

Literacy and Reconfiguration of Agency in Rural Ivory Coast: Between Capital Dynamics and the Social Transformation of Women in Alépé and Bondoukou

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ABSTRACT: The study examines how literacy influences the mindset and autonomy of rural women in Alépé and Bondoukou in Côte d'Ivoire. Drawing on a theoretical model inspired by Bourdieu's concepts of capital, Granovetter's social entanglement, and Sen's capabilities, this research analyzes the social applications of reading and writing as tools for action. A qualitative approach was implemented, based on eight individual interviews, four focus groups, and two interviews with supervisors. The results indicate that literacy strengthens cultural capital through the mastery of reading, writing, and mathematics, and then facilitates its transformation into economic capital through the management of mutual savings funds, access to microcredit, and entrepreneurial spirit. Ultimately, this situation produces symbolic capital, consolidating the recognition and social involvement of women in their various communities. Thus, literacy emerges as a tool for empowerment in rural areas.

KEYWORDS: Women's literacy, capabilities, social capital, agency, rural context.

1. INTRODUCTION

In rural areas of Côte d'Ivoire, women's literacy is not limited to providing them with reading, writing, and numeracy skills. It involves social processes within which economic, familial, and community relationships are forged. According to UNESCO (2015), adult literacy programs are learning spaces where individuals acquire the knowledge necessary to live better lives and interact more effectively with local communities. Furthermore, the Global Campaign for Education (2005) states that literacy enables individuals to acquire and practice reading, writing, and numeracy skills, which are resources for developing active citizenship, improving health and livelihoods, and promoting gender equality (Yéo, 2015, p. 3).

In rural areas where the household economy, rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), and agro-commercial networks constitute the main frameworks of activity, literacy and bookkeeping skills become a transactional resource, a means of accessing networks, negotiating social positions, and asserting agency. Studies conducted in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali illustrate that women's literacy programs have an impact through the social use of writing and reading in community and economic spheres. For example, a study in Burkina Faso showed that women's participation in functional literacy programs enables them to manage ROSCA accounts and collective transactions, thereby increasing their credibility within the group (Kaboré & Ilboudo, 2021). In Niger, integrating literacy into village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) helps make financial operations more transparent and fosters trust among members, thereby facilitating access to solidarity microcredit (CARE International Niger, 2019). In Mali, qualitative surveys have shown that literate women are more sought after for treasury and secretarial positions within rural cooperatives, allowing them to expand their social network and their presence in local economic circuits (Ilboudo et al., 2020).

More broadly in West Africa, empirical research highlights a mechanism of progressive conversion of cultural capital into social and then economic capital. In Senegal, Ndiaye (2021) observes that women who have participated in functional literacy programs are able to secure revolving loans and diversify their micro-activities— not only because of their technical skills, but also because of the trust they inspire in their communities. In Ghana, a longitudinal study by Boateng et al. (2022) shows that integrating literacy modules into village savings groups not only increases the financial viability of women's activities, but also strengthens their ability to negotiate within households, particularly regarding child-rearing and household income management. In Kenya, Kamau (2020) documents a similar phenomenon in rural literacy programs, where literate women become intermediaries between local institutions,

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NGOs and neighborhoods, occupying roles of "social brokers", capable of decoding institutional information, filling out forms and facilitating access to rights.

These conclusions align with Bourdieu's (1980) interpretation, which shows that literacy is a form of capital—in this case, cultural capital, but also social and symbolic capital—that can be used in relationships with others and converted into resources and opportunities depending on the context. Furthermore, as Granovetter (1994) reminds us, no economic organization exists in isolation from social relations: the benefits of literacy unfold within networks, relationships of trust, and community norms, whether these involve honor, respect, or reciprocal obligations. Socially and economically, knowing how to read, write, and do arithmetic becomes not only a marker that distinguishes oneself from others, but also an asset that allows each individual to find their place within the group and have it recognized by others. This is how reading, writing and arithmetic can enable women to be recognized as reliable in environments where reputation and reciprocal obligations are still the rules of the game.

Thus, the real impact of literacy depends on an ecosystem: women's networks, spaces of legitimate recognition, continuity of programs, community legitimacy, and the possibility of converting reputation into economic opportunities. It is precisely this chain of capital conversion—from literacy to trust, and from trust to economic bargaining power—that this study intends to analyze in the contexts of Alépé and Bondoukou. The aim is to understand how women, often positioned at the crossroads of family, community, and market dynamics, mobilize literacy as a social and symbolic investment to redefine their place in exchange networks, the family economy, and local institutional spaces.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to understand how women living in the rural regions of Alépé and Bondoukou use literacy as a social, symbolic, and economic lever to enhance their position within their families, communities, and local markets through their language skills. It examines the importance of writing in the process of enriching cultural capital: compiling lists and writing, gaining the trust of others, building a solid reputation, and ultimately accessing economic and institutional resources. This theoretical framework draws on Bourdieu's sociology of capital (1980) and Granovetter's concept of social embeddedness (1985), as well as Sen's capabilities approach (1999) applied to education.

In order to understand the representations, practices and social uses of literacy this study adopts a qualitative approach in accordance with the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998) regarding the exploration of social phenomena in Cree in experience.

Data were collected through eight (8) individual interviews with literate women, four (4) focus groups with women and monitoring of high-altitude programs, and two (2) semi-structured interviews conducted with community leaders and supervisors. The combined use of focus groups and interviews allows for the cross-referencing of collective and individual narratives, as recommended by Kalampalikis (2004) and Grawitz (2001) for qualitative social science research.

The discussions focused on:

- representations of female literacy;
- the everyday uses of writing in domestic and economic activities;
- the mechanisms of trust, reputation and social recognition linked to literacy;
- the dynamics of participation in tontines, AVEC ¹ and women's groups;
- resistance to women's literacy.

The collected data were fully transcribed and segmented into units of meaning. A thematic content analysis was used to identify regularities, underlying social logics, and the mechanisms of conversion of cultural capital into symbolic and economic social capital, in accordance with Bardin's method (2013). This type of analysis is recognized for its relevance in the study of social representations and practices in an African context.

The analysis focused on relating the collected discourses to the concrete dynamics of community and economic integration observed in the study villages, in line with the recommendations of Miles and Huberman (2003) for contextualized qualitative analysis.

3. RESULTS

The results indicate that literacy in reading and writing serves as a structuring catalyst for rural women in Alépé and Bondoukou. It improves their organizational skills and social status (3.1), then leads to economic prospects through more effective financial management and collective action (3.2). Finally, it generates recognition and legitimacy, encouraging their engagement in community and institutional spaces (3.3).

3.1. Cultural capital as a lever for women's distinction

In Bondoukou, women who have benefited from literacy classes have seen a significant improvement in their economic management skills. The ability to keep accounts, record their income and expenses, and understand prices during sales gives them

¹ Village savings and credit associations (VSLAs) established in rural communities as instruments of financial inclusion and economic opportunities for women.

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greater power to organize and plan their activities, even for cross-border purchases, which they frequently make. Literacy also provides them with a sense of confidence when dealing with suppliers, customers, or members of rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), and it gives them the courage to speak up during household financial meetings. Thus, access to reading becomes a key symbol of their empowerment: not only the regained possession of possessions, but also the restoration of confidence, social recognition, and economic legitimacy. All of this places them in a virtuous circle of trust, recognition, and economic legitimacy, which strengthens them both in their commercial activity and in their decision-making within the household. This is precisely what can be observed in this interview excerpt:

“Before going to the literacy center, I managed my business entirely on my own. I often got lost in my calculations, especially when I went to buy my goods in Bouna or Ghana. Now, I know how to write everything down: my expenses, what I earn, the money from the rotating savings and credit associations I participate in. I discuss things with my suppliers, I can check prices, and calculate things myself. People can see that I have a good grasp of my business, so at the market, people don't trust me anymore. Even at home, I know how to manage the budget, and now my husband asks for my opinion before doing anything.” (PK, literate woman, Alépé).

Literacy thus functions as a mechanism of social distinction. Indeed, it confers credibility, confidence and recognition on the women concerned; in fact placing them in a virtuous circle where mastery of writing, social respect and strengthening of the power to act feed each other.

From this ability to manage, negotiate and plan stems an identity manifestation: literacy in this case becomes a marker and status propelling these women progressively to the status of “modern woman” socially valued and recognized for their acquired skills.

Furthermore, the mention of respect testifies to the social recognition that accompanies this transition. Indeed, being able to “read the prescription” or “do the accounts” refers to socially valued everyday practices traditionally perceived as belonging to the literate or institutional sphere. Literacy thus modifies social relations by strengthening the credibility and legitimacy of women within collective interactions, particularly in environments where authority over written language was historically masculine, as can be seen in this excerpt from an interview with a literate woman:

“Since I started literacy classes, I can read the tontine ledgers, I can read hospital prescriptions, I can do my accounts when I sell things, and I am respected.” (BH, literate woman, Bondoukou)

In Bondoukou as in Alépé, literacy is a marker of social distinction for literate women. It allows them to improve the management of their economic activities, better control transactions, and participate more actively in household financial decisions. Beyond these practical gains, literacy also confers social prestige: reading, writing, and keeping accounts become a sign of reliability and modernity, strengthening women's credibility in areas where written communication was previously dominated by men. Thus, literacy helps redefine their place in the community and increase their agency.

While this social recognition already reflects a form of symbolic distinction, it is also embedded in more tangible dynamics: literacy does not merely alter perceptions; it concretely opens access to new resources and economic opportunities. It is from this perspective that we must now examine how acquired cultural capital is gradually converted into economic capital, serving financial autonomy and strengthening women's socio-productive trajectories.

3.2. Literacy, a source of conversion of cultural capital into economic capital

Beyond its symbolic aspect, literacy in these rural environments is transformed into a tangible tool for accessing resources and strengthening economic power. Reading, writing, and arithmetic skills are directly reflected in the effective management of financial flows, secure control of collective savings activities, and active participation in local solidarity microfinance systems. Consequently, the skills developed in literacy centers are not confined to the cognitive dimension but translate into concrete economic opportunities and increased power within the local economy.

Thus, the participants' ability to record the amounts received and distributed, to track balances, and to maintain accurate records transforms their cultural capital into a relevant economic resource. Indeed, by becoming the ones who record, verify, and explain the calculations to other members, they acquire a strategic position within the local informal microfinance network. This literacy thus confers not only enhanced credibility but also an economic and relational advantage, making literacy a central tool for management, transparency, and empowerment within the group, as can be seen in the following verbatim transcript:

“Before, when I collected the tontine funds, I just handed over the money like that, without writing it down. Now, I write everything down in my notebook. I know how much I received, how much I gave, and how much is left. Even the women come to me asking how to do their calculations.” (FN, literate woman, Alépé)

In short, account management and financial transparency are not merely technical actions; they symbolize a reorganization of power relations within solidarity structures, making written documents and literacy instruments of economic and social authority. However, this transformation of cultural capital is not limited to the management of collective savings. It also encompasses daily commercial transactions, where the ability to assess, predict, and compare prices becomes a strategic tool for economic improvement.

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For the women interviewed, acquiring numeracy and literacy skills has changed their perspective on business activities. They emphasize that they "no longer act haphazardly," but now take the time to analyze costs, anticipate potential profits, and monitor suggested prices. Literacy thus emerges as a tool for better managing transactions, avoiding losses, and planning acquisitions according to specific objectives.

The shift from intuitive management to a data-driven approach reflects a change in their relationship with the everyday economy: they are no longer simply focused on selling, but now strive to optimize their margins and understand the profitability of their activities. They see this change as an improvement in their practices, giving them a sense of being better prepared to face competition, but also of having a clear understanding of their business.

Thus, for these women, literacy goes beyond the simple acquisition of technical skills: it promotes a more thoughtful, autonomous and strategic approach to business, giving them more confidence, rigor and responsibility in the management of their businesses, as this excerpt from an interview with a literate woman in Bondoukou specifies.

"I do calculations before making a purchase now. If someone tells me a price, I check it first. I don't spend money impulsively anymore. I can also make estimates to know how much I'll earn if I have a certain number of bags of my goods. Before, I just took things as they came, sold them as they came, and then I didn't even know how much I was making. But now everything has changed." (SK, literate woman, Bondoukou)

This newly developed ability to calculate, forecast, and analyze transactions is not limited to individual profit optimization. It also paves the way for new forms of collective economic organization, where trust, literacy, and planning skills become collective resources to support joint initiatives. For many participants, literacy not only changes how they manage their own businesses but also fosters a collective entrepreneurial dynamic, driven by a desire to invest together, pool resources, and commit to sustainable projects.

This reality is further highlighted by the testimonies of the study participants, who emphasize the emergence of collective entrepreneurship projects based on literacy skills acquired through training. Accounting practices and collective coordination demonstrate that written documentation fosters economic collaboration, planning, and controlled risk management. This process contributes to the development of shared economic capital, which simultaneously enhances the participants' financial independence and their organizational abilities. In this context, literacy serves as a springboard for establishing organized economic activities.

"After the training, we decided to start a small group business selling condiments, like a cooperative. We contribute weekly, we cultivated our own field, and we also buy in bulk to resell. We manage our own accounts and expenses. We want to expand our business now." (AH, literate woman, Bondoukou)

Thus, literacy not only transforms women's organizational skills and economic practices, but also reshapes their position in the social sphere. The skills acquired not only translate into tangible results, but also lead to increased value, greater attention, and growing credibility within families, support groups, and the community. In other words, literacy is not simply about facilitating optimal financial management; it also provides status, visibility, and renewed recognition. The following section examines the symbolic and social aspects of literacy.

3.3. Symbolic capital: recognition and social legitimacy

According to the women surveyed, literacy is not simply about mastering reading and writing; it represents a significant shift in their role within the family and society. The skills they acquire, such as the ability to complete forms, read emails, and understand administrative or educational documents, now allow them to assume roles previously reserved for individuals considered educated. Their ability to decipher official information and communicate with institutional actors enhances their credibility and social dignity. They feel heard, consulted, and validated in decision-making spheres, thereby affirming that they "understand" and fully participate in community life.

From this perspective, mastery of writing functions as symbolic capital: it grants respect, establishes recognition, and allows for a new form of expression in places where it was previously little noticed, as can be seen in this interview excerpt:

"Since I learned to read and write, I'm the one who fills out the children's school forms, and I'm the one who reads the messages sent to me. Even in the village, when there's a meeting with the development workers, they ask me to come. They say I understand things now. People respect me because I can talk to the authorities." (GF, a literate woman from Bondoukou)

Along the same lines, the women affirm that their ability to read, write, and clarify information further strengthens their legitimacy within the group and the community. For these individuals, literacy is not simply an academic skill, but a symbol of competence and credibility. The women beneficiaries emphasize that they are now recognized for their ability to understand and explain certain information, which establishes them as role models in their social circles.

The excerpt below clearly illustrates this recognition linked to the skills developed:

"Many people applaud me because I understand things and I can explain them. Even within our group, there are women who want to do things like the men. Sometimes, we feel like we're not always accepted, but for my part, I'm aware that I act this way because I want to progress." (KS, a literate woman from Bondoukou)

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Through this narrative, the women highlight the recognition and admiration they now inspire in their social environment, thanks to their ability to obtain information and share it with others. Literacy thus becomes an indicator of individual improvement and social recognition, allowing the participants to see themselves as legitimate, respected, and seen as role models within their groups and communities.

Overall, the data indicate that literacy changes women's position within family and community contexts. The skills developed, such as reading, writing, completing documents, and interpreting administrative information, empower participants to take on new responsibilities in their homes and communities. As a result, they are more frequently called upon to undertake educational or administrative procedures and to participate in discussions with representatives of official institutions.

These new methods are accompanied by a shift in social engagement: the women interviewed reported greater consultation and participation in certain group conversations. The ability to grasp and disseminate written information thus appears to be an asset for their integration into decision-making and social mediation contexts.

The participants use literacy as a tool to assume roles as intermediaries and more active participants within their immediate social environment, which contributes to a transformation of their roles in community interactions.

4. DISCUSSION

This research highlights that women's literacy in rural areas (Alépé and Bondoukou) is not limited to technical skills, but represents a comprehensive social process influencing economic activities, social interactions, and symbolic recognition. This dynamic echoes the research of Bourdieu (1980, 1994), cited by Corcuff (1996), who considers literacy to be a form of cultural capital that can be transformed into social, economic, and symbolic capital depending on the social contexts of engagement. In the situations analyzed, women strategically leverage their newly acquired skills within savings networks, local commercial activities, and community spaces, thus illustrating this transformative process.

The use of written language in everyday interactions (account management, record keeping, reading administrative documents) is considered from a pragmatic literacy perspective, similar to that developed by Lahire (1999) when he viewed writing as a cognitive and social tool integrated into real-life situations. Observations indicate that immersion in written culture improves organizational, planning, and communication structuring skills, corroborating Chartier's (1996) studies on the social aspect of written language use. Furthermore, education strengthens women's networks and fosters the emergence of collective entrepreneurial dynamics based on trust, collaborative accounting, and joint resource management. These findings resonate with the research of Marie (1997) and Pierre-Joseph Laurent (2011), which focuses on the importance of solidarity networks, community associations, and rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) in women's economic strategies in West Africa. The combination of skills and resources observed among literate groups echoes the crucial importance of relational capital in the community economies examined by these authors. Therefore, literacy appears as a tool for transforming social, economic, and symbolic relations within rural communities. It offers women the opportunity to access places that were previously inaccessible, to assume mediation and management roles, and to consolidate their power to act within community dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This research examined how women's literacy in rural areas of Côte d'Ivoire (Alépé and Bondoukou) transcends the mere development of technical skills to become a structuring social process. Starting with the issue of the socio-economic impact of literacy in rural areas, the aim was to study how women use reading, writing, and numeracy to strengthen their status within the family, the economy, and the community. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital, Granovetter's social integration of economic activities, and Sen's capabilities approach, the findings highlight three key outcomes: a strong cultural capital that enhances control over management, the transformation of this capital into economic resources, and symbolic capital that generates social recognition. These results offer research opportunities on the sustainability of these transformations, the importance of post-literacy support measures and comparison with other rural regions in Ivory Coast.

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