

Brian Street – comments [to the e-consultation on the upcoming Gender Equality Strategy](#)

The recently published *OECD Skills Outlook (2013)* Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), has provided important evidence on which International Literacy Campaigns in general and those concerned with gender inequality in particular can build. In the Foreword, Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, suggests that there is ‘*one central message emerging from this new survey, it is that what people know and what they do with what they know has a major impact on their life chances ... The Survey shows that higher levels of inequality in literacy and numeracy skills are associated with greater inequality in the distribution of income, whatever the causal nature of this relationship. If large proportions of adults have low reading and numeracy skills, introducing and disseminating productivity-improving technologies and work-organisation practices can be hampered; that, in turn, will stall improvements in living standards*’. Consequences for policy and action, the report argues, are clear:

**Much of learning takes place outside formal education.  
So it is important to Make lifelong learning opportunities accessible to all.**

David Mallows, Director of Research at NRDC - National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, notes that *Less than 2% of participating UK adults scoring entry-level and level 1 have participated in adult education & training recently* and he draws an important conclusion from this:

*This suggests that we need to increase participation, but also that a more radical approach to supporting informal learning, in the workplace and beyond, may be part of the solution*

These responses to the Survey have implications for the UNDP Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017. On gender issues the PIAAC report states:

**On average, men and women use their skills in different ways, partly because of their jobs.**

*With only a few country exceptions, the survey shows that men use literacy and numeracy skills at work more frequently than women, on average. Differences in skills use between men and women may be the result of gender discrimination, but they can also be due to differences in literacy and numeracy skills and/or in the nature of the job. For instance, if literacy and numeracy skills were used less frequently in part-time jobs than in full-time jobs, this may explain part of the difference in skills use between genders, as women are more likely to work part-time than men. This reasoning could apply to occupations as well, with women more likely to be found in low-level jobs that presumably require less intensive use of skills. When these factors are taken into account, differences in skills use by gender are smaller. The results confirm that gender differences in the use of literacy and numeracy skills are partly due to the fact that men appear to be slightly more proficient but also that they are more commonly employed in full-time jobs, where skills are used more intensively. At the same time, this is not the case when the type of job is taken into account; when it is, the differences in how men and women use their skills at work are larger. One explanation is that while women tend to be concentrated in certain occupations, they use their*

*skills more intensively than do the relatively few men who are employed in similar jobs.*

So, the implications of this more complex view of gender and literacy are considerable and need to be built into policy developments. For instance, there is not necessarily a one to one relationship between gender and literacy levels, rather that relationship is mediated by social factors – for instance, if part time work and low-level jobs mean lower literacy skills and women are more likely to be found in such work, then gender inequality in literacy levels follows. The APPG on Global Education for All will, then, need to take on board such complexity in addressing the concern that ‘women’s literacy remains one of the most neglected areas of the Education for All agenda’. For instance, the document entitled ‘Empowering Women through Education: challenges and strategies’, like the PIAAC Report and the NRDC commentary, makes ‘the link between women’s literacy and other development priorities – such as girls’ education, gender equality, and health’.

The message I read from all of this is that policy needs to link issues of gender equality with recognition of the understanding of social factors, such as informal learning, and equality of access to higher level jobs. What this means, then, for those of us working in the literacy field, including Balid, APPG, NRDC etc, is that it is the uses and meanings of literacy practices in real social contexts that are crucial, not simply autonomous measurement of levels and technical skills in literacy. More literacy classes of the formal kind will not, in fact, sort out the inequalities. Rather we need to advocate *support for informal learning, in the workplace and beyond*, and the various organisations listed here that are working in this field need to come together to highlight this message.

OECD 2013 Skills Outlook: Survey of Adult Skills, a product of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

David Mallows, 2013 Response to PIAAC (Director of Research at NRDC - National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy)

UIL 2013 Literacy And Women’s Empowerment: Stories Of Success And Inspiration Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)