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**Viewpoint**

# A Snapshot of Adult Education in Nigeria

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Although it has been nine years, I still remember Rakiya (pseudonym), as if it were yesterday. After all, although I knew that there were adults who lacked foundational academic skills, she was the first person to make me genuinely think about the prevalence of low adult literacy in Nigeria. She was nineteen years old when she came to work for my family in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. She had arrived from a rural village in northern Nigeria and came to my city in search of better economic opportunities. Due to her lack of access to any formal education as a child, she had extremely limited options and could only qualify for jobs involving physical labor. A church member who knew that my parents were seeking a housekeeper eventually connected her to us.

Growing up in Nigeria, I was surrounded by a rich mix of ethnic groups, each speaking their unique language (for example, my family is Yoruba, so we mainly spoke Yoruba at home, while Rakiya is Hausa and therefore spoke Hausa). English, as Nigeria's official language introduced during British colonization, is used in schools, formal settings, and for communication between people from different regions. Therefore, even though I was raised speaking my native language, I was taught as a child to become fluent in English because it was the language of education and public life. However, because Rakiya did not attend school as a child, she knew only Hausa and no English. Therefore, for Rakiya, in addition to not possessing rudimentary reading, writing, and numeracy skills, her inability to speak English also limited her job options.

Rakiya did not share her academic difficulties with my family. Instead, it was through my daily interactions with her that I quickly realized her inability to read, write, or perform basic arithmetic. One day, Rakiya asked me shyly to teach her some basic English words. We started with greetings like "Good morning" and "How are you?" Once she saw that I was more than happy to teach her, she asked me to teach her how to count money, how to recognize numbers, tell time, and perform simple addition. I also taught her how to hold a pen and write different letters of the alphabet. Although she initially felt embarrassed by her lack of academic knowledge, she remained determined to grow. Every new skill that she mastered brought a big, proud smile to her face. These foundational skills were instrumental in enabling her to eventually pursue training as a hairstylist and manicurist. After five years, she left my family and returned to her hometown to start a small hair styling and nail manicure business.

## Adult Education in Nigeria

Unfortunately, there is a prevailing societal belief in Nigeria that adults like Rakiya are responsible for their lack of academic knowledge and are therefore often labeled as lazy, unmotivated, or disinterested in education, rather than recognizing the structural barriers that hindered their educational opportunities as children (Aderinoye, 2008). Although the Nigerian government officially provides free primary education, there are additional costs such as textbooks, uniforms, Parent Teacher Association dues, and transportation, which make schooling inaccessible for low-income households (UNICEF, 2022). These financial barriers are a major reason many children from poor backgrounds in Nigeria never attend school. In addition, due to discouraging societal attitudes toward children who grow up to be adults without basic academic skills, people like Rakiya typically have no interest in joining adult literacy classes. In fact, most Nigerians (both educated and uneducated) do not view adult education as valuable. Unfortunately, Nigerians hold a widespread belief that

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adults are "too old to learn" and that education must occur in childhood (Preece & Hoppers, 2011).

The widespread issue of low adult literacy and numeracy in Nigeria remains a pressing concern, particularly among underserved populations segmented by gender, location, age, and wealth. Gender disparities are especially striking. For instance, while the national literacy rate for individuals aged 15 and over is approximately 62%, this figure masks a significant gender gap: 70% of men are considered literate, compared to just 53% of women (FAWCO, 2022). The situation is even more alarming among older adults. Among Nigerians aged 65 and above, only 28% are literate: 40% of men and a mere 18% of women. Many females, like Rakiya, grow up without attending even a single day of school. In many parts of Nigeria, girls are often required to assume domestic responsibilities from as young as age six, and by their teenage years, they are often expected to marry. As a result, many girls either never enroll in school or drop out early (Saka, 2019; UNESCO, 2022; UNGEI & Girls Not Brides, 2021). [1]

Geographic disparities also play a significant role in literacy rates throughout Nigeria. Adults in rural communities often have limited access to education due to inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and long distances to the nearest school (Aderinoye, 2008). This results in substantially lower literacy rates in rural areas compared to urban centers. For example, 86% of men in urban areas are literate, compared to just 59% in rural areas. Among women, the gap is even wider: 74% in cities are literate, whereas only 35% in rural areas can read and write (UNESCO, 2022)

Economic status further compounds this divide. Numeracy skills, which are essential for daily functions such as handling transactions, show a marked disparity based on household wealth. Only 44% of adults aged 50–59 in the poorest households is considered proficient in numeracy, compared with 63% among their wealthier counterparts (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2022). [2]

Adults who decide to attend adult literacy classes often experience social stigma when they attempt to return to learning environments that were never designed for them. Adult education programs often operate under models meant for children or younger students, failing to account for the unique needs, schedules, and life experiences of adult learners (Preece & Hoppers, 2011). This mismatch can make adult learners feel out of place, embarrassed, or even ashamed to participate. In many communities, returning to school as an adult is seen as a sign of past failure, which further discourages enrollment (UNESCO, 2020). Without inclusive, flexible, and respectful approaches to adult education, many continue to feel excluded from opportunities for growth and empowerment.

Despite the widespread need for adult education, the Nigerian government has done little to make it accessible. Only a few adult literacy programs in Nigeria are run and funded by the government. Instead, the majority are organized and supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, or local community-based initiatives (Olawale & Olabisi, 2024). In some Nigerian states, faith-based groups and international partners have launched learning centers and vocational training programs designed to be flexible and culturally acceptable for women.

While these efforts are valuable, they are often limited in scope and resources and rarely reach remote areas where education is most needed. However, even when these programs are available, adults face multiple obstacles, such as shame, rigid schedules, limited resources, and a lack of transportation, that make participation difficult.

## Adult Literacy Initiatives

Notwithstanding the challenges, efforts are underway to provide basic skills programs that empower adult learners, especially women. For example, the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC: https://www.nmec.gov.ng/) is a federal agency

1 Note: The terms "literate," "can read and write," and "proficient in numeracy" are used by the cited sources without clearly specifying the level of competence (e.g., third-grade, secondary, or expert-level ability). These terms should be interpreted with caution, as they may represent different thresholds across reports.

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tasked with coordinating policies, programs, and initiatives to promote mass literacy, adult education, and non-formal learning across Nigeria. NMEC works to establish literacy centers, develop instructional materials, and train adult education facilitators. The agency also collaborates with state governments and civil society organizations to implement literacy campaigns targeting out-of-school youth, women, and marginalized populations. However, its impact is often limited due to inconsistent funding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited personnel, especially in rural and underserved regions (Olawale & Olabisi, 2024).

The Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA; https://www.wrapanigeria.org/) is an NGO that addresses the educational and socio-economic needs of women, particularly in northern Nigeria. WRAPA provides functional literacy and numeracy programs tailored for women, often integrating these with human rights education, reproductive health awareness, and legal support services. The organization emphasizes culturally sensitive approaches, such as engaging religious and community leaders to promote girls' and women's education in conservative communities. Another key NGO is the Literacy Enhancement and Advocacy Project (LEAP Africa; https://leapafrica.org/), which focuses on leadership training, education, and capacity-building. LEAP Africa offers literacy-based interventions as part of its broader mission to equip young people with the skills needed to become socially responsible leaders. Programs often include reading clubs, entrepreneurship training, and life skills development. LEAP also engages in advocacy work, pushing for policy reforms to improve access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities across Nigeria.

While non-governmental initiatives are important, they are not enough on their own. Their reach is often limited to urban areas, and they often rely on donor funding that is neither stable nor long-term. Many programs lack curricula, trained facilitators, and follow-up support for learners. Most importantly, they often fail to center the voices and needs of adult learners themselves in the learning environment (D'Angelo, et al., 2023). Adult learners are not just beneficiaries; they are key stakeholders whose lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and learning goals should help shape program design and delivery. Without adult learners' input, the programs become irrelevant. Many adults, especially in rural areas, remain unreached, not because they are unwilling to learn, but because the system continues to overlook their realities, silence their voices, and ignore their potential. However, the broader structural barriers must also be addressed. Learners' interests and willingness to learn are important, but they must be matched with accessible opportunities.

## Challenges to Adult Literacy Education

Nigerian adult education advocates question why there is such an excessive dependence on NGOs. In other words, why is the government not doing more? Education is a basic human right, and yet adult basic learners are often overlooked in national policy and budgeting decisions. While the Nigerian government has signed on to global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; https://sdgs.un.org/), which call for inclusive and equitable quality education for all, the reality on the ground tells a different story. The SDGs consist of a set of 17 goals established by the United Nations to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and education by 2030; however, implementation at the national level has often fallen short. Despite Nigeria's commitment, achieving this goal has been hindered by limited funding, weak policy enforcement, and infrastructural challenges (United Nations, 2015). Without clear policies, dedicated funding, and a serious commitment to making adult education accessible and respected, adults like Rakiya will continue to fall through the gaps. The government must take real action by investing in childhood and adult education programs, training instructors and facilitators, reducing stigma, and ensuring that no one, regardless of age, gender, wealth, or region, is denied access to quality education.

To address the challenges facing adult education programs in Nigeria, several promising models from other African countries could offer insights. For instance, South Africa has implemented effective community-based health literacy initiatives that provide accessible, culturally relevant education to underserved populations (The Status of Financial Education in Africa, 2012). These programs often combine basic literacy with practical knowledge, such as HIV awareness and healthcare

navigation, making them especially impactful in rural areas (Sørensen et al., 2024). As a result of sustained government investment in adult and non-formal education, Zimbabwe and Seychelles have implemented successful adult literacy campaigns, with an estimated 87.5% of Zimbabweans and 95.9% of Seychellois aged 15 and older who are now able to read and write. [3] These efforts have been instrumental in reducing generational literacy gaps and promoting functional literacy across both countries (CIA.gov - The World Factbook 2021; https://intelpoint.co/insights/adult-literacy-rates-of-african-countries/ ).

## Recommendation

The struggle for adult education in Nigeria is shaped by a mix of socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic challenges, including gender inequality, rural-urban disparities, and limited government support. While the government has made formal commitments through global frameworks like the SDGs, progress on the ground remains slow and uneven. For Nigeria to move forward, it must prioritize adult education through inclusive governmental policies, sustainable funding, and collaborations between government agencies, NGOs, faith-based groups, and local communities. Programs should be flexible, community-based, and delivered in local languages to better accommodate adult learners, particularly women and rural populations. Literacy instruction should also be functional and relevant, linking skills to everyday needs such as health, employment, and civic participation. By investing in the education of its adult population, Nigeria would not only address a literacy gap but also unlock the potential of millions to contribute more meaningfully to their families, communities, and the nation at large.

3 Note: The term 'can read and write' is used by the cited source without specifying the level of competence, and therefore should be interpreted with caution.

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