

Adult Literacy Programmes and Women's Empowerment in Rural Communities of Enugu State, Nigeria: An Integrative Review

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ABSTRACT

This integrative review examines how adult literacy programmes contribute to women's empowerment in rural Enugu State. Using Kabeer's resources, agency, and achievements framework and Freirean conscientization, it synthesises studies, policy texts, and programme reports from 2004 to 2025. Evidence from Nsukka, Enugu East, Uzo-Uwani, Oji River, Enugu North, and statewide female-learner samples shows that basic and functional literacy improve reading, numeracy, market access, savings groups, household bargaining, rights awareness, and civic participation. Gains are constrained by underfunding of the Enugu State Agency for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education, irregular facilitator pay, thin rural coverage, household labour burdens, and weak post-literacy links to credit. Literacy is necessary but not sufficient: outcomes are stronger when classes are joined to livelihood skills, group savings, gender-responsive pedagogy, and political commitment.

Keywords: *adult literacy; women's empowerment; rural communities; Enugu State; functional literacy; Kabeer framework; non-formal education*

1. Introduction

Literacy is both a human right and a development resource. The 2030 Agenda places adult literacy at the junction of Goal 4 and Goal 5. Of more than 750 million non-literate adults worldwide, about 63 percent are women (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2025). Nigeria's National Policy on Education defines mass literacy, adult and non-formal education as functional education outside the formal school system (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2013). The National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education (NMEC), established in 1990, coordinates the effort, and each state operates an agency. Enugu created its Agency for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education by State Law No. 4 of 1991 (Ozurumba et al., 2014).

Enugu records comparatively high formal-school participation, yet gender and rural gaps persist. Nigeria Living Standards Survey 2018/2019 figures show English literacy among Enugu females substantially below that of males, and rural women in Igbo Etiti, Uzo-Uwani, Awgu, Aninri, Ezeagu, Udeni, Isi Uzo, and parts of Nkanu and Oji River remain the main clients of adult basic education (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2019; Acha et al., 2024). Enrolment is not empowerment. Following Kabeer (1999), this review treats empowerment as the expansion of women's capacity to make strategic life choices where that capacity was previously denied. The review asks how programmes are organised in Enugu, how they expand resources, agency, and achievements, what constraints limit outcomes, and which designs would strengthen the literacy and empowerment link.

2. Conceptual Framework

Adult literacy here means the ability of persons aged 15 and above, outside formal school, to read, write, and compute with understanding and to apply those skills to everyday tasks (FRN, 2013; UNESCO, 2005). Functional literacy links those skills to livelihood, health, civic, and household practice. Kabeer's resources are material, human, and social preconditions of choice. Agency is the process of defining goals and acting on them. Achievements are the outcomes, including income, health practice, and political voice. The framework fits Freire's

(1970) view of literacy as conscientization, learning to read the word and the world, and Stromquist's (2009) argument that literacy empowers only when it is a political and pedagogical process, not a technical package.

The pathway assumed here is that participation increases human and social resources, which expand agency in record-keeping, price negotiation, savings, and public speech, which in turn produce livelihood, welfare, and civic achievements. The pathway breaks when classes collapse, husbands restrict attendance, skills are not linked to markets, or the state treats adult education as a residual sector (Aghamelu, 2020; NMEC, 2026).

3. Method

The study is an integrative review (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), suited to survey studies, qualitative reports, policy texts, and evaluations in the absence of one statewide dataset. Sources were drawn from ResearchGate, repositories of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Enugu State University of Science and Technology, the Journal of Continuing and Development Education, DVV International, UNESCO, NBS reports, and recent programme accounts. Inclusion required a focus on adult or functional literacy, women or mixed adult learners in Enugu or a named Enugu area, an empowerment-related outcome, and publication between 2004 and 2025. Twenty-two core documents form the evidence base. Findings were coded to Kabeer's three dimensions and to delivery constraints. Sample sizes and mean ratings are reported where authors supplied them. The review organises existing field studies; it does not replace primary fieldwork.

4. The Enugu Literacy Landscape

Enugu State has 17 local government areas. Each is, at least on paper, served by adult education centres supervised by the Enugu State Agency for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education, working under NMEC guidelines (Acha et al., 2024; Nkemjika, 2024). National policy assigns adult education concurrently to federal, state, and local governments, with local governments responsible for implementation. An early 2010s account listed 412 adult literacy centres, 42 non-formal education centres, and 24 radio-literacy communities. The same source noted that funding crises had closed most centres, leaving only six local governments functional, with 3,310 learners and 324 facilitators (Ozurumba et al., 2014). Later studies describe a rebuilt but still fragile system. Acha et al. (2024) enumerated 2,671 adult female learners, with rural sites including Igbo Etiti, Uzo-Uwani, Awgu, Aninri, Ezeagu, Udenu, and Isi Uzo. Nkemjika (2024) identified 116 adult basic education centres and 580 facilitators statewide, plus 228 agency staff. The learner population remains modest relative to the estimated stock of non-literate rural women.

The 2010 National Literacy Survey put women's English literacy in Enugu at 58.1 percent, below Imo at 76.1 percent and Abia at 69.8 percent, against a south-east zonal average of 67.5 percent (NBS & NMEC, 2010). The Nigeria Living Standards Survey 2018/2019 recorded English literacy among Enugu females at 67.2 percent in one broad age grouping, compared with 83.4 percent among males, with the gap widening among older cohorts (NBS, 2019). Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey compilations have placed youth female literacy in Enugu below that of some sister south-east states. These series are not perfectly comparable, but they converge on two facts. Enugu is

not the least literate south-east state, yet rural and older women remain disproportionately excluded from print culture and from English-medium official life.

Literacy does not operate alone. In 2025 the Enugu State Government signed a subsidiary loan agreement for the World Bank Nigeria for Women Project, to be implemented through the Ministry of Children, Gender Affairs and Social Development. The project is designed to improve livelihoods through women affinity groups, grants, financial-literacy training, and entrepreneurship support (Ogundeji, 2025). That architecture matters for this review because literacy raises the demand for credit and record-keeping, while affinity groups supply the social form in which those skills can be used.

Local innovations point the same way. In Enugu North, a 2025 adult-education revival opened five centres, at Hilltop Ngwo, Broadricksoal Camp, St. Luke's Ogui Nike, New Haven Primary School, and Udi Road, combining basic, junior, and senior secondary equivalency with vocational modules in tailoring, soap making, and carpentry (Ekwueme, 2025). Godfrey Okoye University and the NigerWives Association have piloted intensive literacy for home assistants and caregivers (Godfrey Okoye University, 2024). These initiatives enlarge the opportunity structure within which literacy skills can be converted into income and status. They also show that a municipal template already exists, and that the constraint is coverage and continuity rather than the absence of a model.

5. Findings

5.1 Resources

The most consistent finding is a gain in human capital. In Nsukka, Ozurumba et al. (2023) surveyed 181 learners and 19 facilitators ($N = 200$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .916$). Mean ratings were high for reading and writing (3.18), business calculation (3.19), reduction of illiteracy (3.11), and assimilation of new knowledge. In Enugu East, Mmuozoba (2022) drew 461 usable responses from a Taro Yamane sample of 480 and concluded that basic literacy improved livelihood to a great extent, through record-keeping, market confidence, and household provisioning. Acha et al. (2024), from 348 of 2,671 female learners, linked literacy and vocational add-ons to group enterprise and market access. Onyishi (2004) had already found that 86.7 percent of sampled Nsukka women joined adult education, 96.7 percent generated funds through monthly contributions, and a majority took loans through associations formed around classes. Ofornagoro (2022), with 211 rural adults aged 30 to 65, found a positive association between adult literacy and health-promoting behaviour.

5.2 Agency

Acha et al. (2024) reported greater awareness of domestic violence, widowhood rights, and civic engagement, a Freirean rather than purely labour-market effect. Ukwuaba (2015), surveying 68 community development officers, found that community education advanced women's literacy, but collaboration among communities, government, NGOs, and religious bodies was weak. Odenigbo and Uzoagulu (2025) treated political self-improvement, including reading notices and speaking in town unions, as part of community development. Agency is rationed by time. In Oji River, low attendance was linked to workload, poverty, family duty, unsupportive husbands, and

curricula unmatched to women's stated needs (iProject, 2024). The power to attend class is itself an agency outcome.

5.3 Achievements

Achievements in the Enugu corpus cluster around livelihood, household welfare, and modest civic gains rather than a large-scale transfer of land, political office, or household authority. Mmuozoba (2022) concluded that rural women in Enugu East improved their livelihood through basic literacy. Ozurumba et al. (2023) found that functional literacy promotes competence, releases potential, builds self-esteem, and supports employment and job creation. Acha et al. (2024) linked programmes to wealth creation through women's groups and market access. Onyishi (2004) treated poverty eradication as the dependent construct and identified literacy, vocational skills, agricultural and health extension, and loan schemes as the working parts of adult and non-formal education in Nsukka communities.

These achievements should be read carefully. Most Enugu studies use descriptive surveys and self-report scales. They show perceived improvement among women who already enrolled, not experimental effects against women who did not. Egbo's (2000) earlier Nigerian fieldwork is a useful caution: literate rural women enjoyed a wider set of life options, yet they did not automatically become community leaders, and non-literate women were often ambivalent about classes because extreme poverty made attendance costly. Empowerment in Enugu looks real but bounded: incremental livelihood and awareness gains, not a wholesale redistribution of power.

5.4 Delivery constraints

The same literature is candid about system failure. Funding is the binding constraint. NMEC officials have repeatedly said that weak political will at state and local levels undermines adult education, even though Section 18 of the 1999 Constitution and the concurrent list assign responsibility downward (NMEC, 2026). In Enugu, earlier centre closures left large rural tracts without classes (Ozurumba et al., 2014). Agency visits to Uzo-Uwani communities in 2020 still had to plead for enrolment and stakeholder support (Ikem, 2020).

Human resources and learning conditions are uneven. Nkemjika (2024) examined NGO contributions with 164 actors drawn from agency staff and facilitators, and located motivation, money, and supervision as recurring problems. Ozurumba et al. (2023) recommended qualified vocational facilitators, grants for centres, and rooms with ventilation and usable desks. Where facilitators are unpaid or paid late, classes become intermittent and learners leave. Curriculum mismatch is a third constraint. Women in Oji River and similar rural areas disengage when content is not tied to trading, farming, or household enterprise (iProject, 2024). Centres that fold soap making, tailoring, and market numeracy into the literacy day retain learners (Acha et al., 2024; Ekwueme, 2025).

A fourth constraint is weak articulation with finance. Literacy raises demand for credit. Without affinity groups, micro-grants, or the Nigeria for Women Project, newly literate women remain locked out of working capital (Ogundeji, 2025; Onyishi, 2004). Monitoring data are also thin. NMEC has called for stronger collaboration and more credible non-formal statistics (NMEC, 2026). Enugu studies use local samples, and there is no public

dashboard of female enrolment, completion, and post-literacy employment by local government. Without that record, empowerment claims cannot be tracked.

Table 1. *Core Enugu studies informing the review.*

Study	Sample	Main finding used
Onyishi (2004)	Nsukka, 150 women	Savings groups and loans linked to poverty reduction
Ukwuaba (2015)	17 LGAs, 68 officers	Community education advances literacy; collaboration is weak
Mmuozoba (2022)	Enugu East, n = 461	Basic literacy improved livelihood to a great extent
Ofornagoro (2022)	Rural adults, n = 211	Literacy associated with health-promoting behaviour
Ozurumba et al. (2023)	Nsukka, N = 200	Literacy supports livelihood, belonging, and socio-economic life
Acha et al. (2024)	Female learners, n = 348	Rights awareness and livelihood skills for group enterprise
Nkemjika (2024)	Agency and facilitators, n = 164	NGOs help delivery; funding and supervision constrain it
Odenigbo & Uzoagulu (2025)	Enugu State	Literacy supports economic and civic community development

Note. Designs are predominantly descriptive surveys of participants, not experimental evaluations.

6. Discussion

The Enugu evidence supports a qualified empowerment thesis. Adult literacy programmes enlarge rural women's resources, including literacy and numeracy, health knowledge, peer networks, and in some sites vocational skills. They expand agency by raising rights consciousness and, for some learners, civic voice. They produce livelihood and household-welfare achievements that participants themselves rate as substantial. These findings align with international syntheses showing that women's literacy programmes work best when reading is connected to earnings, health, and community involvement (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2025).

The qualification is equally important. Literacy is not a sufficient cause of empowerment. Kabeer's framework insists that resources must be converted through agency into achievements, and conversion depends on the opportunity structure. In rural Enugu that structure is shaped by household rules, thin rural markets, seasonal farm labour, and a residual adult-education budget. When centres close, the resource pipeline stops. When husbands forbid attendance, agency is blocked at the household gate. When graduates cannot obtain starter packs or group loans, achievements plateau at the ability to write a name and keep a small book.

Comparison with neighbouring evidence sharpens the point. Mbah (2016) found functional effects of adult literacy on family life, trades, and community roles among rural women in Ishielu, Ebonyi State, an adjacent setting with similar agrarian livelihoods. Aghamelu (2020) argued nationally that rural women's illiteracy feeds vulnerability, exploitation, low self-esteem, and poverty, and that literacy should be paired with better public budgets and private collaboration. Enugu does not need a unique theory. It needs more reliable implementation of a pathway that is already well understood.

Measurement is a second discussion point. Most local studies rely on researcher-made questionnaires and treat a mean above 2.50 on a four-point scale as high extent. That convention is common in Nigerian education faculties, but it is weakly suited to strategic life choices: whether a woman can refuse a harmful widowhood rite, control farm proceeds, or contest a local-government budget line. Future Enugu research should combine domain measures of household decisions, mobility, assets, and political participation with literacy assessments and, where feasible, comparison groups of non-participants.

A third point is intergenerational. UNESCO has long documented mother-and-child and family-literacy models in Nigeria that treat women's literacy as an input to children's schooling and household health (UNESCO, 2016, 2017). Enugu studies mention children's welfare indirectly, through family living standards, but rarely measure children's enrolment or learning as an outcome of maternal literacy. Closing that gap would strengthen the public-finance case for the state agency, because benefits would be shown to spill into the formal school system that already commands a larger share of the education budget.

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

First, the Enugu State Government should treat the state agency as a core poverty-reduction and gender-equality body rather than a residual unit. Predictable funding for facilitator stipends, learning materials in Igbo and English, and centre maintenance is the precondition for every other recommendation. NMEC's insistence that state performance determines national literacy results applies directly here (NMEC, 2026).

Second, literacy should be joined by design to livelihood and finance. Affinity groups under the Nigeria for Women Project, state enterprise programmes, and local vocational modules should recruit from adult-literacy centres, and centres should recruit from those programmes. Graduates of basic literacy need a documented pathway into post-literacy, skills training, and starter support.

Third, pedagogy must be gender-responsive. Class times should follow farming and market calendars. Facilitators need training on domestic-violence referral, widowhood rights, and participatory methods, rather than primary-school chalk and talk. Community education officers, town unions, churches, and women's meetings should be formal co-owners of mobilisation, addressing the collaboration deficit identified by Ukwuaba (2015).

Fourth, rural local governments with thin coverage, particularly parts of Uzo-Uwani, Aninri, Ezeagu, and Isi Uzo, need targeted restoration of classes, including radio and mobile post-literacy for women who cannot travel. The 2025 Enugu North five-centre model is a replicable municipal template if it is paired with vocational kits and childcare during class hours (Ekwueme, 2025). Fifth, a state information system should publish, at least annually, female enrolment, completion, facilitator numbers, and a short module of empowerment indicators by local government.

8. Limitations and Further Research

This review is limited by the design of the underlying studies. Many are single-area descriptive surveys with self-report instruments and samples of existing learners, so they over-represent women who already overcame the barriers to enrolment. Accounts of the 2025 programme revival have not yet been evaluated with learner-level outcome data. Official literacy statistics use shifting definitions, any language versus English and different age bands, which complicates trend analysis. Grey literature on centre counts is also uneven, and figures from the early 2010s and from 2024 should not be read as a single time series.

Further research should compare participants and matched non-participants in at least one rural and one peri-urban local government, measure empowerment with multi-domain scales alongside literacy tests in Igbo and

English, and trace post-literacy trajectories for 12 to 24 months, including business start-up, savings, and children's schooling. Budget-execution analysis of the state agency would show whether political commitment is more than a line in the law. Participatory work with women's groups would also test whether Freirean pedagogy produces agency gains beyond those of conventional basic literacy, particularly on widowhood rites, domestic violence, and voice in town-union meetings.

9. Conclusion

Adult literacy in rural Enugu contributes to women's empowerment, but unevenly and under institutional strain. Evidence from Nsukka, Enugu East, Uzo-Uwani, Oji River, Enugu North, and statewide female-learner samples shows gains in resources, agency, and livelihood that women value. Those gains are undercut by underfunding, centre attrition, unpaid facilitators, restrictions on women's time, and weak links to credit. Literacy should be treated as the human-capital and conscientization core of rural women's economic and political inclusion, not as an educational residual. Enugu already has the legal agency, university departments, emerging local models, and a women-livelihood architecture. What remains is to fund the centres, join the pathways, measure outcomes honestly, and keep rural women, not only enrolment ledgers, at the centre of the enterprise.

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