

## IMPLICATIONS OF CONFLICT PARADIGM ON THE EMPOWERMENT OF ADULT LEARNERS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA

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### *Abstract*

*This study looks at how the conflict paradigm affects adult learners' empowerment in Nigerian rural areas. The conflict paradigm, which has its roots in Marxian sociology, sees society as being marked by power struggles, inequality, and competitiveness, all of which have an impact on educational achievements and access. Adult learners in rural Nigeria frequently encounter systemic obstacles that limit their chances for empowerment, including poverty, gender inequity, cultural norms, and a lack of government assistance. The study emphasizes how adult education can be a place of contestation as well as a tool for emancipation by utilizing the conflict paradigm. On the one hand, it highlights how unequal distribution of chances and resources can cause educational systems to perpetuate social inequality. However, it also highlights how adult education may change lives by increasing critical consciousness, encouraging group action, and enhancing social and economic involvement skills. The paper concludes that conflict paradigm remains highly relevant in understanding empowerment through adult education. By foregrounding issues of inequality, class struggle, and power, it provides a critical lens for examining how adult education can either entrench existing disparities or serve as a platform for transformation.*

**Keywords:** *Conflict Paradigm, Empowerment, Adult learners, Rural Communities, Nigeria.*

### **Introduction**

In Nigeria, adult education is essential for tackling the problems of poverty, underdevelopment, and illiteracy, particularly in rural areas where formal education is scarce. Adults can enhance their quality of life by taking use of the chances it offers for social interaction, skill development, and lifetime learning (Aderinoye, 2004). With the aim of giving them the literacy, vocational, and civic skills necessary for survival and involvement in local

development, adult education programs in rural areas frequently target marginalized groups like women, farmers, and young people without jobs (Omolewa, 2007).

Since empowerment promotes independence, active engagement, and the capacity to confront social and economic injustices, it is essential to community transformation. Adult education equips rural residents with the information and abilities needed to participate in profitable economic endeavors, stand up for their rights, and participate in group decision-making (Brookfield, 2013). In this way, adult education not only lowers poverty but also fosters critical consciousness, which empowers communities to hold people accountable and take an active role in politics.

The conflict paradigm holds that disparities in wealth, power, and access to resources essentially shape society and is based on Karl Marx's understanding of class struggle. Later theorists like Coser (1956) and Dahrendorf (1959) broadened this viewpoint by highlighting the fact that conflict is not only unavoidable but may also spur social change by opposing repressive systems. While acknowledging the promise of education as a weapon for emancipation, the conflict paradigm's application to education emphasizes how unequal access and control of educational resources can perpetuate societal inequities.

Access to adult education is greatly impacted by differences in political power, gender roles, money, and cultural customs in rural Nigerian communities. A fuller comprehension of how social structures sustain exclusion and how education can act as a vehicle for confronting such disparities is made possible by seeing empowerment through the conflict paradigm (Apple, 2012). The paradigm emphasizes how adult education may serve as a tool for emancipating underprivileged populations as well as a way to perpetuate societal structures.

The purpose of this study is to explore the implications of the conflict paradigm on the empowerment of adult learners in rural Nigeria. The study aims to shed light on the opportunities and difficulties associated with using adult education as a tactic for community change by examining the relationships between power, inequality, and education. It is important for promoting policy proposals for equity-driven, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive adult education programs that can empower rural learners, lessen systemic inequality, and support long-term community development in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **Conflict Paradigm**

A sociological viewpoint known as the conflict paradigm sees society as a system marked by rivalry, inequality, and the fight for limited resources. It highlights the conflict between dominant and subordinate groups, where resources and power are not allocated fairly, and has its roots in Karl Marx's writings. Conflict is not only unavoidable but also a catalyst for societal transformation. According to the conflict paradigm, while education can be a site for empowerment and resistance, unequal access to learning opportunities may also perpetuate societal inequalities (Apple, 2012).

### **Empowerment**

The process through which people and communities take charge of the choices and resources that impact their life is known as empowerment. Participating in social, political, and economic organizations, gaining knowledge and skills, and boosting self-confidence are all part of it (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment in adult education allows students to confront

oppressive systems, take advantage of economic opportunities, and actively engage in community development (Brookfield, 2013). Therefore, empowerment is a process that promotes independence and societal change on both a personal and a community level.

### **Adult Learners**

Adult learners are those who participate in official or informal education after they reach the conventional school age, usually with the goal of enhancing their literacy, life skills, or vocational abilities. They frequently attend school while juggling obligations to their families, communities, and workplaces (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Farmers, traders, women, and young people without jobs are among the adult learners in rural Nigeria who are looking for chances to enhance their literacy, develop new skills, and gain empowerment in order to survive socioeconomically (Aderinoye, 2004).

### **Rural Communities**

Low population density, inadequate infrastructure, and a reliance on subsistence farming and unofficial economic activity are characteristics of rural areas. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to healthcare, and poor educational facilities are among the issues that Nigerian rural communities frequently confront (Okafor & Onokerhoraye, 2010). Since these factors, adult education initiatives focus on rural populations since education is a powerful tool for development and empowerment in these underprivileged environments.

### **Conflict Paradigm and Adult Education**

According to the conflict paradigm, which has its roots in Karl Marx's writings and was later developed by theorists like C. Wright Mills and Ralf Dahrendorf, society is defined by constant conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups over limited opportunities, power, and resources. The conflict paradigm contends that education frequently reflects and perpetuates preexisting social inequities, in contrast to the functionalist perspective, which views education as a tool for fostering social harmony. According to this concept, adult education, especially in rural areas can be viewed as a place of conflict as well as a tool for sustaining or combating systemic injustices (Apple, 2013).

### **How Social Inequality Shapes Access to Education in Rural Communities**

Social inequality has a major impact on who can access educational opportunities in remote regions. Many adults' ability to fully benefit from educational programs is limited by gender inequities, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure (UNESCO, 2022). Marxist theory holds that in order to preserve their power and restrict the movement of oppressed groups, the ruling class frequently controls resources, including educational institutions (Marx & Engels, 1977). For example, systemic, cultural, and economic constraints often keep low-income earners and rural women out of literacy initiatives. This implies that inequality is intentionally created to uphold current hierarchies rather than occurring by chance.

### **Class Struggle, Power Relations, and Education**

Class conflict manifests itself in educational systems through curriculum design, policy implementation, and access. By legitimizing social structures and spreading prevailing ideas, schools and adult learning facilities may further the objectives of the elite (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). For instance, adult education programs in rural Nigeria could place more emphasis on

practical skills that meet urgent financial demands than on giving students the critical thinking abilities needed for social change (Oduaran, 2018). This illustrates how power dynamics influence the kind and standard of education provided, guaranteeing that marginalized populations continue to be economically beneficial but politically inactive.

### **Education as Both a Tool of Empowerment and Control**

Education has the power to change inequity, but it may also perpetuate it. Paulo Freire (1970) contended that education might be utilized as a tool for liberation, promoting critical consciousness (*conscientização*), or as a tool for dominance, through what he dubbed the "banking model of education." Accordingly, adult education in rural areas has two distinct personalities: when it is structured to preserve the status quo, it can reinforce social inequality; but, when it is centered on critical and participatory pedagogies, it can also empower underprivileged populations (Brookfield, 2005). For example, literacy and skills training can challenge the inequalities that limit rural adults by giving them opportunities for political engagement and self-reliance.

### **Relevance of Conflict Paradigm to Adult Education**

A helpful theoretical framework for comprehending adult education and empowerment in rural Nigeria is the conflict paradigm. According to this viewpoint, education is a disputed space where social injustices are both perpetuated and challenged rather than being a neutral activity (Giroux, 2001). When access is restricted to specific groups, adult education programs have the potential to perpetuate social inequalities. However, they can also be a weapon for emancipation by bringing oppressed groups together for collective action and generating critical consciousness. Using the conflict paradigm reveals the transformative potential of adult learning in fostering empowerment, equity, and social justice while simultaneously highlighting the structural obstacles that prevent rural adults from accessing education, such as poverty, gender inequity, and political marginalization.

### **Empowerment of Adult Learners in Rural Communities**

The multifaceted idea of empowerment entails giving people the ability to take charge of their life and actively engage in decisions that have an impact on their communities. By equipping adult learners with skills that generate revenue, economic empowerment improves livelihoods and lowers poverty. In order to take collective action as a community, social empowerment entails bolstering networks, solidarity, and self-confidence (Narayan, 2002). While cultural empowerment encourages respect for indigenous knowledge systems and participation free from cultural domination, political empowerment gives disenfranchised adults the opportunity to demand accountability from leaders and influence governance (Brookfield, 2005).

### **The Role of Adult Education in Skills Development and Poverty Reduction**

One of the most important tools for giving students the practical skills they need to be independent is adult education. Programs for literacy and vocational training improve access to jobs, entrepreneurship, and agricultural productivity in rural areas (UNESCO, 2022). Oduaran (2018) asserts that adult education, which imparts market-relevant skills and functional literacy, has played a pivotal role in Africa's rural transformation. Such programs, when well-designed, empower people to actively engage in community development activities and alleviate poverty.

### Barriers to Empowerment in Rural Settings

1. **Illiteracy:** In rural areas, high rates of illiteracy continue to be a major obstacle to empowerment. Many adults find it difficult to obtain information, use contemporary technologies, or take advantage of economic opportunities if they lack basic literacy abilities. People who lack literacy are more likely to remain dependent and have a harder time negotiating power dynamics.
2. **Gender Inequality:** Due to cultural conventions, early marriages, and household duties, women are frequently excluded from adult education programs in rural areas, where gender gaps are more noticeable. Their ability to make decisions and maintain economic independence is restricted by this exclusion (UNESCO, 2015). According to feminist researchers, attaining real empowerment requires tackling gender inequality in education (Moser, 2012).
3. **Poverty and Unemployment:** Because many rural residents place a higher priority on survival than education, widespread poverty reduces adult education participation. Due to the unclear rewards on skills acquisition, limited career options further deter investment in education (Todaro & Smith, 2020). This cycle hinders community development and perpetuates marginalization.
4. **Insufficient Government Regulations:** The success of adult education programs is frequently hampered by inadequate funding and weak legislative frameworks. Numerous programs in rural areas lack adequate funding, are not adequately supervised, and are not customized to meet the needs of students (Okediran, 2019). For example, adult education in Nigeria has historically received less funding than formal education, which lessens its ability to empower people and reduce poverty (Oduaran, 2018).

### Implications of the Conflict Paradigm on Adult Learners' Empowerment

#### Positive Implications

1. **Increasing Knowledge of Inequalities in Structure:** By emphasizing the structural aspect of social injustice, the conflict paradigm assists adult learners in seeing that their problems are systemic rather than just personal (Marx & Engels, 1977). This knowledge enables them to see how class differences, power dynamics, and cultural dominance restrict access to resources, such as education (Apple, 2013).
2. **Fostering Adult Learners' Critical Consciousness:** The conflict paradigm, which draws inspiration from Paulo Freire's concept of conscientização (critical consciousness), views education as a tool for students to critically examine their socioeconomic circumstances (Freire, 1970). This gives them the tools they need to challenge established power structures, oppose tyranny, and look for ways to improve their precarious circumstances.
3. **Promoting Advocacy and Group Action:** The transforming force of communal struggle is emphasized by the conflict perspective. Rural learners can demand responsibility from local and national authorities, create cooperatives, and advocate through adult education (Brookfield, 2005). For instance, community literacy initiatives in Nigeria have frequently acted as launching pads for group mobilization in local development and resource control (Oduaran, 2018).

### Negative Implications

1. **If education is politicized, existing inequalities will be reinforced:** Instead of challenging current disparities, adult education that is controlled by political elites may make them worse. For example, rather than equipping students with critical thinking abilities, programs may be exploited to further the ideology of the ruling party (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The emancipatory objectives of adult education may be compromised by this politicization.
2. **Marginalization of Vulnerable Groups:** The focus on power battles in the conflict paradigm can occasionally ignore the most vulnerable groups, including women, the elderly, and those with disabilities. If educational programs are not intentionally inclusive, these groups may become even more excluded (UNESCO, 2015).
3. **Disagreements Between Educational Reforms and Traditional Authority:** Traditional leaders and elders have a lot of power in many rural communities. These power structures may be questioned by adult education programs based on the conflict paradigm, which could result in opposition or conflict between reformers and those who preserve cultural traditions (Ake, 1981). These conflicts may restrict community acceptance and diminish the efficacy of empowerment programs.

### Strategies for Strengthening Empowerment through Adult Education

1. **Including Conflict-Sensitive Methods in Adult Learning:** Existing social tensions must be taken into consideration while designing adult education in rural Nigeria. According to Bush and Saltarelli (2000), conflict-sensitive education fosters communication between various groups and works to stop the perpetuation of inequality. For example, implementing culturally sensitive participatory learning techniques might lessen traditional leaders' reluctance while promoting inclusive empowerment.
2. **Improving Rural Communities' Access to Education and Vocational Skills:** Policies should address budget issues, teacher shortages in rural areas, and infrastructure deficiencies in order to emphasize fair access to adult education. Adults may overcome unemployment and poverty by increasing access to vocational training possibilities in areas including entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and agro-processing (UNESCO, 2022). Reducing gender gaps in access to skill development also requires programs specifically designed for women and underrepresented groups (Moser, 2012).

### Role of Government, NGOs, and Community Leaders

**Government:** The Nigerian government should undertake literacy initiatives linked to rural development projects, enforce gender-sensitive educational policies, and enhance budgetary allocation to adult and non-formal education (Okediran, 2019).

**Non-governmental organizations (NGOs):** By providing funds for community-based literacy centers, training facilitators, and launching creative empowerment projects, NGOs significantly support state efforts (Akinpelu, 2002).

**Community Leaders:** By encouraging participation, establishing changes as legitimate, and making sure that cultural obstacles do not exclude women and other vulnerable groups, traditional rulers, faith-based organizations, and local leaders should support adult learning programs (Brookfield, 2005). Furthermore, incorporating peace education into adult education programmes will aid learners in developing the negotiating, mediation, and conflict resolution

skills necessary to foster harmony in rural areas that are prone to violence. Similarly, based on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy approach, adult education should foster conscientização, or critical consciousness, so that students can identify and confront oppressive systems (Freire, 1970). In addition to empowering people, this dual strategy increases our collective ability to alter communities and promote lasting peace.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the intersection of the conflict paradigm and adult education with a focus on rural communities in Nigeria. It has drawn attention to how the conflict perspective exposes the systemic injustices that influence educational opportunities, the part power dynamics play in sustaining marginalization, and the dual character of education as a tool for both emancipation and control. Though enduring obstacles including poverty, gender inequality, illiteracy, and inadequate legislative frameworks continue to impede development, the empowerment discussion showed that adult education may improve the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of life for rural learners.

The conflict paradigm is still very applicable for analyzing adult education-based empowerment. By bringing inequality, class conflict, and power into the forefront, it offers a critical perspective for analyzing how adult education can either reinforce current inequalities or act as a catalyst for change. The significance of critical consciousness and group action as necessary elements of genuine empowerment is also emphasized.

In light of these insights, there is an urgent need for adult education policies that are egalitarian, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive. These policies ought to address gender inequality, give priority to underserved groups' access, and guarantee that rural regions receive enough funding. Furthermore, including critical pedagogy and peace education into adult education programs can turn education into a tool for communal development as well as personal empowerment. Adult education that is conflict-sensitive and equity-driven ultimately has the power to end poverty and marginalization cycles while promoting social justice and sustainable development in rural Nigeria.

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