

Unsettling the Water: Adult Learning and Women's Empowerment across the Globe

At ICAE's training in Beirut, EAEA's Aleksandra Kozyra has spoken to adult educators from Lebanon, Algeria, Nigeria, Uruguay and Ecuador about their work in women's empowerment.

Is there a topic in adult learning and education that would resonate with adult educators from across the globe: those based in Latin America, Middle East, as well as Europe? The last edition of the IALLA, ICAE's Academy of Lifelong Learning Advocacy, hosted by the Arab House for Adult Education and Development, took place in Beirut, Lebanon last April and focused on adult education and women. As a woman coming from Poland, where our reproductive rights are being drastically curbed, I could not think of a more timely topic.

Together with 16 participants from 12 countries, we explored feminist epistemology, embodied learning and public pedagogy during workshops and lectures run by Katarina Popovic, Secretary-General of ICAE, and Maja Maksimovic, Assistant Professor at the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade. Most importantly, we learned from each other, and I was constantly inspired by the wealth and breadth of experience among the participants.

We continued the exchange in between the sessions, at breakfast and in the evenings. From supporting women's mental health in times of political and economic instability in Lebanon, to the use of art-based pedagogy in the design of public spaces in Uruguay, I am sharing what is only a snapshot of my discussions with five adult educators who work in women's empowerment in their communities.

Emptying the fear

"We're a country that witnesses wars and internal conflicts all the time. So dealing with trauma is something that we keep doing, and it's part of my job," tells me **Samar Sahyoun** when I ask her about her work as an adult educator in Lebanon.

In her professional life, Samar wears many hats. She trains teachers, works in family education, and is the Secretary for Women's Affairs in Lebanon's Youth Movement. She also supports women who are in the process of getting a divorce.

According to Samar, the multiple crises that the country is facing have contributed to a general feeling of anxiety in society, which has also affected adult education.

"We have had so many economic and security challenges in Lebanon. For sure, you have heard of the explosion that we had in Beirut in 2020. Because of the high inflation, people haven't been able to retrieve their money from banks. They're not able to pay tuition fees for their children. Our public schools are on strike. We are even lacking medicines," says Samar. **"We don't feel safe, and a lot of people are just emptying their fear."**

In this context, her work with women, especially in the area of mental health, has become particularly important. Facing constant pressure and responsibility to take care of their families, they tend to forget about their own needs.

"Working with women on that level is multifaceted," she continues. "It's often difficult for me as an adult educator, because I don't always know the personal context. It's complicated work, sometimes it's individual, sometimes it's group work."

Samar gives an example of a recent workshop that she did with 80 women in the North of Lebanon, which aimed to help the participants connect with their inner selves.

"The nice thing about it was that the age range was very wide: I had people in their 30s and people in their 70s," says Samar.

According to her, there is an increasing awareness among women in Lebanon about the importance of self-care and mental health.

"We have NGOs that provide free counselling and support, and sometimes there is so much interest that there are waiting lists. More and more women are becoming self-educated, they find resources online. I notice that Lebanese women are now reading books and watching movies that speak about mental health," she tells me.

There are multiple topics that Samar would like to focus more on in the future, such as policy and advocacy ("We have laws that aim to improve women's rights and give them more power, but they are not necessarily being implemented," she says). She is particularly interested in improving the economic independence of women, including small-business entrepreneurship. "I would like to see more initiatives in which women are encouraged to make their own products and sell them," she says, looking ahead.

Who has the truth?

For **Shanez Kechroud** from e-graines, improving financial capabilities is key to supporting women's economic independence.

Together with another trainer, Shanez runs workshops in the south of Algeria for women who produce handicraft. While her colleague focuses on the design of the products, Shanez helps participants with the administrative side of their work.

"We look together at how to calculate the costs of the material and the revenue. A lot of it is about being able to plan ahead, and asking yourself questions like – how much do I need to sell to pay this amount? I also help them make a request to get an artisan card, and count in the fee for it that they will need to include in their planning," says Shanez.

According to Shanez, improving financial capabilities is often connected to other life skills.

"We noticed that some of our participants struggled with literacy – for example, in a group of six women, three wouldn't be able to read or write," she says. "This meant that I couldn't work with them, and it really bothered me, as having the financial capabilities is very important: many of the women were selling at a loss," she continues.

To address this gap, Shanez and her colleague reached out to the National Literacy Office in Algeria and asked for contacts with local schools and educators that offered literacy courses. Linking the participants with them brought uplifting results.

"In each of my three workshops, I had three women who started literacy classes and were very happy about them. **They still call me to keep me posted on their achievements; they now do more things on their own, for example going on YouTube to look up videos that their children sent them,**" says Shanez.

The connection to the participants of her workshops is something that Shanez finds very important in her experience as an adult educator. Her workshops include small groups and take place in the homes of the participants, which brings out a feeling of intimacy.

"You sit on the floor together, you eat together, it creates a connection. It's a process," she says. She gives an example of her recent workshop, in which she saw changes happen bit by bit. "On the first day, all the women were wearing headscarves. On the second day, they took them off. On the third day, we put some music on, and we all started to dance together."

Shanez adds that she finds it important to create a relationship of equality. "They already have their own way of working with the material, and we always

try to get to know their method. **It's a process of co-creation. Also on a human level, I've learnt so much from them, from their wisdom and resilience,**" she continues.

She comes back to one topic that we have been discussing during the training: post-colonial approaches to what counts as knowledge, and who owns it.

"Who has the truth?," she asks. "We come together to share our truths."

Telling stories: under the moonlight and in the classroom

"Once you unsettle the water, people open up," says Professor **Bolanle Clara Simeon Fayomi**.

Bolanle teaches adult education at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ife-Ife, Nigeria. At the IALLA, she conducted a workshop on art-based methods in adult education, with a focus on storytelling. During one of the activities, we explored the story of Yemoja, Yoruba goddess of water.

"When we do that kind of activity together, a lot of things come up. You realise that in our class you also saw this happen," she points out to me in the evening after our workshop. "We saw interpersonal or religious experiences emerge. Things that I, who told the story, did not even think of, but a lot of people related to."

She admits that other teachers, especially in academia, are sometimes hesitant to use art-based methods with their students.

"**People tend to forget that we are also emotional beings,**" she says. "They will want to look at everything strictly from the point of view of being an academic. Of wearing an outer shell and not feeling anything. And then they come to my class, and they are amazed, asking: are you really playing clubs? Are you really dancing?"

According to Bolanle, this comes much more naturally to the students than to the lecturers.

"In the African way of life, we are communal people. For instance, there is what we call a story by moonlight, where people, all of us living within the community, come together under the moonlight and share stories. So it's not hard for students to go along with this methodology. They find it easy to find a story to talk about, a story to be involved in," she explains.

Bolanle sees art-based methods as a way to help learners process their own emotions and deal with personal trauma. Our work on the story of Yemoja, which touches on body-shaming and self-harm among women, is a good illustration.

For Bolanle, using art-based methods is also the way ahead: it is an advantage that adult educators will have over AI.

“AI will not be able to actually manage the emotions that are there, and that’s something that learning can produce. **One thing that cannot be taken from us is our creativity, and this is the only way we can be relevant in this future,**” she concludes.

Public spaces – whose spaces?

“It’s not that people who live in poverty are not or can’t be creative. They don’t have the same cultural power, because we’re continuously excluding them,” says **Cecilia de la Peña**. Cecilia works for IPRU, the Institute of Economic and Social Promotion of Uruguay. IPRU is a civil society organisation which promotes the dignity and rights of youth and adults, based in Montevideo.

With three main branches: social, economic and educational, it aims to make an impact on women and youth in a state of poverty by running non-formal programmes.

One important activity of IPRU is its support for neighbourhoods with illegal settlements. “We know that after some time, these settlements will need to be legalised, and we work with the communities to explore how the public spaces or community projects could be designed,” says Cecilia.

The question of public spaces is one that is also central to women’s participation in community life.

“When it comes to young women in Uruguay, what we saw is that when you cross poverty and women, it is especially women who abandon formal education, and who are then more likely to be young parents. In one of our projects, we work with young mothers, under 18, to explore how they could still live a full life,” Cecilia tells me.

“**A major part of it is connected to access to the city, which means access to education, culture, health services,**” she continues. “We try to think how we can provide tools in order for them to experience different aspects of the city. We have found that most public policies actually reinforce exclusion by focusing on the community, on being in a familiar environment. To amplify their experiences, we try to, for example, provide transport to different parts of the city. We then organise meetings between these adolescents and those from other communities, with a focus on different topics, for example on sports or culture.”

Even in their own neighbourhoods, vulnerable groups often feel unsafe. “We noticed that young people and women don’t have a place to be in their own

neighbourhood,” says Cecilia. “Because it’s dangerous, or because they are not accepted. It’s a topic we try to dig into. We’ve done art projects together with our participants – for example, making murals or putting up lights in abandoned spaces.”

“We are always bringing the issue of gender in these spaces,” she continues. “Because we know it is women who are more present in the community, but those who have the power are men.”

Getting a seat at the table

According to **Maria Cianci Bastidas** from CLADE, Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education, changing power structures is not possible without advocacy. Maria has joined my conversation with Cecilia to give insight into the work of CLADE, a network representing national, regional and international organisations active in education in Latin America and the Caribbean. Focusing to a large extent on social and economic disparities, it advocates the right to education of the groups that continue to be marginalised: rural women, indigenous communities, inmates, LGBTQI+ community.

In recent years, CLADE has been a strong voice in the CONFINTEA process, especially in the lead-up to and follow-up of the CONFINTEA VII in Marrakech last year. CONFINTEA, the International Conference on Adult Education, is the only global policy process that is centred on adult learning and education.

“We have done many activities, for example, we participated in the regional consultation of UNESCO, making a survey of the recommendations of the continent and the Caribbean,” lists Maria. “We also made a decalogue on the ten most important points for our times, which also got good coverage at the event. We are now monitoring the Marrakech Framework for Action, looking at the local experiences that can contribute to improving funding and conditions of teaching and learning of young people and adults.”

CLADE is active in advocacy at different levels. The work isn’t easy, and there is sometimes pushback from other groups – for example, the advocacy for comprehensive sex education programmes among CLADE and its members goes against the demands of conservative groups, who see sex education as a private sphere.

Another task of CLADE is to monitor the extent to which civil society is involved in policymaking. The picture is mixed, but Maria cites some positive examples, one of which comes from Ecuador, where she is based.

“Just last week, one of the representatives of the Chilean Ministry for Education sat down with civil society organisations to listen to their requests on the Education for All framework. In Ecuador, there was recently a meeting between civil society and representatives of the state. **Already sitting down with civil society sets an agenda.**”

The dream of Maria and CLADE would be to train public officials and little by little, create an environment where civil society and policymakers sit at the same table to work on policy papers and agreements.

One success story is Uruguay, where civil society is actively involved in different policy processes, at different levels – I hear from Cecilia about IPRU’s recent project that collaborated with a municipality to revitalise an abandoned square. Cecilia cites multiple reasons why such partnerships are possible in Uruguay but not necessarily elsewhere in the region; one of them is the fact that health and education systems have been public for decades. This has been made possible thanks to historically strong and vocal trade unions and social movements. “**It’s not that someone just came and gave us our rights,**” she specifies.

This is something that resonates with me, as it seems similar to the narrative that we hear in Poland: that since we didn’t experience the feminist waves in the countries of the Eastern bloc as they happened in the West, women’s rights were just given to us by the powers that be. A narrative that, as I explored while preparing for the training, is largely false.

“You don’t just get invited to meetings or consultations. You need to put constant, constant pressure,” adds Maria.

If there is one reflection that I have taken away from the exchange with other participants at the training, it is exactly that: you can’t always take your own rights for granted. But while our work in civil society is often about taking one step forward, and then two steps back, it is reassuring to be reminded that we don’t exist in a vacuum, and we don’t necessarily have to start from scratch.

This article was originally published on EPALe, the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe in two parts:

- *Sharing our truths: stories of women’s empowerment in Lebanon and Algeria*
- *Unsettling the Water: adult learning and Women’s empowerment across the Globe*

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