominated, and literacy took a secondary role while remaining vital to Regina in other respects. Although Regina was unhappy about losing her factory job five years previously, it had resulted in her having the time to return to school and added a sense of importance by upgrading her literacy.

I: When you left Port Elizabeth....was that a time when you thought...to go back to school?

R: Yes. That time I was working but there were bad days in the factory. Eight till five and there was no chance and the school was the afternoon.

Both Alda and Regina experienced the power of English in the workplace. They expressed a great deal of satisfaction that gaining communication skills improved their ability to negotiate, speak up, and confront issues in the workplace.

Regina also related literacy to employment. The link between literacy and employment is often made in the media and in society at large.

R: Because the job is little. You can't find a job quickly...you must improve yourself, that's why I want to learn and read...because my goal is to open hair saloon. Yes..because I have my certificate.

Tied to the immediate benefits of literacy upgrading were the long range goals and dreams that literacy participation could improve future job related opportunities.

Nomsisi and Lungelwa were both unemployed at the time of the interviews. They both expressed the hope that improving their English would help them find work. Lungelwa suffered deeply because of her unemployment; she felt that she had no basis to take her children back from her ex-husband since she knew that she could not support them. She hoped that English classes would help her find a job and one day enable her to support her children. She was looking for domestic work at the time of the interview.

Nomsisi lived with her daughter in Langa township. Having waited so long to go to school, Nomsisi was more 'school' oriented than 'work' oriented. She had initially gone to Cape Town in 1986 to go to school, unlike Lungelwa and the others who went to Cape Town to find work.

Joyce had learned English well from working as a domestic worker with various families over the years. Still, she wanted to improve her English so that she could work in different places and she believed that English would help her to get better jobs.

J: English will help with job, any job, even domestic job. For example, it will help to follow a recipe.

Joyce worked three days per week in different homes and participated at St. Francis School literacy classes and the South African Museum literacy classes on Saturday mornings.

In previous years, even if there had been evening classes before, she would not have been able to attend because of her work. Joyce explained that when she worked as a live-in domestic worker/nanny her work was such that she was never "free". The family's demands were constant, even after the so-called working hours. A friend of Joyce's urged her to find another job, and not to be a live-in worker so that she would have her evenings free to attend classes. Work, and the independence that goes with it were very important to Joyce.

I: What is it like to be a South African woman?

J: Black people...some don't want women to work. Young girls go to school...don't know much...get married and just a housewife. Woman is just to be married and look after house and washing and ironing. Sunday...dress children, go to church. Before...people used to say "you look for work? But you're a woman!" Before, Black people just want man to work"

Joyce was very resistant to the traditional female roles. She knew that the social conditioning into men's and women's roles interfered with women's desire and right to work. She believed that English skills enabled one to find better work, which would increase independence. She regarded herself as independent from a young age and after she married in 1995 she was adamant to maintain her independence. Unlike the other women, Joyce was not working to support children.

Joyce made specific reference to Black people when she described the division of labour and was somewhat surprised when I told her that women in Canada could have similar concerns.

Nombulelo has worked as a domestic worker since she was 16. She attended literacy classes at USWE several years ago but stopped so that she could take on more work to provide for her two sons. She planned to return to school when she had the opportunity. Her working conditions seemed

reasonable which was in part why she was not desperate to return to school immediately. Still, Nombulelo dreamt of a better job:

I: So what do you think you can do for a job after you go back to school?

N: When I was young I used to dream of being a nurse. Cause I like to look after people.

She spoke about her job as a domestic worker as a temporary accommodation, not a permanent position:

N: Yes, we live as a family...that is nice. But hoping for the future, I plan to have my own house for the kids. If I have time, save...want to go back to school, doing night time or part time classes. Yaa because I'm still young, I'm 33, I still feel young. I have plans for the future.

I asked Nombulelo what difference literacy made to her work:

I: And since you went back to school, did it make any difference to your workplace? The people you're working for, did it..have any change or impact..the things that you learned?

N: Ya, it did a little cause I never use to like...cause I'm the one that was there in the daytime, now I was look after the house cause they ask me and I must answer telephone and write messages...now I can do that, take messages..I do it.

I: So what did she think of that when she saw that you could read and write, take messages?

N: She also give encouragement to go back to school. She say that in the future I see that if I'm good in like...answering the phone..I can find job as secretary..then I will find myself that kind of job and she can find someone else to look after the house.

Nombulelo's employers were supportive.

I: And she encourages you?

N: Ya.

I: Is that unusual?

N: It is because some people don't ..as long as we're there to look after the house...she don't care about you...your future...you must just be there.

I: Ya, thats what I've heard actually.

N: When she needs you, you must just be there.

Nombulelo forged an unusual relationship with her employers based in part on her increased literacy skills and determination to learn. Her general

comfort with her work situation was not pushing her to return to literacy classes immediately.

In contrast to the Maritime women, the women I interviewed did not blame themselves because they were in low paying work. They did not define themselves through their work as domestic workers. Their self-image was constructed on another value system which which is not defined by occupation.

The women believed that literacy class had positive benefits in their jobs even if it did not help them to obtain better jobs. Desire for work and/or improved working conditions were invariably tied to literacy participation. This did not , however, translate into unrealistic expectations that literacy would be a ticket to a job. In accord with the women in Horsman's study, the women I interviewed felt that improving their literacy could help and not improving their literacy would certainly not help.

Regina and Alda believed that improved English skills had a positive effect on work relations. Improved English skills did not result in a better job, however Regina had three more days work as a domestic worker during the time I interviewed her. There was some evidence that English skills improved working conditions and power relations with employers.

Domestic work is precarious. Domestic workers' rights are often ignored despite the new Labour Act. Working days and hours can shift based on the needs of the employer. Domestic workers' schedules and private lives are rarely considered. For these workers, too few or too many hours of work can jeopardize literacy participation. The work that the women did also affected their literacy participation. Not having enough work made basic needs a priority, and literacy participation came second..often with great regret. When the women had to choose between literacy classes and an extra day of work, they usually

chose work. Economically they were too close to the wire to have any real choices.

Horsman noted that "Literacy and upgrading are part of a dream for independence." (p. 263) The same may be true for the women I interviewed. They spoke pragmatically about what literacy could do for them - writing letters and conducting banking, and sometimes they 'dreamed' of having a job such as nursing, or hairdressing or secretarial work. Horsman stated that the women "wanted the sort of work that one chooses, work with meaning that pays enough to free them from cares about basic survival." (p. 264) Nombulelo automatically linked what she would like to be with 'finishing school':

I: And if you could be anything what would you be, in your dreams?

N: When I finish school?

I: Yaa.

N: I'd be a nurse...yes..help people.

To a large extent the dominant ideology which links education to employment was echoed by the women I interviewed, which echoes the Horsman study.

THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF LITERACY PARTICIPATION

Among the perceived benefits of literacy participation are the following factors that motivate women to participate; learning, increasing independence, improving self-concept, breaking the isolation, organizing oneself and opening up the world.

Learning

Generally the women were happy about the practical skills they learned in literacy class: speaking, writing and reading skills which enabled them to fill in forms, write letters, take messages and read instructions and newspapers.

Nombulelo spoke about what she had learned at USWE:

N: was nice because I learn a lot from USWE like..spelling. I didn't know how to spell when I write a letter in English...I learn a lot of things with USWE.

Alda said that at St. Francis School she learned new words which helped her to understand the news on television. I asked her if she could write before she went to St. Francis School: "NO. Never do like this."

The Museum classes, which are based on Xhosa history, provided an opportunity to remember and write about Xhosa cultural heritage. The classes were a combination of history lessons and English literacy. Joyce said It's important because some people didn't know...how people use to live...how it was.

Regina said she enjoyed these classes because she learned things that made her appreciate her culture and things that had been lost or forgotten over the years. The students discussed and wrote short stories about art, games, religion and beliefs from their culture which they published as readers at the end of the term. The readers were published in January 1997 and serve as primers for literacy students at the museum.

Increasing Independence

Increased literacy skills are often linked with increased independence, self-reliance and confidence. Some academics (Fingeret, 1983b, Gibson in Prinsloo, 1996) claim that so-called illiterate people are not dependent but that they create a context of reciprocity and mutual interdependency, exchanging help with tasks that require literacy, for something that they can offer.

The women I interviewed were very happy not to depend on anyone for daily tasks requiring literacy. Feelings about themselves, their independence and their progress were intertwined. Nombulelo described how literacy class had helped her:

N: It helps me with when I withdraw money from the bank, I learn that through USWE. Because I use to have a problem when I go to the bank...can't fill in the

forms. So I ask someone else to do it with me...which I don't like. I also like to speak English with other people.

I: So when you wanted to go back to school to take literacy, it wasn't just for getting a job, it was also...

N: for myself...to be able to communicate with other people, yes.

I: And what difference did going to literacy class make?

N: It make a BIG difference for me. Because now I do things for myself, I don't ask others, if I go places where maybe find person who can speak English, I speak for myself..and the person understand what I'm saying.

Alda said:

A: Can go for the shop, can buy anything, can sign anything, but before, go for the bank was tight a little. You go for the bank to open account, but before I call someone like my son, now I do it myself.

I: So now you don't have to call anybody to help...how does that feel?

A: I feel o.k...now..I'm happy ...I'm very happy. Everything change now. I'm happy..very happy.

Joyce said:

J: Now I know how to have a bank account and pay bills. Before...I ask someone to help me. Just to show me even where to sign my name. I want to do it myself, I don't want to have to ask someone.

On another level Joyce was already independent. I asked her how her life was:

J: Good...no problems...even when I was by myself it was good. Before...I didn't want to marry. When I was young, I wanted to go everywhere, travel...far away..and see places.

Improving Self-concept

Regina noted differences between her 'shyness' before she started literacy classes and how she feels now:

R: It changes you a lot, I mean...about yourself. You're not shy to speak, like speak with other people who doesn't understand your language...I use to be very shy...to speak. Like get shy because you're going to speak wrong....like me I'm so shy...because I have not good English..I'm still shy.

In another interview, I asked Regina if going to literacy class made her feel differently about herself:

R: Yes, I feel different because I can speak a little..I can write and I can read ..I feel proud about that.

Another time I asked her how she felt when she came out of a literacy class:

R: (laugh) I feel great.

I: Why?

R: Because I learn ..lots.

Joyce said:

J: I think some more good things about myself, I can do other jobs, I can earn more money.

Alda also gained confidence:

A: Mmm it get easier now, all things come right now. I like anything, I like anythings, thats why I like it. Before I don't know anything...but now I know anything, brain comes clear now.

In another interview Alda said that she wanted to continue school for years and years. She related how her leaving school and then returning later as an adult, made her feel:

I: You left school because you were sick.

A: I'm sick, pass away...dead.

I: What do you mean?

A: Pass away...dead..there's a funeral. I pass away...dead.

I: You felt that you were dead?

A: I'm dead, I leave the school thats why I'm dead, thats why I'm sick, you know what I mean?

I: oh ya o.k....you felt as if you were dead?

A: Ya, as if I'm dead, I don't go for school , but I'm sick. I feel bad, I'm go for the school...thats why I carry on like this, you know what I mean? I'm not dead now, before Margie, I'm pass away.

I: But...its like...for you...going back to school ...was coming alive again.

A: Ya..I carry on...since the brains has come more, more , more more I know anything you see. Musn't know any few things, your brain must be more more you know...must continue all my brains. I feel o.k. now, I'm happy, I'm very happy, I'm very happy. Everything change now already. But before it difficult to start anything.

Alda's reference to being 'dead' speaks volumes about how empty she felt.

Nombulelo had positive feelings about herself. I asked her to describe herself:

N: To myself, Nombulelo is a very loving person first of all...like people, like the things that make me laugh...don't like sad things...if I hear sad things I also get sad. But I'm a very happy person.

Breaking the Isolation

I asked the women what they liked about going to classes apart from what she learned there:

Joyce said " I meet friends and know things that I didn't know before."

Now when she has nothing to do she takes out a book. Nomsisi said: "Can find work, I don't have to sit at home. I have something to do now".

Regina said:

R: If you not speaking English, you can't speak with each other. Because you don't know that language...you can say you suffer because you can't speak... Communicate?

I: yes, you can't make communication with each other...its too difficult. But now I feel its easy to make communication with each other.

Nombulelo: "nice meeting people you don't know ."

Alda referred to taking a break from traditional female roles.

A: But can't do like this all the time sitting home, working, cooking, do the washing. Can see what is happen all your book..open a book not know what is happen in your book...but you go school you know what is happen in your book now.

As the women become part of the community of a literacy class, they learn skills which increases their independence. Independence *and* an increased sense of community go hand in hand.

Organizing Oneself

Literacy class provided a focus in the women's lives that helped them to organize and structure their time.

Joyce said:

I: Is the way you see yourself now, different from before?

J: Now...I could sit down and think and do things properly. Not just think quickly and then forget again.

Now that she is in school she is learning and always thinking. If she has nothing to do:

N: I just take a book and read...before I didn't worry about reading things...now, always thinking.

Nomsisi said that she knows what to do now - she does all her work first, the washing, cooking, cleaning - and then she sits down with her books.

Alda described her work day.

A: Lunch time I'm sitting for my room and make some little bit lunch for me and...open a book and read something."

Opening up the World

The women spoke about knowing about more things, more people, and going places. This coincides with the end of apartheid, democratic elections, and freedom of movement.

Joyce also said: "Its good for me, I enjoy it. Its something different in my life."

The "something different in my life" corresponds to what one woman told Horsman; "I'm even feeling better just learning, having something else in my mind besides the everyday". (p. 204)

I: ok. so...going back to school and learning more, has it changed the way you see the world?

Alda: (pause) Uaa, I can see all the world now, see the world you know what I mean?

I: Has it changed the way you think?

A: Yaa, it changed anything...I can go anywhere, I can go to Tanzania ..nobody can tell me..I can take for the passport and go anywhere.

Yaa. Can go now...but before can't go..where can go, can't ask anyone.

The I women interviewed all believed that their literacy participation is meaningful above and beyond how it connects to work or family. During discussions around the meaning, the purpose and the point of literacy participation, the women spoke passionately about their participation in literacy classes and how it made them feel.

In contrast with Horsman's study, the women did not inevitably make literacy participation an extension of what they thought was best for their children. They were going to literacy class for themselves, and they felt that it would be good in relation to their children.

Literacy trainer's views on women's participation in literacy programmes

This section reports the findings of a two hour interview with twelve literacy trainers at the literacy group Masifundisi. It aims to present literacy trainers perspectives on women's literacy participation. Eleven of the trainers were African women and one was a Coloured woman. The voices represent various perceptions about learners which may, or may not, represent the trainers positions based on their race and class.

Masifundisi is a community based NGO which offers literacy classes from an office in Athlone, a coloured area near Cape Town. It developed as a community based organization whose literacy work was part of the broader struggle for liberation. It also acts as a resource and information center for learners and presents literacy learning as a form of political and personal empowerment. Masifundisi also attempts to inform and involve communities in their own development, specifically through the Government of Unity's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP's aim is to involve the population in addressing issues of housing, health, education, gender equity, access to water and electrification.

The discussion with the literacy trainers at Masifundisi highlighted some perceptions that the trainers have concerning the factors preventing women from attending and/or making their attendance difficult. A group of ten trainers from this centre were interviewed for two hours to discuss why women participate in literacy classes, what problems they encountered and how it benefitted them.

In general, the trainers noted that there are many factors that create barriers to women's participation in literacy programmes, including:

relationships to men, women's childrearing responsibilities, traditional roles, health considerations and the need to work.

Women's relationships with men. *The issue for women is not (just) the ability of their potential or ex-husbands to provide economically for a wife and child/ren, but the attitudes and behaviour of these men.* (Ziehl, 1994, p. 44)

Consistent with many studies, (Lind in Namibia, 1996, Horsman, 1989, Edwards, 1993, Medel-Anonuevo, 1996) the trainers at Masifundisi cited women's relationships with men, chauvinism and sexist socialization as major inhibitors to women's further education. One trainer stated:

...men are not supporting them, they are not supportive at all because you find that in most of the classes, some of the women, the men don't know, their husbands don't know they are attending classes, they hide the books or they would give their books to the facilitator.

As fathers, men also show similar lack of support for their daughter's education. As one trainer said:

..you know in old days women are not allowed to go to school..when..the father didn't allow women to go to school, because they said if you educate a women you're wasting your time, you're wasting your money..so that is another thing that prevented women to go to school.

The perception that men feel threatened by women becoming literate is an often cited major problem for women participants. The main reason offered is that men see women's advancement through literacy as a threat to their power over women. Some men try to restrict the women from such independence through violence. One trainer at Masifundisi stated:

They're feeling threatened that when you go back to school you might leave him and go for better people than him,..their education is so limited that when you further your own status, they feel threatened.

The trainers were concerned by the fact that violence against their students was a part of their lives and they discussed strategies to deal with this situation:

Some will say you know I was pregnant when I was kicked by my husband and I landed in hospital..and you know, I couldn't do anything, I couldn't report to the police about that because you know...people would be saying, how can you report that you've been beaten by your husband and he's taken by police, you musn't say anything, if your husband beats you, its your own indaba....(fate)
You can see some of them come to class and there isn't this feeling of participation because they have this worry.

The Masifundisi trainers attempt to address this problem in the classroom to help women work towards solutions.

Yes...maybe a women is beaten by a man and then we discuss that while we are learning...what is happening here, does this situation also happen in your township or do you know somebody who's being beaten...and then while we are talking about that, some open and say why they left marriage, its because of that.

Traditional role of women: childbearing. *Women's subordination has forced many women to accept unwanted pregnancies, along with unwanted marital and sexual relations. (Wild, Kunst , 1995, p. 27)*

The trainers noted that early and frequent pregnancy contributes to women's illiteracy by forcing girls to leave school at an early age. Girls who become pregnant are excluded from school and other activities, and do not receive support from their families or communities. On the other hand:

the boy who has impregnated this girl is actually allowed to go everywhere, he's not excluded, not even a single event, he is not even going to be expelled from school you know, because the women is perceived to not be looking well after herself.

The trainer added that women are made to " feel very embarrassed and blame themselves for being pregnant." Blame is also assigned to the mother of the pregnant girl:

lets talk about the daughter who is pregnant before marriage...you are blamed...it's you, its you are the cause. If you are looking very well after this child, this child wouldn't be pregnant today.

And in reference to the fathers of pregnant girls:

What was he doing..sitting, reading paper, going all over where there are men's meeting where we are not allowed to come and raise our voices.

Stromquist (1990) discusses the impact of education on pregnancy citing many studies which demonstrate that higher education for women: "results in fewer children per family, less infant mortality, marriage at a later age, healthier children and better-reared and educated children" (p. 97).

Care of children. *Irrespective of the form the family takes - whether nuclear, extended and so on - there is a widely held belief that the role of women is as wife/mother and that women's participation in the labour market is marginal. (Wolpe, 1994, p. 12)*

I asked the trainers why women wait so long, often until their 40s to return to school. Childcare is the responsibility of women, as stated "because of the children, they can't go back to school, they've got this load of the children." It is often only when the children are grown that women have the time and freedom from worry to return to school.

They have to look after these children till at a certain age whereby they are confident enough that these children are totally now on their own and then, its then that they are able to at least go now back to school because the responsibility that they have is less, you know.

Women also express a great deal of concern about their children's safety. Violence against children is prevalent in South Africa, mothers are worried about leaving their children unattended while they go to classes, or in the wrong hands. The Cape Times newspaper of Jan. 21, 1997, reported that child rape has "reached epidemic proportions", and it is believed that although 200 new cases per week are reported across the country, the majority remain unreported. Mothers' fears are supported by statistics on crime against children.

The trainers also explained how having children can motivate women to become literate. Parents feel that they are expected to be able to help children with their homework and feel embarrassed and inadequate when they can not. When children ask their mothers to read something from the school:

They can't read it and feel embarrassed and then they realize that they need to read and they need to write and they need to count and the needs are at a very later age when they find that they're having a competition now where the children look down on them as illiterate and then they feel embarrassed you know.

As access to children's schooling is expanding, children will be receiving more education than their parents ever had and this is bound to increase the gap between parents' and children's social positions within families and communities. It may well result in generational and cultural gaps. Women increasing their literacy skills could help to bridge these gaps.

Children require a significant part of the family's income and increase the need for women to work, which in turn motivates women to improve their literacy in the hope that it will help them find work.

Need to work. *The domestic worker is seen as a commodity, as opposed to an individual, which is easily dispensable.* (Brown and Reynolds, 1994, p. 78)

The need and desire to work is the common reason for women's literacy participation. Many literacy participants have worked as domestic workers and farmworkers in the past and have related the following information to their teachers. Domestic workers and farmworkers have a difficult time freeing themselves of their duties in order to attend classes. Also, employers often do not allow live-in domestic workers the time to attend classes; trainers believed this is linked to employers need to maintain power and domination over the workers.

It is because when we get knowledge, madams would know that we're going to demand, and therefore they deny you an opportunity to go...because they know that they are going to be faced with challenge. Yes, they make it very difficult.

And in the case of farmworkers:

The farmers who want their jobs to be done...these people start working at 6..and they break off at 6 in the evening, then they come back very late by the time they arrive at home..they have to...you know...cook for their children do their day to day duties, wash their clothes.

Work also affects women's attendance, it often takes priority over literacy classes. When a choice has to be made women often choose a job over classes. Stopping and starting literacy classes hinges to a large degree on work life.

Employment is a circular problem for literacy participants. Most studies promoting literacy report that it is difficult to be employed in the formal sector without literacy skills, and it is difficult to participate in literacy programs while employed.

Physical and mental health . *Most damaging of all, women are continuously blamed and victimized for the illnesses of their children, partners and parents (Wild, Kunst, 1995, p.25).*

Poor women suffer from a variety of physical and mental health problems which undermines their ability to study, work and participate in public life. The most common health problems of domestic workers are eczema (aggravated by cleaning materials), ergonomic problems (back ache and arthritis aggravated by the nature of housework), hypertension and diabetes related to stress of long hours, little gratification, low pay (Platzky and Billy, 1996). All of the above, particularly stress impacts negatively on mental health.

The trainers at Masifundisi spoke about how women's position and condition in society and their socialization creates enormous stresses which, in turn, affect their literacy participation. Women trying to redefine their roles in society face personal battles, and may not be supported by the other women in their community. In a discussion on cultural gender socialization, one trainer explained how women had been trained to be submissive and defer to men's authority.

You can imagine growing up as a little child, being told that you cannot answer back, no matter how you feel as a women, and then when you are getting married, in our culture like you'll be taken by your family over to that house, you'll be told that before you are taken, ah, its called, ah, a certain meeting by women, women you know, women can actually be good oppressors to others, you can see that and then they will tell you, if your husband beats you, you must never fight back, otherwise you'll disgrace this family, you must never swear at your husband, and you must listen to him, whatever he says, whether you like it or not.

One trainer spoke about the psychological effects of culture on her students:

Women have been made to carry a lot of burden, to be submissive, look after the children, you know the failure or or the success of this house whether you work or not is put upon your shoulders. Always when I talk about these women, I think of a drawer, whereby everything that is bad you take out that drawer, you put it in that drawer all the time, and then, this drawer is full of all the things that for all

the years you haven't shared with anyone, and you are told not to and then you can see now how stressful that can be.

I asked what kind of effects they see in students under stress for various reasons:

Like when they don't have money they become worried and they don't concentrate in the class, they come in and out you know, they become drop outs because they've got to look for something to raise their money.

This causes poor performance, and when they don't pass exams they become discouraged, which also leads to dropping out.

Under the apartheid government, there were not enough educational facilities for people to attend literacy classes. As one Masifundisi trainer states:

There is no where to go before..there is a night school which is very far, there were no literacy centers for adults. They had to go in the evening to this day school where they were taught by dayschool teachers who are not trained to teach adults and they would teach them as they teach children during the days and some of these women were not allowed by their husbands to leave children in the house to go to school in the evening.

In Cape Town, transportation is a factor which inhibits women's literacy, especially for farm workers.

They must go to the main road where they get their transport and their transport is far from home...those people have to work on the farms in order to get bread for their children.

Perceived benefits of literacy participation. Regardless of the barriers and problems that women face when they attend literacy class, the trainers and literacy participants whom I spoke with were all strong advocates of participation. Literacy class is a 'site' where women can meet to

discuss problems, explore solutions, and gain new knowledge about themselves and their communities.

The trainers at Masifundisi work to bring about political awareness among the students. Discussion includes the achievements of the Government of National Unity since 1994, and how citizens can play a greater role in society. They want their students to understand how the Reconstruction and Development Programme works.

The people are not aware of what is happening, how can we get these funds..but the government is trying and there should be structures..the structures that will be able to access those funds...then you know, our organization is trying to build capacity in those communities where we are working, so that...those people could be capacitated with knowledge in order to access the funds.

The Masifundisi trainers spoke about ways that literacy class helps women by increasing their self-esteem, confidence, and independence. They noted that women were often shy when they first came to class but then later they started to speak up and share their problems, ask for advice and strategize around problems. Improving reading and writing skills increases learners pride and increases self-confidence. The trainers suggested, that this, in turn, helps women to confront oppressive forces around them.

They've been oppressed by men all these years and I think its very relevant that they do come up and talk and stand stand up for themselves instead of letting a man tell them what to do, and they've been domineered by the man, they felt small, they felt like they've been cooped up, and they've been in this corner for many years and now they've suddenly shed like a butterfly now.

The following trainer's statements relate to discussion on how literacy helps women.

Those people actually they think that their dignity is no longer there because they have been looking after children, managing their own homes with so little money and therefore no has ever said to them ..well done.

Coming to class "takes them out of their little room and little cells that they've built for themselves." The trainers said that students often come to their classes feeling old, tired, and hopeless but that learning reading and writing skills makes them feel more important.

One trainer provided an example of the changes in women which she believes is related to literacy participation.

_____ was irritable, she was moody, she didn't want to have any conversations, now she has the ability to go out and speak and I think that's important that you do sort of gear the learner to be.. to come up, you know, when they think they need to be heard.

Because Masifundisi is community oriented, they create savings clubs among the students which helps to create a bond and "actually helps the learners not to feel isolated". They also advocate the importance of teaching people about their history and their contribution in the struggle for liberation which further validates the students as people.

So far, we see that the South African women who told me their stories exhibit many of the problems found elsewhere. Poverty, the demands of children and the gendered nature of power relations combine to render women's continual participation in early education and later adult education literacy classes, almost impossible. It seems however that the South African women possess an extra dimension, one of perseverance, strength and basic self-worth in the absence of self-blame.

African, European, Indian and North American women report a lack of time for education because of domestic duties and childcare responsibilities. It is common for women to internalize the notion that they alone are responsible for these functions, and that they may only begin to think of their own personal development after their family has been 'taken care of'. Although the South African women were also preoccupied by concerns around their children, they spoke out forcefully about the unjust division of labour. They expressed anger and frustration rather than compliance and resignation at the roles which women which have been conditioned and pressured to fulfill.

In the international literature women consistently report concern with helping children with homework and increasing respect from family members as motivators to pursue education (Mwansa, 1996, Lind, 1996). This was also cited by the South African women but not as a first priority. The women were going back to school because they believed that they needed to for themselves. A desire for a better job coupled with increased independence and 'control over one's life' was often linked with a return to studies. Although employment is a major concern, there is scant evidence to show that increased literacy results improved employment opportunities. This does not deter women from their desire to educate themselves.

International studies and the interviews with the South African women confirm the highly sexist division of labour worldwide, and which is even more prevalent among the women I interviewed, all of whom were domestic workers. Susan Bullock's (1994) work is confirmed by the women I interviewed:

Although girls are increasingly likely to get some schooling, in poorer countries it may well be interrupted because they are needed to help at home, or to bring in extra income. (p. 89)

Stromquist (1990) calls for a deeper understanding of how the division of labour and unequal value of women's work has been normalized and internalized. She notes:

The contributions by feminist scholars to the understanding of the condition of women within all spheres of social and economic life have identified deep-seated causes for the subordination of women. (p. 97)

Interestingly, although the women I interviewed held inferior positions in society relative to the men, I did not have the impression that they had internalized feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis men. On the contrary, as we saw earlier, the women often spoke with an understanding of their own strength relative to men's failure to assume responsibilities as fathers and citizens. The women understood that the social structure underpinning women's lives placed women in an inferior position, unlike in The North American context where it may well be perceived that women's emotional condition and low self-esteem, are at the bottom of women's inferior position.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Factors that Affect literacy participation

This study examined the impact and meaning of literacy participation in the everyday lives of six South African women. In doing so, the effort was also to move from the findings and rhetoric of other feminist researchers writings in other social contexts. Quite simply, I wanted to know more about three key areas:

- private life of family, husband/boyfriends, children
- public life of work, literacy class
- dispositional factors such as self-concept, confidence, independence

I attempted to bring forward the 'meanings' and 'reasons' for literacy participation, firstly by locating them, and secondly by analyzing the sometimes contradictory role that they play in women's lives. Ever present was the sense that these factors are themselves influenced and shaped by gender roles.

There were many 'driving forces' behind women's literacy participation: hope, desperation, resistance, consent, need to escape, desire for control, and independence.

Literacy participation as an act of hope. All of the women I interviewed wanted to learn more - about everything. They wanted to know what goes on beyond their world of home and work, and what was happening in their country and the world. In some cases, they sounded as if they felt cut off. They wanted to know the world and, if possible, see it and "go anywhere". They especially wanted to be able to communicate better in English, as this, they said gives people more access to so many things - people, places, jobs. They wanted to read the newspaper and understand the television in English.

Evaluations of literacy programs often offer "good" reasons for why people want to learn to read and write. But it is not just about letter writing and reading the medicine bottle to administer proper doses to the children. More, it is about access to know what is going on around oneself, in the here and now, or as Paulo Freire said "to read the world". For Joyce one reason was to read the big words on the posters announcing the news headlines of the day. Regina wanted to understand what the madam was saying to be able to respond accordingly - to reply, and not just passively absorb, to be able to negotiate. Alda wanted to be able to argue with the ticket officer who tried to charge double the fare for a bus ticket to Johannesburg. The women wanted to read magazines and newspapers and to understand the laws that affect their lives.

All of the women hoped that improving their English literacy skills would somehow help them get a job or a better job. What else was going to help, given that these women's race, gender and class defined them as the most disadvantaged people in South Africa?

The women I interviewed wanted a better life for their children and they hoped to find better paying jobs by improving their literacy skills. For the women whose children were grown up, they hoped to gain their children's respect through educating themselves. The women were often pleased by the admiration they received from people in their lives - their older children, siblings, uncles, aunts, boyfriends, husbands, friends and employers.

Occupying the most disadvantaged margins in South African society and seeing very little chance of escaping this position in their lifetimes', the women I interviewed wanted to do things that they felt could improve their situations, or how they felt about themselves. 'Learning' does this. The women all felt better about themselves since returning to school. When I visited classes at the South African Museum and USWE, I consistently came away with the impression

that the women were respected and listened to by their trainers. The trainers had a social conscience and awareness of the issues in their students' lives. I never once heard a trainer speak about low attendance negatively. Rather, they spoke with admiration when the students were able to make it to class. The trainers were aware of the difficult conditions that their students lived.

The women were, in some cases, isolated and marginalized. This is not because of their lack of literacy, as literacy rhetoric would conclude, but because of their lack of money to get out. In some cases the women are relatively new to Cape Town and were without family or friends in the region. The women enjoyed the social interaction and the possibility of making friends which literacy class can offer. Through, and with, other women they may receive emotional support, a network leading to a job and just the chance to be themselves. Literacy class helped the women to feel less alone with their problems. In class women usually meet other women who share similar concerns.

Literacy participation as an act of desperation.

Unemployment can mean extreme poverty in South Africa for an African woman on her own. It is worse for those with young children. Both Lungelwa and Nomsisi were desperate to get jobs. Whether or not literacy classes can help in this way is questionable, but it certainly can't hurt their chances, and at the same time it can provide 'something else' in their lives.

Poverty restricts social interaction and movement. It also creates mental and physical health related problems caused by poor nutrition and stress. Literacy classes which are close to home and free offer one of the few social gatherings that poor women can attend on a regular basis. Lack of money for transportation was frequently cited as a deterrent from literacy participation.

Women feel responsible to their children and want their children to value learning and the importance of education. There is little that they can give their children in a material sense, but they believed they could try to instill values in their children which may help them when they are older. They can be an example to their children that learning is important and necessary.

Attending literacy class provides an alternative to the boredom and isolation of domestic responsibilities. A literacy class, like any social gathering allows women the space to forget about their problems, or provide a forum to discuss their problems.

Three of the women I interviewed were not living with their children but they were lonely for them and worried about them. Literacy class helped them by providing a place to build their life independently, unrelated to children. The unemployed women especially had the feeling that they must "do something." This frustration was in part addressed by joining a literacy group. More than once it was mentioned that when men are unemployed they drink and get into trouble. The women I interviewed were preoccupied with doing something useful that could improve their situation rather than worsen it. They did not drink excessively or get into trouble.

Literacy participation as an act of resistance. The women I interviewed often wanted to improve their lives and their knowledge about the world. Some of the women were very confident and proud of themselves, others appeared to be a bit shy *and* proud and confident. This "shy and proud" seemed like a contradiction which was difficult to understand. The women in Horsman's study often came across as shy and *not* proud, even ashamed. One member of the South African parliament remarked (Lawson, 1992) "Why is it that you have such amazingly strong women. Then when you put them in a meeting with men they don't participate?" (p. 44). This comment reflects the

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norms governing what women and men can do and say while in mixed groups. The term "amazingly strong women" described the feeling I often had about the women after an interview. And yet women's position relative to men continues to play a silencing role in the public sphere. From a 'westerners' perspective that silence may indicate a lack of voice but perhaps the silence speaks volumes.

According to Lawson (1992) "Women are socialized to be shy in the outside world - to support men but not to compete with them. This socialisation goes on throughout life." (p. 44) One worker said: "we are always shy to talk in front of men. You've got this thing of custom where women cannot stand up in front of men and tell them what to do." (p. 10)

English literacy can help women challenge and resist the "socialisation for shyness" that they grew up with. Literacy class provides a site where women can practice their ideas and use English in a safe and supportive environment. This can in turn affect the image that other people have of them; as was observed with certain employers and family members of the women I interviewed.

The trainers at Masifundisi were aware that literacy participation is sometimes an act of resistance against controlling husbands and boyfriends. Although it was not a factor for the women I interviewed at that time in their lives, they were often cautious and even fearful of men disrupting their lives.

The women I interviewed did not stop carrying out their domestic responsibilities because they were participating in literacy classes. But the fact that they spent time in other pursuits, 'for themselves' was in defiance of women's prescribed roles of always caring for 'others'. Doing something for themselves was made easier when the women's children were grown up or not living with them. Going back to school was a way for the women to counteract

the fact that they had to leave school as girls. It was a way to address a past injustice. Regina said:

"Now all women can go to school here...now have many places for learning...and free like the Museum and USWE. So now, things get better and we can benefit from all these things...because before..was not schools for us."

This feeling was common among the women I interviewed, after all these years they intended to take full advantage of any opportunities available to them which they had previously been denied.

The women were respected and listened to in the literacy classes and, as students, they could finally be on the receiving end of something positive. This is in contrast to their work lives where they serve other people for meagre wages, with little consideration in return. Freedom of speech in a literacy class can be an act of resistance to the position that domestic workers are accorded on the job.

Literacy participation as an act of consent. To some extent the women who participate in literacy classes are acting in concert with what the government is telling people they need to do. South African dominant discourse through the media promotes the belief that people need literacy to become active, responsible and productive members of the community and good parents. In contradiction with the dominant discourse developing in South Africa about the need for literate citizens lies a concrete reluctance to invest in adult education. The *Cape Times* of February 25, 1997 reported that "less than one percent of the national education budget was spent on adult education." (p. 4)

The chairperson of the Adult Educators and Trainers Association of South Africa has argued for increased spending on adult education, accepting the dominant discourse that illiterate parents may not be good parents, not the

kind of parents who support their children's education. He states: "Full value for the billions spent on children's education will only be achieved when those children go home to adults who understand, enjoy and encourage learning" (Cape Times, Feb. 25, 1997). Does this mean that only adults who are now participating in adult education programs understand, enjoy, and encourage learning? Literacy participants may in part be 'consenting' to western ideology which portrays non-literate non-participants as deficient parents. South Africa may eventually succeed in creating such a negative ethos around 'illiterate' parents that women will adopt the kind of self-blaming and shame that the Maritime women expressed in Horsman's study.

In stark contrast to the above discourse the women I spoke with showed an immense amount of concern about their children's schooling. Regina and Alda, who have older children, often spoke about their children's education. The women who had younger children, Nombulelo and Nomsisi, felt confident that now, finally, their children would have a chance to be better educated in the 'New South Africa'. Lungelwa expressed a great deal of concern about her children because they were living with their father and she had limited access to them.

Literacy participation to gain control/independence. The women I interviewed felt that participating in literacy, improving their skills, and becoming more knowledgeable about the world helped them gain more independence and greater control in their lives. English literacy in the homes where the women worked, as in the union movement, facilitated a measure of control and increased power. The women believed that literacy could help them find a better job and help them in their jobs. Independence is of primary importance for women's survival as Bernstein (1985) notes:

The enormous gap between the idealised theory of the family and the brutal reality under apartheid has resulted in the emergence of the independent women. (p. 43)

The trainers at Masifundisi remarked on the women's increased independence vis-à-vis domestic relations with family members and husbands. Women's desire for increased independence and control over their lives appears to be universal.

Literacy participation to escape. Literacy class may provide an escape from the home, family, housework, and general harassment in life for women in South Africa. Male oppression in the work place (Lawson, 1992) limits women's rights and advancement. Women may want to escape oppression in the home:

Many unhappily married women suffer, unable to take any action, knowing that if their husbands desert or divorce them, they may lose their right to live with their children as well. (Bernstein, 1985, p. 41)

Literacy classes are safe havens for women.

Given the position and condition of the majority of African women, they have reason to want to escape their homes for a few hours a week. Their homes are generally very small, or very noisy, empty or too crowded. Literacy class is a place where women can go and be themselves, and not be expected to cook, clean and take care of other people. In the lives of domestic workers, aside from their home and their employers' homes, it may be the only place where they aren't expected to do domestic work and to cater for other people. In a literacy class, they can *sit down*.

Factors affecting continued participation in literacy programmes can contradict each other. The factors that encourage or discourage participation

they are not fixed - they can and do change. A mother may be motivated to go to literacy class 'for the children's sake', but these same children can also prevent her from going to literacy class because the time away from them is a worry. General deterrents include: lack of time, money, energy, transportation, children, men, work, and self-esteem vis-à-vis-education. But some of these deterrents are *also* motivators - at the *same* time. It is difficult to return to school with low self esteem *but* its is a good way to improve self esteem. The women sometimes expressed doubt or lack of confidence regarding their limited education, but they did not express lack of self-esteem about themselves in general.) The relationship between motivators and deterrents is dialectical, always in flux and responding to internal and external factors in the women's lives. These factors are highly gendered, revolving around their domestic work, children and limited financial resources.

The 'meaning' of literacy participation is a tapestry of the above motivators and deterrents. The 'meaning' behind literacy participation is never one thing, one goal, one reason or aspiration. The meaning could only be uncovered by peeling away the intricate layers behind all the different 'reasons' that women gave for participating *despite* all the deterrents.

Gender, Literacy and power in the context of development

Women in developing countries have often been described as subordinate based on their inferior social position as measured by educational attainment, occupation and income. This is coupled with a male -centred understanding of women's experience steeped in the western/capitalist context (Smith, 1990). Neither has western feminism been particularly responsive to the realities of women in developing countries. (hooks, 1994, Mohanty, 1991)

Women in with low literacy skills have often been described as having low self-esteem and lacking independence. Issues of poverty and structural inequalities that underpin women's educational attainment are often not scrutinized . Kathleen Rockhill (1985) and Jennifer Horsman (1989) suggest that women with limited education may lack an objective understanding of events in their lives which limited their education. They note the impact of dominant discourse on women's understanding of their own lives; the tendency to blame the individual for failures rather than the conditions that result in failures. The women they interviewed frequently echoed the perceptions of social workers, teachers and society at large regarding 'illiterate' people. Horsman, Rockhill, Smith (1990) et al., noted that women often feel guilty and inadequate as mothers if they define themselves, as they are defined by others, as illiterate. Often they blame themselves for having made "bad choices" in their lives, which resulted in their subsequent poverty and illiteracy. The dominant discourse which blames the victim is echoed by the "victims" who blame themselves.

The dominant discourse on motivation vis-à-vis literacy links attendance and passing exams to motivation. This link overlooks the biased and overburdened circumstances of women's lives which include the distorted division of labour in the household around domestic chores and childcare and their underpaid waged work. Women with limited literacy skills often internalize what the dominant class in society wants people to believe - that illiteracy is the fault of the non-illiterate - not of class, race, or gender oppression.

Self-blame not only exonerates the system and the powerful, it deprives women of the power of 'subjective knowledge' with which to critique and resist the role of victim. It leaves women feeling powerless, out of control of their own

destiny, and dependent on others. It maintains and perpetuates dependence on men, teachers, welfare, and the medical profession who wield authority and power over women's private and public lives, sometimes in abusive ways.

In the context of South Africa I glimpsed a 'subjective knowledge' which differed greatly from the ethnographic research (Horsman, Rockhill, etc) pertaining to women and literacy. I interviewed six African women in the Cape Town area who were participants in literacy programs, while employed or looking for employment as domestic workers. None of the women had more than a few years of schooling as girls. In contrast to the typical profiles regarding women in literacy programs, I encountered the following striking differences.

1. None of the women used the dominant discourse paradigm to describe their early school leaving. All of the women said that they had no choice around their school leaving. The reasons they gave were poverty, illness and marriage/pregnancy. In one case where a woman had her first child at 13, she did not blame herself, rather it was her lack of access to knowledge about contraception and pregnancy.

The women did not blame themselves for their lack of education. They cited the overwhelming structural inequities which generated or occurred concurrently with poverty, sexist roles in the home, and poor health which forced them out of school. They also cited political forces such as apartheid education (Bantu Education) and laws limiting employment, (White and Colored Preference Laws) and the Group Areas Act which dictated where people could live based on their color. The women constructed and interpreted their own experiences from their own subjective understanding of the circumstances of their lives. They knew that they grew up with extreme oppression and injustice which was slowly being corrected by the new Government of National Unity.

2. The women did not denigrate their own intelligence. They never referred to themselves as stupid. They never said or alluded to feelings of inadequacy as mothers. The women frequently referred to their personal improvement through literacy as "getting better", "understanding more", "able to communicate better", along with general comments of self-satisfaction and well-being related to their progress.

3. The women did not see men as all-important figures with legitimate authority. They spoke with agency about their experiences and their concerns, and they were, for the most part, independent and self-reliant, albeit low-income earners. They did not express emotional or financial dependence on men. In one case, where the woman had previously been financially dependent on her husband, she found herself destitute after the divorce. They did express disapproval about men's reluctance to fulfill their responsibilities as fathers.

Literacy activists and learners in South Africa may be able to build on the power of subjective knowledge and authority that women appear to have developed. Either unaware or resistant to the dominant discourse around "illiterates", South African women look for ways to address what their knowledge over their own experience tells them; that their material circumstances and social positions are the result of structural injustices.

A great deal of power exists in the knowledge that one's social position in society is unjust and that the injustice is socially validated. This is the essence of what "conscientization" aims at. Feelings of powerlessness are linked to a lack of social and therefore personal validation and acknowledgement. In the Horsman study the women had a "blame the victim" understanding of their own lack of literacy skills. This is not surprising given that their circumstances of structural inequality are not validated by the society around them, nor by themselves.

Dorothy Smith (1990) explains how self knowledge can be an important form of power:

As the line of fault along which women's experience breaks away from the discourses mediated by texts that are integral to the relations of ruling in contemporary society, a critical standpoint emerges. We make a new language that gives us speech, ways of knowing, ways of working politically. At the moment of separation from established discourse, the objectified forms of knowledge they embody become critically visible. (p. 11)

From a developmental standpoint the "objectified forms of knowledge" and sense of self-worth and strength that South African women possess as revealed through this study cannot be overlooked. Literacy teachers, policy makers and programme directors who are influenced by dominant discourse may assume that learners have low-self-esteem, are dependent and in need of "empowerment". They may not understand the extent of personal strength that learners possess. Women's resistance as well as subordinate position shaped their self-concept. Progressive, conscientizing discourse around literacy has created its own set of assumptions which do not do justice to the consciousness of some South African women. The women I interviewed in the Cape Town area did not conform to Paulo Freire's description: (in Bullock, 1994)

**Self-depreciation is a characteristic of the oppressedSo often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness."
(p. 96)**

In contrast, Bhola's (1994) position rings true:

The teacher who regards illiterates as ignorant and marginal commits 'a sin against the mind', feigning to disregard the fact that mere survival has caused such pupils to display tremendous character, intelligence and know-how and filled their minds with a culture of truth and knowledge. (p. 115)

It is a valuable learning experience to go to literacy participants to hear what *they* have to say about their position and condition in society, and how they understand the development of the circumstances of their lives.

In the case of South Africa I found that a greater exposure and more profound inquiry into the subjective realities of women's lives reveals that although women's power and strength may not be visible in an economic or political sense, their sense of power and importance is very present as subjective, embodied knowledge that is mediated throughout daily life. While it may be true everywhere that, as Horsman said, women's lives are socially disorganised around other peoples' needs making it difficult for women to prioritize their own education, the historical, political, economic and social circumstances in South Africa have purposefully resulted in limited literacy skills for many African people. The reasons for 'illiteracy' are socially legitimated. The dominant discourse in South Africa cannot argue that African people made bad choices around their education. As this study demonstrates, limited illiteracy in South Africa is socially validated, and understood, therefore non-literate people may be less inclined to blame themselves for their limited literacy.

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