

REFLECT Circles as Catalysts for Peace Education: Advancing Gender Equality and Social Change in Rural Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the adaptation of the REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) approach as a tool for peace education, gender equality, and social transformation in rural Egypt. The study examines how REFLECT circles provide participatory learning spaces that combine literacy development with critical dialogue, empowering women and girls to address issues of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), discrimination, and social exclusion. Drawing on field experiences and existing research, the chapter highlights how REFLECT promotes community participation, conflict resolution, leadership development, and collective action through interactive methods such as dialogue circles, storytelling, experiential learning, and community-based activities. Evidence from rural Egyptian communities demonstrates that the approach contributes to increased awareness of gender equality, enhanced decision-making capacity, improved social cohesion, and reduced tensions within families and communities. The chapter further illustrates how literacy, when integrated with peace education, becomes a catalyst for empowerment and sustainable development. Through a case study and practical examples, the paper argues that REFLECT serves as an effective, low-cost, and participatory framework for fostering peaceful coexistence, community ownership, and social justice among marginalized populations. The findings support the use of REFLECT as an innovative approach that links literacy, empowerment, and peacebuilding in rural and underserved communities.

Keywords: REFLECT Approach, Peace Education, Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment, Social Cohesion, Community Development, Literacy Education, Conflict Resolution, Rural Egypt, SGBV.

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One of the main issues of conflict and tension in rural Egypt is sexual gender-based violence (SGBV). Illiterate women and girls identify SGBV as a critical issue that creates conflict on a domestic level as well as on a community level, especially in conservative and rural areas. The patterns and persistence of SGBV are inter-woven into social norms and power relations. In this context of disparity, many women and girls also face barriers to accessing education.

In the last several years, I have focused on researching and analyzing this growing monster through my academic and practitioner work in Egypt. Throughout my journey through both my Master's and

Doctoral degrees, I began to explore SGBV issues rooted in Egyptian local communities. Furthermore, I delved into critical gender topics such as early forced marriage of girls, female circumcision, and the impact of the gender gap on parochial women's development (Rihan, 2006) [1].

Definitely, I see there is a need for the REFLECT literacy approach in peace education to address SGBV issues in illiterate communities, and to support women's learning and community participation. The dimensions of integrating peace education and literacy provide a shift in pedagogy and adult education philosophy from programs treating these areas separately. REFLECT circles take place in grassroots

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Community Development Associations (CDAs), while some REFLECT activities operate in collaboration with educational institutions such as the Adult Education Authority (AEA). During my work, I observed that REFLECT initiatives in peace education contributed to cultivating civic values and practices against SGBV. These initiatives promote positive knowledge, skills, and attitudes that help mainly local women either to prevent the occurrence of conflict, resolve conflicts peacefully, or create social conditions conducive to peace. Raising the voices of rural women creates rigid collective values of nonviolence and social justice, which are central to peace education [2].

The objective of this chapter is to show REFLECT as a literacy and social change approach adapted for Peace Education. REFLECT circles/groups in rural Egypt experimented and utilized this adapted approach to discuss local conflict, discrimination, as well as Sexual Gender Based Violence (SGBV) problems. I describe the REFLECT approach, define peace education from a gendered perspective, and share insights into applying REFLECT in peace education.

Framing REFLECT Approach and Peace Education

REFLECT approach “Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques” was developed in 1993 through empowering community techniques. It builds on the framework of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, but nowadays it is known as a term of a participatory approach for adult learning, empowerment, and social change [3,4].

The introduction to the original manual that is the primary resource for the REFLECT literacy program provides a succinct overview of the philosophy and significance of uniting Freirean pedagogy with the PRA (participatory rural appraisal) methods widely used in community development processes. This blending of participatory methods aims to promote active dialogue and empowerment:

In a Reflect program, there is no textbook, no literacy primer, no pre-printed materials, except a manual for the literacy facilitators. Each literacy circle develops its own learning materials through the construction of maps, matrices, calendars, and diagrams that represent local reality, systematize the existing knowledge of participants, and promote the detailed analysis of local issues. These graphics can include maps of households, land use, or land tenancy; calendars of gender workloads, illnesses, or income; matrices to analyze local crops, credit sources/uses, or participation in local organizations. A graphic is initially constructed on the ground (using whatever materials are locally available), promoting everyone’s active participation. It is then transferred to a large sheet of paper/card using simple pictures. Words are then introduced on the graphics, initially as labels, and later as commentaries. The graphics are used to stimulate discussion, participant-generated writing, related numeracy, work, and action to address local problems...The fact that participants construct their own materials in Reflect circles leads to a strong ownership of the issues that come up, which would be impossible to achieve through introducing issues in a primer. This has led to local action and a strong link between the literacy program and other development activities. Reflect circles can be catalysts for wider processes of change [4].

In the ActionAid REFLECT action research conducted in El Salvador, Uganda, and Bangladesh, participants highlighted “self-realization” arising from the REFLECT circles [5]. They had higher self-esteem, could articulate ideas better, and increased their critical problem-solving skills, and increased gender awareness. Learners collectively engage in social and economic actions.

Local actions give the ability to retain community peace, maintain local control over decision-making, and address their own development needs. For example, the elimination of early forced marriage of girls is addressed through creating pressure groups of supporters in safe spaces. Accordingly, women and girls learn through REFLECT discussions about their rights and ways of practicing them without getting into conflict with their male siblings and community members.

Peace Education has been described in various contexts over the past century. Biswas, provides a helpful overview of the field, which has been informed by UNICEF’s Education for Development approach that emphasizes a commitment to “solidarity, peace, acceptance of differences, social justice, and environmental awareness [6,7].” UNICEF defines Peace Education as “the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable children, youth, and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level) [7]. The main concept of peace education is to make people aware of the importance of peacemaking and to develop a positive environment [8]. This is not just an individual learning experience, as it encourages collective participation in the promotion of peaceful change processes.

Betty Reardon’s work has been foundational for integrating gender awareness in peace education [9,10]. As Reardon notes, despite global progress in reducing gender inequality, recognition of human rights, and achievements in poverty reduction, conditions of war and violence persist, as well as the systems promoting and financing weapons in the name of security. Reardon also draws attention to the specific gendered impacts of war through the perpetuation of violence, and argues that as gender equality is necessary for peace, “education for gender equality is an essential component of education for a culture of peace” (p. 21). Education for peace raises awareness of the conditions and structures that support systems of violence, perpetuate inequality, and gender discrimination. “The quest for a culture of peace calls on us to examine the ways in which gender roles and all forms of human inequality are woven into the fabric of cultures of violence (p. 21).

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is foundational to peace learning, so too must gender-informed conventions, such as CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and more recently 1325 [11]. Such examinations call for critical awareness raising to make visible the processes of discrimination, to find peaceful, more equitable alternatives. Reardon promotes Freirean pedagogy in

this effort, stating, “the theories and practices we have learned from Paulo Freire are the conceptual and methodological heart of the most effective peace learning and peace politics.” (p. 66) [10]. This focus on awareness raising and the participatory and discussion-based teaching methods align well with the REFLECT approach, which is also deeply rooted in Freirean consciousness raising.

The Egyptian Context

SGBV: UNFPA reports from a survey in 2015 that each year, 7.8 million women in Egypt suffer from violence [12]. Egypt has continuously experienced high levels of violence against women and girls, manifest in sexual violations, female genital mutilation (FGM/C), physical abuse, and widespread discrimination.

In 2021, Egypt was ranked 109 out of 191 countries in the “Gender Inequality Index” in UNDP’s annual Human Development Report [13]. UNFPA Egypt notes this low ranking highlights the persistence of gender discrimination despite the progress made in other measures, including female literacy rates, enrolment rates, labor force participation, and unemployment. UNFPA adds that this situation negatively impacts Egypt’s achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 - gender equality [12]. A UN Women study reported that 99.3% of Egyptian girls and women surveyed reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment [14]. The study details a wide range of intimidating, threatening, and violent acts perpetrated against females.

Gendered Barriers to Education: World Bank data reports that literacy in Egypt overall is 75%, a figure that drops to 68% for women [15]. In Egypt’s survey of literacy in 2017, 10.6 million women were considered illiterate [16]. In rural Egypt, similar to many developing countries, women can have dual status as they might be the victims of violence as well as drivers of violence. A study conducted in Sierra Leone examined the ways women are socialized to reinforce discrimination and abuse, showing how illiteracy and ignorance of human rights protections contributed to the acceptance of domestic violence. In these instances, women were socialized to accept the notion that male partner violence against them was permissible [17]. Such a situation underlines the critical need for gender aware literacy support for women facing such attitudes and human rights violations.

The root causes of gender-based violence are multifaceted and often intertwined. First, illiteracy leads parents to choose sons over daughters when they cannot afford to send all their offspring to school. Second, conflict with persistent and culturally sanctioned gender roles often entrap girls in roles that exclude them from school, such as when they are obliged to help with household chores or to enter the child labor force [17]. Lack of employment opportunities for women can also reinforce the notion that the return on the investment in education is low for the individual and their families alike.

Sultana’s report on girls’ education in Egypt presents a stark image of some of the barriers facing girls, whereby accessing learning can pose real threats [18]:

In a self-feeding vicious circle, uneducated girls are less likely to have the power to negotiate relationships. In many countries,

girls are forced by their families into early marriage for cultural and economic reasons as early as age 12 and sometimes before—thereby losing out on formal education, their income-generating potential, and their ability to make informed decisions about their lives. In some rural, traditional communities, as we find in some governorates in Egypt, for instance, tensions can also erupt due to so-called family- or blood-feuds, thus parents prohibit their daughters from leaving the hamlet to walk to school, fearing that they will be an easy target for those set on taking vengeance (p.15).

In Egypt, peace promotion has a profound effect on quality education. It helps young people and adults gain knowledge, enhance their skills, and form an attitude about the meaning of peace in human life. Peace education prevents the emergence of conflicts and creates conditions for peace in poor communities. REFLECT can promote conflict resolution that promotes peace.

Literacy is key to supporting peace learning, as well as supporting women’s overall community participation and empowerment. The USAID Literate Village project implemented CDAs as safe community spaces for women. After the literacy classes, women were able to improve leadership skills and participate in community meetings [19].

An Adapted Approach; “REFLECT in Peace Education.”

During the past few years of my work in peace education, I noticed that there was always a need for a participatory literacy approach that aims to build constructive change in local communities, especially in rural, deprived areas. It is known that REFLECT’s perspective of peace education has a special potential in empowering dialogue practitioners to raise women’s critical consciousness through dialogue [20].

While practicing peace education in REFLECT women’s circles in some Egyptian villages, it was observed that gaining information equipped women to comprehend the root causes of violence and promote equality. Peace education is utilized in REFLECT circles through the following uses:

- First, to promote collective peace activities using arts, music, etc., which gives members of the group a proper concept of solidarity.
- Second, to build community values and social networks.
- Third, to support the freedom of the decision-making process on the household and community levels.

Both REFLECT and peace education concepts are approached as interdisciplinary perspectives that can be incorporated into the teaching of a wide range of subject matter. Interactive, participatory, cooperatively-structured educational methods are as important as the content of learning for development. The above approaches allow learners to better grasp complex concepts, build problem-solving abilities, and develop social skills. These approaches are used in local educational activities and provide a framework for tutoring people about community, peace, and social justice issues.

In Egypt, Peace education initiatives encompass innovative multi-sectoral approaches, including community-based activities, legal

awareness sessions, women's or girls' empowerment initiatives, and art therapy. REFLECT is used as one of the innovative ways applied, especially in rural areas during the last decade, to pacify the community pressure [21].

In the last decade, Thousands of REFLECT groups have been formed in Egypt to reach illiterate adults, especially women and girls in marginalized areas, who are now free from illiteracy and also empowered enough to change their lives positively [2]. Reflect is mainly implemented through Community Development Associations (CDAs) which are grassroots nonprofit organizations in different rural areas of Egypt.

Peace Education in action: Many examples of activities are conducted through circles/groups of REFLECT to create synergies through:

1. Creation of a democratic space of dialogue between women and men, as well as different generations of girls and boys,
2. Listening sessions for acceptance,
3. Acceptance of others,
4. Give a voice to the excluded, especially the most vulnerable, by utilizing REFLECT tools of empowerment as a daily routine,
5. Encourage collaboration in diverse groups by using arts and sports,
6. Discuss controversial issues through street theater or storytelling, especially in topics related to SGBV, including early marriage and FGM/C,
7. Use experiential learning, which is important to learn by doing, as well as promote creativity and thinking.

The new adapted REFLECT approach for peace education has been proven to be more effective at teaching people to read and write, and more efficient at linking literacy to wider development.

In 2017, A comparative research was conducted in one of the villages in Egypt to explore the impact of implementing REFLECT versus the traditional adult literacy program. The research assessed the learning methods used in literacy on the attitudes of rural women towards gender equality issues in one of the Egyptian villages. Impact of practicing REFLECT was examined in this research through five themes: awareness towards gender concepts, gender differences, women's empowerment, violence against women, and early marriage of girls. Results showed that REFLECT can be adapted not only as a literacy approach but also as an empowerment approach. REFLECT has a strong positive effect on gender issues, peace building, and community development [22].

Furthering their knowledge of the local environment (agriculture, health, income generation, and survival skills) helped this process of self-realization, which was also reflected by improved relations within the masculine community (and within the household). The discussions in the literacy groups often lead to community-level actions to improve local conditions. Women can create social cohesion and harmony—for example, income-generating activities for REFLECT groups of women supported the self-confidence of learners to participate in civic activities such as volunteering and joining CDA boards.

These actions ranged from the economic sphere (constructing grain-stores, diversifying crops, cooperative buying or selling) to community projects (small infrastructure such as re-grading access roads, school repairs, and water pipes); from the environmental sphere (terracing, organic fertilizers, tree nurseries, tree planting) to the health sphere (digging a tube well, building latrines, clearing rubbish, cleaning stagnant water).

The key factor in achieving the implementation of these actions was felt to be that the learners had independently arrived at decisions to do something through their own analysis - they felt local ownership of the problems and of the possible solutions.

Advantages of REFLECT in Peace Education (adapted approach) appeared to have had a positive initial impact on gender roles and relations, in which facilitators reported that many men have taken on domestic work. Women are now more vocal and more involved in key household and community decisions. Educational peace relates to helping people to recognize many forms and causes of violence and promote values and skills to live in society. REFLECT approach within Peace Education influences social behavior, changes attitudes, and habits, aiming for social cohesion and lessening tension in families and local communities. Furthermore, REFLECT approach within Peace Education proved to be low-cost and cost-effective in rural Egypt [22].

REFLECT activities gives an opportunity for peaceful involvement of women along men in larger community development e.g. cleaning and greening, etc. Such joint activities through REFLECT supports safe healthy relations in the rural society. Women during field discussions said that now they can get involved in household decision making processes because: "now we have enough information and skills to feel confident in leading our families with our husbands without family conflicts." Another woman participating in the village community development association said, "joining REFLECT helped me with sufficient awareness and knowledge to be able to protect the health of my daughters" [22].

It should be noted that the REFLECT approach describes the trainer's role as a "facilitator" as one who "facilitates" the discussions, exchanges amongst participants, and different experiences and points of view of the group, and not for the trainer to appear as the expert. The intention is to promote the local knowledge of the participants [23]. It is recognized that most of the facilitators are women, as they can endorse the culture and traditions in conservative community settings [22]. The REFLECT facilitator is characterized as being from the local area, very open, and respecting people's customs and points of reference. The facilitator should have direct experience working on SGBV prevention and response, mainstreaming gender equality, and peacebuilding. The facilitator's role is to promote community actions and advocacy around gender-based violence and to encourage community members and opinion leaders to collectively discuss their concerns, exchange ideas, and develop key messages that promote safe, healthy, and productive life choices for families and communities.

Activities of REFLECT in Peace Education: REFLECT in Peace Education enables many participants to think critically about practices and actions. Participants must identify a hub to endorse practicing positive activities and social cohesion interventions. Many organizations like Community Development Associations (CDAs), Non-Profit Organizations, and school assemblies can act as a powerful vehicle for teaching values, raising self-esteem, and developing enthusiasm. These organizations won recognition for their outstanding community engagement work in the areas of moral, social, and cultural education.

REFLECT supports looking for inspiration and ideas in incorporating Peace Education and nonviolence into communities. It also serves as a resource platform for various peace and nonviolence education activities. Some of the effective activities that take place:

- **Listening & talking circles:** Promotes openness and shares voice amongst individuals of a group to celebrate, build community, make decisions, or address conflict.
- **Free writing:** Opens up new ways of thinking and reacting that are not confined by structure. It can tap into higher-level thinking. Allows for freedom of expression by eliminating the need for perfect structure and grammar.
- **Community Sympathy:** Highlights the various interests, talents, and experiences that group members bring to the group and can be used to enhance the learning experiences. It also gives group members ownership over determining how the group guidelines are to be structured to meet the unique nature of each learning community. When group members have ownership over developing those guidelines, they are then also more likely to adhere to them and self-enforce.
- **Needs Assessment:** Generates buy-in and shared responsibility for creating and sustaining a positive and relevant learning experience. Values the input, ideas, needs, and wants of the learners and helps establish a partnership model of education. It gives participants ownership over their learning experience.

Success Story: “Muna ... from Learner to Leader”: REFLECT in Peace Education not only fights illiteracy in the villages of Egypt but also reduces the tension and builds bridges of dialogue. There are several successful models, in particular, women, such as Muna, -30 years old married woman - she joined a REFLECT group in her community. She found the approach very interactive and effective not only in learning numeracy, literacy, and life skills, but also for promoting dialogue and raising awareness about challenges, social pressure, and conflicts that she and other women face every day. Many married women - like Muna - experience violence in their homes frequently.

Attending REFLECT groups gave a safe space for women to discuss openly their challenges to mitigate the conflict. Women's meetings encourage constructive conversations, share ideas, and resolve differences peacefully, without violence.

Muna was quoted as saying, “It is learning that opened the window to possibility, whereas most opportunities were

inaccessible to me before.” From where I stand: “I am passionate about promoting peace”. Muna is one of the few women to become a member of her local Community-Based Association in her village. Since being trained as a woman facilitator for peace education and gender equality, she became a passionate advocate for peaceful conflict resolution, starting from home and extending to the larger community.

Finally, REFLECT contributes to Peace Education as it supports learning about cooperation, tolerance, identity, empathy, creativity, and leadership as participants are increasingly exposed to their larger communities. It teaches multiculturalism and relationships in a way vulnerable and marginalized groups can understand, and exposes them to the understanding that, though people may have many differences, they also have much in common.

In Conclusion

The essence of the REFLECT in Peace education approach proved that adult literacy alone does not empower people. Nevertheless, the REFLECT learning approach within social change and peace education is a strong method to form a foundation of cohesion and conflict resolution in communities. It appears that the REFLECT approach involves two parallel and interweaving processes: a literacy process and an empowering process.

Literacy gives people practical skills which will help in the empowerment process (e.g., as they assume positions of responsibility in community organizations) and the empowerment process in turn creates uses for literacy in people's everyday lives. This mutual consolidation and reinforcement are the essence of why it makes sense to fuse the two processes. To successfully interweave these two processes, a well-structured participatory methodology like REFLECT.

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