

Empowerment or Exclusion? How Socio-Cultural Barriers Shape Adult Learning in Community Learning Centres

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ABSTRACT

This study explores socio-cultural factors that hinder adult education through community learning centres (CLCs) by applying Bourdieu's Cultural Reproduction Theory. It shows how stigma, gender discrimination, financial limitations, cultural traditions, and the weakness of institutions combine to exclude the same groups from education. The qualitative method was chosen for the study. In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants aged 23 to 65, all of whom had between one and five years of learning experience. Each interview, which lasted for 30-40 minutes, was held in the CLC offices to provide an atmosphere of confidentiality. Thematic analysis of the data was carried out in line with Braun and Clarke's framework. The results demonstrate that stigma serves as a tool to reject adult education, as learners are frequently labelled as disadvantaged or "too old" to learn." Such perceptions result in learners feeling ashamed and thus they give up their efforts. The study also found that gender inequalities, which derive from patriarchal norms, overwork women by giving them more household chores thus limiting their growth, at the same time males resist and institutional bias favouring men suppresses females' views. Economic difficulties like those of transport fares and lack of materials act as a barrier to the participation of people coming from low-income backgrounds which leaves them to choose between education and other needs for survival. Culture has become a barrier that is deeply rooted in generational and gendered expectations whereby education comes after family obligations and community pressure stigmatizes girls who go beyond the limit in their education after getting married. Lack of proper facilities and equipment, poor financial management, and irregular teaching worsen these hurdles faced by learners in institutions. By focusing on learners' real stories rather than the analysis of the policy, this research shows the extent to which socio-cultural matters are determinative either of inclusion or of CLCs' empowerment. The researchers holds that the provision of adult education should not be mere token representation but rather culturally sensitive, gender responsive, and structurally, supported to clear away the obstacles and create equal opportunities for participation.

KEYWORDS: Adult education, socio-cultural barriers, gender inequality, lifelong learning, empowerment, exclusion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studies about adult education in the last ten years have shown how crucial Community Learning Centres (CLCs) are in increasing literacy, vocational skill development, and social integration. A significant amount of this research has, in fact, enhanced the transformative power of CLCs in the empowerment of the least advantaged groups and in the facilitation of lifelong learning programs (Emmanuel et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Worldwide, adult education programs are the major sources of the triple bottom line goals of poverty alleviation, gender equality, and democratic participation, which is why they are in line with the wider development goals. Looking at the South African situation, Baatjies and Hlatshwayo (2018) have observed the CLCs' role in democratizing education by giving access to the uneducated and underprivileged communities. These centres, therefore, have been

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described as the powerful instruments for solving the problem of educational disparities and opening the way for community development.

Existing research, while recognising these contributions, has largely concentrated on the program design, policy framework, and structural growth of the adult education system. The socio-cultural factors influencing learner participation have received little consideration. Tawana and Higgs (2021) maintain that stigma remains a significant issue, where adult learners are normally identified as those who need remedial help or are considered incapable of adjusting to the new requirements. Gender biased roles, further exacerbate the problem, as women are the ones who are mainly overburdened with household tasks, which restrict their participation in learning. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of transport not only aggravate the problems but are also barriers to sustained participation (World Bank, 2018). Though these problems have been acknowledged, very little has been done to critically assess how these problems intersect with one another and with cultural traditions and institutional weaknesses to result in continuous exclusion.

The difference between the policy goals and the actual lived experiences highlighted by this gap is quite significant. Despite the investments made by governments and international organizations in adult education, the effectiveness of these programs is still largely dependent on their success, and thus, it is not only a matter of access but also the capacity of these programs to break down deeply rooted socio-cultural barriers (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). Existing studies have not gone far enough in questioning the effects of stigma, gender discrimination, and cultural traditions interaction, leading to lower participation levels, and it has also not sufficiently explored how institutional inadequacies such as lack of infrastructure, insufficient funding, and poor-quality teaching exacerbate these issues. Furthermore, the earlier studies have largely relied on policy analysis and institutional accounts while giving less regard to the voices of adult learners themselves. The lack of learner, centered research means that the motivations, challenges, and lived experiences of adults in CLCs are the least of the researchers' considerations, thus creating a gap in understanding of how socio-cultural barriers are experienced at the individual level.

This research is significant as it has the potential to influence both policy and practice. By examining socio-cultural barriers to participation, the study can reveal the reality that this experience in the form of structural inequalities are not only political but are also deeply embedded in the everyday lives of adult learners. Overcoming these barriers is necessary. The study, therefore, acts as a medium for conversation on the topic of adult education and, thus, makes a unique contribution by providing a critical evaluation of socio-cultural barriers and suggesting strategies for increasing participation in CLCs.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

The research intends to find out how far cultural, social, and economic factors are behind the low involvement of adult learners in community learning centres and to develop strategies that would ensure inclusion and equity in these centres.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the predominant cultural, social, and economic barriers that hinder adult learners from engaging in Community Learning Centres?

How do these barriers manifest across different contexts and settings?

What strategies can be employed to address these barriers and promote greater participation in adult education?

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research employs Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Reproduction Theory to help in understanding the cultural, social, and economic barriers in adult education. Bourdieu was of the opinion that education systems reproduce social hierarchies by favouring those who have the dominant cultural capital and at the same time opposing those who do not have it (Nash, 1990; Tzanakis, 2011). The term cultural capital is used to describe the knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that are given high value by educational institutions, which tend to be the standards of dominant social groups. Speaking of adult education, it implies that learners coming from less fortunate backgrounds are often the ones that lack the cultural resources acknowledged by the institutions, thus, they have limited access to Community Learning Centres (CLCs).

The persistence of such dynamics is well documented in literature. Pienkosz, Petelewicz, and Piotrowska (2025) in their study revealed that socio, economic status and cultural norms have a very strong impact on adult learning outcomes, thus, maintaining the inequality ladder across generations. Groener and Land (2022) unveiled that adult education programmes in South Africa are not effective in breaking the existing social hierarchies, rather through institutional practices like poor infrastructure and lack of pedagogical resources, they continue to exclude. The issue of gender inequity, in turn, is a good example of reproductive mechanisms. Khosa (2023) supported this view arguing that patriarchal norms and domestic chores still act as barriers to women's progress, thus, illustrating Bourdieu's habitus idea, social structures determine individual dispositions and opportunities.

In addition, stigma can also be related to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, which covers the less obvious ways through which power is exercised via cultural norms and expectations. Adults going back to school are often thought of as slow learners or "too old" to study, thus their efforts are not recognised and they are discouraged (Akintolu, Uleanya, & Letseka, 2021). Such ideas help to keep the barrier going, by portraying adult education as something secondary or of less value, thus, it is denied being a real way of empowerment. This shows that Cultural Reproduction Theory helps to see how the barriers encountered in adult education are not just individual cases, but they have a systemic character. It points out that problems like stigma, gender inequality, and socio-economic constraints are not separate occurrences but are deeply ingrained in the structures of inequality that exist. Consequently, this framework serves as a base for the analysis of the obstacles to participation in CLCs and for the invocation of strategies that oppose reproduction rather than support it.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Stigma and Social Perceptions

Stigma is still one of the most spread socio, cultural barriers for adult education throughout the world, and this factor has been found to influence participation in different contexts. In Japan, adults often hide their literacy problems to not be ashamed, thus they do not attend formal programmes, and the exclusion cycle is perpetuated (Yamamoto, 2021). This phenomenon is a case where cultural perception of failure as well as insufficiency can silence learners and opportunities for their empowerment are limited. In the United States, adult learners are often treated as those who need remedial education in which, due to the undervaluation of adult education in society as a whole, working, class adults mainly decide to choose employment over study (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). And in the similar way, in South Africa, stigma is reflected in the opinion of adult education as a "last chance" that causes the loss of its trust and discourages the enrolment of learners (Tawana & Higgs, 2021).

Most importantly, stigma can be considered as one of the most insidious forms of symbolic violence which is a factor that is very important in Bourdieu's Cultural Reproduction Theory. Symbolic violence is when the groups which have a dominant position issue the meanings which delegitimize other groups, thus, exclude and reproduce inequality (Nash, 1990; Tzanakis, 2011). In relation to adult education, stigma is one of the reasons why learners' efforts are delegitimized, and they are even seen as failures rather than people who want to get empowered. Such a mechanism is not only cultural but structural as it shows a reflection of social hierarchies which favor some forms of knowledge and put others in the margins. Comparative insights show that, despite the fact that the stigma manifestations vary (shame in Japan, remedial perceptions in South Africa and undervaluation in the US), the effect is the same: less participation and persistence.

Adult education has been stigmatised for a long time and such stigma is generally associated with economic expectations whereby learning is viewed as less time available for income generating activities. Akintolu, Uleanya, and Letseka (2021) posit that adults in education may absorb the negative views of society regarding themselves, this in turn lowers their self-esteem and thus may lead to elevated dropout rates. Pienkosz, Petelewicz, and Piotrowska (2025) observe that economic background and cultural norms fold over each other when it comes to stigma, thus it perpetuates the issue of inequality and the limitation of access to educational openings. Groener and Land (2022) explain that schools, for example, through lack of proper facilities and irregular teaching, make the issue of adult learning delegitimizing worse, as they do not give sufficient challenge to this problem. The above-mentioned research in totality is an illustration of the fact that stigma is not a single case, rather it is a deep, seated structural obstacle in the socio, cultural contexts which surround it.

Stigma existence calls into question if Community Learning Centres are places that empower or exclude people. If adult education is still regarded as a kind of remedial education or something less important, then the learners will not really feel included. Therefore, tackling stigma goes beyond policy changes by also requiring a shift in culture that sees adult education as a real and valuable way of lifelong learning.

5.2 Gender Inequalities and Patriarchal Norms

Gender inequality is weighed as the main cultural, socio, and economic obstacle for adult education across Africa and beyond. The situation in Northern Nigeria shows that the majority of the female population cannot complete their education because of early marriage, gender-based violence, and scarcity of educational opportunities (Mshelia, 2021; Abera et al., 2020). The restrictions imposed on them are a perfect example of how patriarchal norms impact women by dominating the world of adult education and thus limiting access as well by the acts of focusing on housework and deepening the stereotype that women are to live in the domestic environment (Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2020).

Corresponding dynamics are happening in different parts of Africa. In Kenya, the culture around the raising of children dictates that this responsibility be given to the mother, and thus, women, cannot be part of lifelong education as this personal and career development becomes inaccessible to them (Wanjohi, 2022). In South Africa, ladies are most of the time the ones who carry the double burden i.e. household chores and educational commitments, which is why they find it difficult to persist and as a result, a

high rate of dropout, especially in Community Learning Centres, is observed (Khosa, 2023). These discoveries demonstrate that gender inequality is not limited to the specific region, rather it is a barrier that is behind the different African low, income areas.

The origin of the continued existence of these barriers is explained by Bourdieu's theory of habitus, which is the set of one's inclination developed through cultural expectations. Women's habitus usually identifies with housework and so educational participation becomes the second thing or even not suitable at all. This is a perfect illustration of Bourdieu's model that cultural norms serve to keep inequality alive by determining the extent of opportunities and expectations (Tzanakis, 2011).

Significantly, gender inequality in adult education is not only a problem of Africa. Women all over the world are faced with the same type of troubles, although the cultural expression is different. For example, in the industrial countries women may suffer from the juggling of career and family responsibilities, and in the African countries patriarchal norms and early marriages are predominant. The comparative evidence points to the fact that despite different specific manifestations, the final result is the same: women's participation in adult education is restrained which is a vicious circle of exclusion that exists in different settings.

5.3 Economic Constraints and Resource Limitations

Economic barriers are one of the things that limit adult learning, and they also affect the cultural norms that determine which adults can learn. Lack of money, transport, and support from institutions are some of the things that have been reported all over sub-Saharan Africa (Akintolu, Uleanya, & Letseka, 2021). In South Africa, the difference in resources between urban and rural Community Learning Centres (CLCs) areas leads to more exclusion as rural learners have to face poor infrastructure, lack of funding, and limited access to qualified educators (Maceke, 2025). These issues extend beyond the African continent. For instance, in the United States, adults' lack of sufficient funds is the major reason they don't enrol in continuing education programs, whereas in Japan, economic insecurity is the main factor that discourages learners from investing in education, despite the rising demand for lifelong learning opportunities (Yamamoto, 2021; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Economic barriers do not just sit there quietly; they interact with cultural and gendered expectations. For example, in Africa, poverty situation is intertwined with patriarchal structures, which makes women the most vulnerable to be left out. Generally, carrying out household tasks, in addition to having little financial resources, limit women's abilities to participate in adult education programmes (Khosa, 2023). Whereas, in industrialised countries, the presence of financial difficulties along with the existence of stigmatization and lack of time cause learners to shy away from acquiring more knowledge, thus giving up when they have work and family responsibilities at the same time (Pienkosz, Petelewicz, & Piotrowska, 2025).

Bourdieu's notion of economic capital can be of great value in giving an account for such scenarios. It is the case that learners who have limited money cannot easily find ways to turn the cultural aspirations into joining educational activities and therefore, inequality is further developed across generations (Tzanakis, 2011). Economic capital works together with cultural and social capital and hence, poverty doesn't only hinder educational access but also it puts adult learning at the same level with those who have a perception of being left out by reinforcing the view that those who are excluded are the ones involved in learning activities.

Moreover, the real, world examples serve to underline the tangible side of the obstacles that these might be. Musingafi (2015) discovered that the adults who were learners in different programmes across Zimbabwe, had come across many difficulties because of non-existence of teaching and learning facilities that in turn made instruction less effective and these learners were discouraged to remain in the courses. Such results demonstrate that the economic constraints issue is not only about individual affordability but also includes systemic resource limitations within institutions themselves.

5.4 Cultural Traditions and Norms

Worldwide, people are becoming more aware that culture is a determining factor that either helps or inhibits adults' decision to go back to school (Roberts Gotta, 2019). Very often, the culture is so deeply embedded in people's lives that it doesn't allow adults to resort to the priority of education. In Kenya and Nigeria, culture-based practices concerning family responsibilities and early marriages have been identified as the main factors that severely hinder the participation rate (Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2020; Wanjohi, 2022). In South Africa, the perception that adult education is for those who have failed previous studies leads to exclusion as the educational efforts of the learners are not recognised (Tawana & Higgs, 2021). Cultural expectations about age in many places also have an influence on this matter, and that is probably why old people are most of the time labelled as "too old" to learn, and this further pushes them away from participating and solidifies the existence of the views that are against the idea of inclusion (Akintolu, Uleanya, & Letseka, 2021). On a global scale, cultural capital is the main factor that decides who is considered as a "real" learner, and this causes the disadvantaged groups to be at the margins and their educational goals to be undervalued (Tzanakis, 2011; Pienkosz, Petelewicz, & Piotrowska, 2025).

All this evidence signifies that cultural traditions in any case still remain the main factors that bring about the issue of inequality reproduction through having roots in gender roles, stigma, or age-based expectations. Significantly, cultural norms are not frozen in time, and they change as per the social development. For example, changes in the labour markets and globalization have opened up new areas for lifelong learning, but cultural traditions are often behind these changes and thus, adult education programs are not

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in sync with the realities of the communities (Groener & Land, 2022). But most adult education programmes, however, do not sufficiently engage with these norms, and thus the impact they have is minimal. For instance, programmes that overlook the influence of patriarchy in Africa have difficulties in attracting women whereas those that ignore stigma in Japan and South Africa are barely spoken of.

This exemplifies the need for pedagogies that are sensitive to cultural factors and do not simply dismiss the cultural traditions but rather actively involve them. There are convincing data that educational programmes which use indigenous cultural rituals, are considerate of community values, and confront the issue of exclusion are quite successful in keeping attendance and facilitating the empowerment process (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Yamamoto, 2021).

5.5 Institutional and Policy Challenges

Institutional weaknesses worsened by socio, cultural barriers have a major negative effect on the adult education system. One of the most serious problems of adult education in South Africa is the uneven quality and availability of Community Learning Centres (CLCs), which, in general, do not provide broad access to education, especially in rural areas where infrastructure and the required materials are lacking. Some adult education centres experience problems such as the lack of personnel, poor facilities, and weak institutional coordination (Akintolu, Uleanya, & Letseka, 2021). Emmanuel, Kimaro, Haruni, Machumu, Anja, Perpetua, and Kalimasi (2022) maintain that the central authorities' managerial and institutional framework is characterized by lack of political commitment to the implementation of adult education. They add that it happens even when it is recognised as being very beneficial for the welfare of the society.

The institution's internal setup shows the same problems. Dhlamini and Heeralal (2014) found that furniture in adult education centres was unsuitable, with chairs and tables too low, making learners uncomfortable. This shows that poor facilities and resources inside institutions reflect the same neglect found in policy, discouraging adults from taking part in education.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This research utilised a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews to explore socio-cultural barriers to adult education in Community Learning Centres (CLCs). A qualitative approach was chosen since it allowed for an in-depth and detailed understanding of the participants lived experiences, opinions, and their interpretation of adult education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were the best choice as they have the benefits of both a fixed structure and open-ended nature, thus, giving the researchers the possibility to investigate further topics as well as figure out the similarities and differences of the data obtained from different participants (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). The decision of this design aligns with the study goal to comprehensively explore the issues that are not only socially but also culturally dependent.

6.2 Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to select 15 adult learners attending CLCs. The sample included nine females and six males, thus, reflecting the gendered aspects of adult education participation. The participants' ages ranged from 23 to 65 years; hence the study could cover both the youth and the elder adult learners. Moreover, all of them had between one and five years of learning experience; hence, they were adequately exposed to institutional and cultural dynamics. Purposive sampling was the right choice because the research needed the most informative cases that could shed light on socio-cultural barriers (Palinkas et al., 2015). The differences in age, sex, and experience of participants enhanced the trustworthiness of the results as they provided a greater number of perspectives within the same institutional context.

6.3 Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in the offices of the learning centres in order to avoid any form of disturbances such as noise. The time of each interview was from 30 to 40 minutes. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions on stigma, gender roles, cultural traditions, economic challenges, and institutional support. By means of the probing questions, the interviewees were encouraged to give more detailed answers and the interviewer sought clarification of the responses. Audio recording was agreed upon by all the participants; hence, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim for the sake of accuracy. Doing interviews in places familiar to participants helps them feel comfortable and reduces distractions from others (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

6.4 Data Analysis

Data was analysed by means of thematic analysis in accordance with the latest guidelines of Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis was selected as it is very adaptable and is also appropriate for identifying the patterns in the qualitative data. The six stages involved in this process were: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating the first codes, searching for the themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and writing up. In order to ensure close interaction with the data,

the coding was done manually, and the themes were refined iteratively so as to capture both the semantic and the latent meanings. The researchers were also reflexive throughout the process and jotting down the assumptions and reflections as a way of lessening the bias.

6.5 Ethical Considerations

Approval for the study was granted by the university's ethics committee as well as the managers of the participating centres. Participants were provided with information sheets outlining the study's purpose, the procedures involved, and their rights. Prior to participation in the research, the participants were requested to give their informed written consent. In order to maintain confidentiality, the transcripts were anonymized and pseudonyms used in the reporting. Throughout the study, the researchers focused on credibility and trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of the findings was enhanced through member checking, whereby the participants looked through the summaries of their interviews to confirm correctness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was realized through giving detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was ensured through a complete record of all the methodological decisions, whereas confirmability was achieved through the use of the reflexive journal to minimize the researcher's bias (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

6.6 Limitations

Despite the richness of qualitative interviews, the study is limited by its sample size and location. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to adult learners all over South Africa or abroad. However, qualitative research is about deep understanding rather than statistical generalization. The research highlights the socio-cultural barriers faced by the CLCs and serves as a foundation for future studies, which may use mixed methods or larger samples to improve the generalizability of the findings

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented by themes and include participant excerpts, followed by the researchers' interpretations. To protect privacy, participants are identified by their centre and interview number (e.g., CA.S1 = Centre A Student 1). This coding system allows readers to follow the excerpts while keeping participants anonymous.

Theme 1: Stigma and Social Perceptions

Across all the centres, stigma was the main factor that prevented adult learners from going to the centres.

C A.S1: "People in my community make fun of me calling me out of touch to be in school. They tell me to be more practical and leave the learning to the younger ones."

This indicates the dominant idea of adult education as a kind of education for those who have failed or have not realised that it is a very common misconception that for adults to be in education is something secondary and to be laughed at by kids making the learners become more increasingly shy to participate in the class and reluctant in attending.

C B.S2: "Even my relatives ask why I waste time here instead of working. They say I should be earning money, not sitting in a classroom with books like a child."

This finding reveals that stigma is closely connected to the economic expectations, thus, it somewhat demotes education as a 'threatening' tool of the income generating activities. Stigma is a very negative thing that has been culturally and structurally ingrained for a long time to such an extent that it may be considered a case of Bourdieu's idea of symbolic violence. This is the process by which the ruling groups force their version of the world to be accepted and at the same time reject the versions of the oppressed groups (Nash, 1990).

C C.S1: "Sometimes I feel ashamed to say I am still studying. People think I failed before, and that I am trying to fix mistakes from my past. It makes me hide my books when visitors come."

When learners internalise the negative perceptions that the society has towards them, they eventually start viewing themselves in accordance with that stereotype. These societal attitudes alienate them, change their sense of self, and decrease their chances of engaging in education. Stigma is one of the main causes that support the discrediting of adult learning, it demoralises those who are willing to continue their education, and it deepens the gap of social inequality (Tawana & Higgs, 2021; Yamamoto, 2021; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Theme 2: Gender Inequalities and Patriarchal Norms

Gendered barriers could be found everywhere in these centres, most of all they were felt by female learners.

C C.S3: "Before coming here I have to cook, clean, and look after children. After finishing all these chores, I am really tired and I sometimes miss the classes because housework is never, ending. I feel like education is something that I cannot afford."

This finding shows how patriarchal norms and women's role in the household limit women's participation in the area, thus showing how education is positioned as subordinated to the familial obligations of women.

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C B.S1: “My husband doesn’t help me when I tell him I want to come here. Firstly, he says education is for children and that I should concentrate on the domestic chores. When I insist on going, he gets furious and thus I usually have to lie and tell him I am leaving for somewhere else if I want to go.”

The persistence of a male dominated system that refuses to concede power to women, especially through their education, is quite apparent in the way power is shared at home and which, in turn, limits the opportunities available. The social conditioning of women which is highly dependent on their cultural background, is very often a significant obstacle to their participation in the decision-making process and, most of the time, they perceive education to be an unsuitable activity or, at best, a risible one.

C A.S2: “Men get more respect in the centre. When women talk, their words are overlooked and sometimes, the teachers do not hesitate to pay attention to the men’s answers rather than theirs. It makes us feel invisible as if our voices don’t matter.”

This points to the gender bias being institutionalised in learning environments, the places where women's contributions are undervalued. Hence, the dynamics here lead to social exclusion even in the spaces that are designed to promote inclusion.

Women have been enclosed by systemic barricades which deteriorate their educational expediency. Particularly patriarchal norms and cultural expectations have been the major obstacles that limit women's access to adult education (Khosa, 2023; Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2020; Wanjohi, 2022). Even though the cultural manifestations of these issues differ, the fact is that women continue to struggle to combine education with domestic and professional duties. In Africa, for instance, premature marriages and patriarchal authority are the main obstacles that hinder the educational progress of women, whereas in industrialized contexts, time poverty and workplace discrimination are more common (Yewande & Olawunmi, 2023). All these factors, on the one hand, create a vicious circle of inequality and, on the other hand, discourage women from going further with adult education.

The problems mentioned above restrict women's access to education, thereby perpetuating exclusion and limiting the potential of adult education to make a positive difference. Solving them requires both policy measures and changes in culture that challenge the patriarchal norms and also acknowledge women's rights to lifelong learning.

Theme 3: Economic Constraints and Resource Limitations

Economic barriers were frequently mentioned across centres.

C A.S2: “Money for transport is a big problem. Sometimes I walk long distances to attend classes, and by the time I get there, I am totally exhausted. On days when it is raining, I do not attend because I do not have the money for the taxi.”

This finding indicates how poverty and lack of adequate infrastructure restrict people’s access and therefore their attendance becomes inconsistent and physically demanding.

C C.S1: “I want to continue, but I can't afford the fees and books. Even buying a simple notebook is a struggle for me, and sometimes I have to share school supplies with others. It makes me feel that education is only for the rich.”

The evidence indicate that financial constraints are described as the causes that directly lead to limited involvement of the learners and thus to exclusion, which is deepened due to the lack of access to even the most basic learning resources.

C B.S3: “If I skip work to come to class, I will not get my salary. I am in a tight situation to choose between school and the family because if I decide to go to school, my family will suffer, but if I pick work, I will be at a loss with my studies.”

Adult education learners are often in a dilemma where they have to choose between immediate economic survival and long-term educational aspirations. A study by Soloma (2018) shows that limited access to teaching and learning materials leads to a decrease in the desire to continue studies. Poverty and lack of resources have been found to affect women more, as they are burdened with household responsibilities and are financially dependent (Geleto et al., 2018). Besides these, transportation and financial difficulties make the situation worse, and thus, people who face these challenges become less likely to participate (Akintolu, Uleanya, & Letseka, 2021). In general, according to Bourdieu, economic capital is the main factor that determines whether cultural aspirations can be converted into participation in education. Without money, people’s involvement in activities decreases, and the gap between the rich and the poor becomes wider.

Theme 4: Cultural Traditions and Norms

Cultural traditions not only influenced the way people participated but also determined the activities available across different centres.

B.S3: “In my culture, after you get married, education is considered to be no longer necessary. People expect you to concentrate on the family, take care of the children, and serve your husband. If you insist on studying, people make rumours that you are neglecting your side of the work.”

This finding shows how cultural demands suppress adults to prioritize education and present it as an antagonistic factor to marital and family responsibilities.

A.S3: “Some community elders say that education is for children and not for adults. They tell us that at our age we should be working or leading the youth, not attending classes. I feel ashamed when they say so as if I am doing something wrong by studying.”

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This finding shows the influence of generational norms which discourage adult learning by suggesting that only children can be educated. These kinds of traditions create a barrier that makes people less likely to take part in education programs (Wanjohi, 2022; Tawana & Higgs, 2021).

C.S2: “If a woman keeps studying continually, people say that she is neglecting her family. They say that she is becoming arrogant or that she is forgetting her place. There are times when even women themselves; by saying I should go and stay at home rather than coming to class, criticize me.”

The above finding reveals how cultural traditions support patriarchal expectations thus restricting women’s opportunities and referring to education as a factor which destabilizes the family.

Women are still deprived of long-term education due to early marriages, domestic related duties and cultural traditions gradually one by one after those constraints had been widely destroyed in the world (Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2020). Although the cultural influences are different from place to place, in general, such traditions have a profound impact on adult education, as they continue to provide a framework for exclusion. Although the cultural traditions are not fixed and do change with social changes, adult education programs mostly do not recognize or confront these norms which is the main reason of their low effectiveness.

Theme 5: Institutional and Policy Challenges

Institutional insufficiencies are evident across all centres, undermining equity and participation in adult education.

C C.S2: “There are times when teachers are not available, and classes have to be cancelled. We keep waiting for a long time only to be told that we should go home. What is more, this situation gives a feeling of neglect. Our education is not taken seriously.”

This finding emphasised how weak institutional support may cause a drop in involvement, thus leaving those who learn frustrated and losing their motivation.

C A.S3: “The place is short of books and chairs. We do not learn well under such circumstances, and we have to share the materials and even sit on the broken furniture. It is as if we are the ones who have been left behind while the other centres are progressing.”

The finding reveal how infrastructural shortcomings may deter the learners and contribute to the double of inequality issue between adult education centres and mainstream institutions. Groener and Land (2022) stress that the quality and accessibility of CLCs especially in rural areas is not even and that this is one of the reasons for the deepening of exclusion.

C B.S2: “When the centre is not functioning well, I become indifferent. There are occasions when the classes get delayed or the timetable is altered without notifying us. They do not care about us, and I wonder why I should keep coming then.”

According to Maceke (2025), institutional neglect produces inequity by allowing well-resourced centres to benefit while learners from underfunded areas being disadvantaged. The material conditions have a very strong impact on the learner's experiences and if the facilities are inadequate for example the furniture is not suitable, the participation will be undermined (Dhlamini & Heeralal, 2014). The neglect can be traced to not only policy frameworks but also the everyday learning environments that have been poorly resourced and thus are less engaging due to bad resource allocation. There is a lack of sufficient political and financial commitment which, in addition to other factors, has the effect of making the adult education programmes less sustainable (Mushi, 2016). The truth is that even progressive policies will not work if there is no institutional capacity and community support. It is therefore very important to have investment in facilities, staff provision, and political backing if we want to give adult education a place in society and make exclusion less.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results point to various areas where interventions could have a positive impact on adult education in Community Learning Centres. One of the first things that need to be done is to eliminate the stigma that surrounds this type of education. This can be done through awareness campaigns that present adult education as a lifelong learning process, public sensitization, and success stories of learners, while psychosocial support helps learners to overcome the stigma inside themselves. Gender inequalities need to be addressed by providing such things as flexible schedules, childcare support, and gender, sensitive pedagogy, as well as engaging men and community leaders in the work of challenging patriarchal resistance. It is possible to lower the economic barriers by providing subsidies, transport allowances, and free materials, together with offering flexible scheduling and income, support initiatives that will enable people to balance study with their survival needs. To eliminate the cultural barriers, it is vital to engage with the traditions through culturally responsive approaches that not only respect local norms but also help in integrating local practices and challenging those who hold that learning from certain stages of life is the only way. Strengthening of Institutional capability through financial resources, personnel, and infrastructure, as well as the support of politics and a steady organisation, can be the main factors that help to maintain the drive and the authority needed to achieve the purpose. These steps highlight that adult education must be culturally sensitive, community-driven, and supported by government to remove barriers and promote equitable participation across Community Learning Centres.

9. CONCLUSION

The research deeply looked into the cultural, socio, and economic barriers that affected adults who were learning in Community Learning Centres and discovered that the barriers of stigma, gender inequality, limited economic resources, cultural traditions, and weaknesses at the institutional level combined together to hamper participation of adults. Learners' voices explained that communities often delegitimize adult education, place patriarchal expectations on it, weaken it through poverty and limit it by lack of adequate infrastructure. These barriers are systemic and thus, over time, they reproduce inequalities and not only influence learners' identities through external pressures but also through internalized stigma. Taking a critical view, the research found that along with addressing the cultural and social realities of the learners there was no way adult education could succeed. The results suggest that policy reforms, community involvement, gender, sensitive practices, institutional investment, culturally responsive approaches, and psychosocial support should all be parts of the holistic intervention package designed to ensure that participation in adult education is sustained. In the end, adult education should be more than mere symbolic gestures; it should become a powerful vehicle capable of empowering individuals, strengthening communities, and advancing social justice.

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