Gender Implications of Income Generating Projects; Lessons from a Training Project on Food Processing

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Introduction

Women's concerns have been addressed in the development scenario for over two decades. Among many issues which concern the well-being of rural women, enhancing their income-earning capacities is increasingly given priority attention in the discussion on rural development. The importance of increasing rural women's incomes is emphasised firstly since it will enhance the possibilities for empowering women as independent producers. Secondly, it can be safely assumed that added income will increase the likelihood of achieving higher living standards for the whole family.

The Problem

One of the major limitations in the commonly applied methods of promoting income generation for women is that, often, the activities are viewed only as means by which women's income, skills and welfare are improved. While improving living standards is an immediate concern, it should be noted that the primary concern in promoting income generation for women is not merely welfare, but women's long term equality in access to resources, and their empowerment. It is observed that this element is missing in much of the development assistance directed towards women.

Enhancing women's incomes is attempted through various interventions. Often, interventions are standard, based on pre-conceived assumptions on women's 'accepted roles' rather than on their actual needs and constraints. Looking back at the various approaches to development; welfare, equity, anti-poverty, efficiency, and empowerment it is now recognised that some of the approaches have made women in developing countries worse off. At the end of the UN decade for Women (1975-1985) it has been observed that no substantial positive improvement of women had taken place over the decade, primarily because assistance directed towards women have been inappropriate to their needs.

The paper argues that interventions addressing gender concerns should aim at meeting both practical and strategic gender needs, to enable long term sustainability, equality, and ultimately empowerment of women. Experience of a micro level training project in food processing implemented by the Intermediate Technology Development Group, Sri Lanka is presented to highlight some of the pertinent issues relevant to this question.

Variation in Gender Needs

Men and women have assigned roles in society, and there is a gender division of labour. Women have multiple roles, i.e. productive and re-productive, and community roles. There

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1 the assumption here is that income earned by women is generally spent on the benefit of the household or family needs such as food, children's education, health care etc. rather than on her personal needs.

2 Often interventions with income generation focus are based on sex-stereotyped activities. Some of the widely promoted activities include sewing, cooking and handi-craft making.
is a differential impact of economic, social and cultural factors on both sexes in any given community owing to gender divisions in labour. Activities which women perform within their productive and re-productive roles are specific, and often different from what men perform. For example in agricultural production there is a clear division of labour between men and women. Land preparation is predominantly a male activity while weeding and transplanting are done by women.

It follows from this that women’s needs and their use of time in carrying out activities related to their role are specific and different from that of men. In household activities a significant share of the daily reproductive activities such as cleaning, cooking, collecting of firewood and water, and caring for children is done by women. A substantial contribution from the man to household activities is rare and often exceptional. Thus, a necessary condition for the establishment of gender sensitive income generating opportunities will be identification of specific gender needs.

Needs Assessment

Since recent times ‘Needs Assessment’ at the feasibility stage of an intervention is identified as a key element of effective development programmes. However, needs assessment of a community will not give a complete picture unless gender concerns are addressed. For a more complete needs assessment of a community the division of labour in productive and reproductive roles must be understood.

Molyneux (in Moser C.O.N.:1993) has developed a model which differentiate women’s needs into strategic and practical. Strategic gender needs are those which arise from the analysis of women’s subordination to men. Strategic needs involve efforts to strengthen the position of women vis-a-vis men as a step toward the ultimate goal of establishing a social structure in which women do not suffer discrimination in any form (SIDA:1993). Practical gender needs arise from women’s socially accepted roles within given social, economic and political structures. Practical gender needs are linked to strategic needs, and Moser (1993) suggests that practical gender needs may be used as a means through which more strategic needs are reached. A differentiation of this nature allows for a more complete needs assessment with long term perspectives towards empowerment of women.

Food Processing as an income generating activity for women

Suitability of activities for income generation need to be decided based on the knowledge of specific gender needs. Needs vary not only between men and women, but among different categories of women depending on age, social and economic status etc. It is generally assumed that small-scale food processing activities have a wide scope for providing income

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3A study of gender division of labour (Sirisena W.M., Kilkelley K.M.1986) in two dry zone villages and in two major irrigation schemes in Sri Lanka demonstrate the division of labour in paddy cultivation under different systems of management. Studies highlight women's significant role in transplanting, in plucking seedlings and in manual weeding. Men are primarily responsible for land preparation.
generating avenues for rural women. At small scale, it is believed to be an activity which is possible to combine with the other household reproduction activities performed by women⁴.

The Case of Training on Food Processing

Five years ago, Intermediate Technology development Group initiated a training course on small-scale food processing. Over the years, it has evolved into a comprehensive package of services which include training for rural extension workers, entrepreneur training, follow-up refresher courses, supply of information, and facilities for trials at the training centre. Primary objectives of the training package are as follows:

* to strengthen the capacity of local organisations to support small food processing enterprises and thereby to stimulate income generation and employment generation in rural Sri Lanka.

* micro enterprise development to create employment and increase income by adding value to foods.

"Cathy Rich Memorial Food Processing Training", which is run annually is designed to train extension workers with the necessary food processing skills to assist rural entrepreneurs in setting up small-scale food processing businesses. Training lasts for 45 days and covers a wide range of processing techniques which include traditional as well as non-traditional food items, and business skills. Entrepreneur training is conducted once a month on demand, and covers individual food items. There is also follow-up training depending on needs. Training itself is supported by facilities offered to use the equipment at the training centre to test new products for marketability etc., and by provision of information related to food businesses.

The training package is not gender focused, and does not have an objective to address women's training concerns. However, in practice, there is a "gender bias", not intentionally (as the above mentioned objectives show), but the bias seem to arise out of the accepted notion (which can be challenged) that small-scale, often home-based food businesses are more a woman's activity. Following from this in the selection of participants for training women trainees and extension workers are given preference. Out of the total number of trainees since initiation, 80.7% were females (see Annex Table 1). This intentional bias is based on the fact that a majority of small-scale food processors are women and on the assumption that women trainees are more suitable to assist village level women food processors.

Bennet (1993) identifies the following criteria for a successful income generating project irrespective of gender; a marketable idea, confidence, information, business skills, appropriate support, motivation, and commitment, indicating that small business needs are not gender specific. However, it is noted that for women entering into business there are extra barriers which are unique and directly related to their position in society.

⁴ However this is a matter which require careful consideration since there is a possibility of increasing women's workload further in some instances, specifically when women's practical needs are not taken into account.
Through a learning process over the years at present the training package attempts to meet most of the above mentioned criteria. For instance, the structure of training is based on market information to emphasise on the food items suited for localised markets. Training courses include production and business aspects, i.e. basic accounting, book-keeping, and business management skills. Further to the basic training if training is required on individual components, participants are linked with other appropriate institutions which provide such training. The component on leadership training is assumed to give elements of confidence to the trainees. There is an attempt to ensure commitment and motivation by offering training only on a partial subsidy basis (the first few courses were fully subsidised).

Practical Value and Limitations of the Training

The uniqueness of the training package is that this is about the only training on food processing and food businesses available for rural extension-level personnel and for rural entrepreneurs. Courses offered in the local universities are at a post graduate level. The primary inadequacy of the training is the absence of a gender focus in the package of services despite the fact that over 80% of the participants are women. Secondly, it is assumed that the training package is suitable for both men and women. Considering that the majority of participants and beneficiaries are women, there are specific concerns which need to be looked into. Lope et al (1990) suggests the following as specific concerns: women's low social capital (education, status, bargaining power, experience in the political and economic world, self-confidence), their heavy workload, and their triple role.

Due to absence of a gender focus the potential of the training to address women's practical and strategic needs and reaching different groups of women whose needs vary is largely reduced. To be able to address women's practical and strategic needs there must be an understanding of the same. The program at present is largely based on feedback from the beneficiaries, and lacks a needs-assessment with a gender focus.

Addressing practical needs

The importance of skill training opportunities for rural women need not be over emphasised. At a glance, the training offers opportunities for skill training for rural women which can be useful in initiating income-earning activities. Further, increased income is assumed to improve family welfare. The training programme's ability to support the establishment of small food businesses is seen through the particular advantages of the activity (which are largely based on assumptions):
* as home-based businesses, they address the problem of restricted mobility of rural women to some extent
* capital and other (equipment etc.) requirements are relatively small
* Possibility for combining activity with other daily household re-production work.

Thus, it can be noted that the training package results in addressing rural women’s practical needs to some extent by offering the opportunity of localised training on a subject which has a practical value for them.

Apart from this, the programme’s ability to reach varying groups of rural women (whose needs and constraints are different) effectively is limited due to the absence of gender sensitivity. As Lopez et.al (1990) suggests, based on the past experiences, many economic projects are based on inaccurate conceptions of women’s work and use of time, which generally limit their chances of success and long term sustainability. For instance, important considerations such as gender division of labour, multiple roles women play, time management, and constraints in mobility need to be understood clearly to identify the factors which inhibit sustainability of income generating activities for women. Further, to achieve women’s welfare through income-generating activities, it is necessary to understand the interrelationships between income generating aspects and other household responsibilities. At present the training package does not address these issues directly. A needs assessment with a gender focus by talking to groups of women will unravel the micro level situation.

Needs assessment is required at two levels; at the direct beneficiary level (can be combined with the feedback) and at the trainee level. At both levels, it is necessary to look at their different roles, work loads, time management and constraints. At the trainee level, it is important to generate information on particular constraints in relation to practical aspects of the training, which would be useful in the selection in order to minimise the drop-outs of trainees. This information is of critical value in identifying the mechanisms to address varying skill training needs, in building up the training content and for program design.

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5 This aspect is particularly important in initiating income generating activities for women. It is observed that a majority of the small scale food processors are either mothers who are desperate for an additional income, but have limited mobility due to child care and other household responsibilities, or older women whose mobility is limited.

6 For instance from the feedback it is realised that some women are able to carry out business activities only in off season due to their role in agricultural production.

7 A section of the trainees do not continue with the activity (see Annex Table 1) owing to various reasons. This problem partially lies with the selection procedure particularly with selecting committed participants. Another section of the trainees are unable to continue due to practical difficulties.
Addressing strategic needs

There are specific limitations of a wider scope applicable to women small scale food processors. Understanding these limitations would provide an insight into women’s strategic needs, which leads to their equality and empowerment in the long term. These include:

* for many entrepreneurs, it is a new activity initiated out of necessity, therefore are faced with problems arising out of inexperience in business activities.

* constraints particularly applicable to rural women initiating business; such as access to raw material, capital and credit, and difficult entry into markets.

These are common problems rural women face in any business activity across the countries. It is agreed that both rural men and women are relatively disadvantaged in terms of access to credit, marketing etc., however it is observed that rural women are disadvantaged even further in relation to access to the same resources. An evaluation on the training carried out recently identified difficult access to credit and entry to markets as particular constraints faced by the women. Further, in the entrepreneur training, a majority of participants (over 77%) are men, and in 50% of the sessions the female participation was zero, which indicate that there are special barriers for women to reach entrepreneur level in comparison to men with the same training.

At present, the training views these constraints as common for both men and women. This misconception is a result of the absence of gender sensitivity. For the training to be effective, recognition of the constraints specific to women and the need for creating a support network which includes improved access to credit and entry into markets as a part of the training assistance given to rural women is apparent. Based on the feedback and follow up activities, a mechanism deployed by the training to create a support network to help with the credit constraint is, selecting participants from organisations (organisations working on income generation activities) which have a credit component. As a subsequent step now arrangements are made to persuade banks and other credit organisations to recognise the training as a criteria for eligibility for credit. Without a direct gender focus the full thrust of these measures cannot be realised.

A way of reaching strategic needs through practical needs would be recognition of the qualities necessary to survive in business, and to identify specific areas where strengthening is required. For instance, in the training content, specific attention can be paid to leadership training and confidence building for women entrepreneurs since it is recognised that due to their subordinate role women lack confidence and independence.

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8As Bennet (1993) suggests one of the main problems women’s enterprises face the world over is the perception of women held by the male dominated business world. Often women beginners require male support for activities such as marketing.
Addressing constraints of this nature with a gender focus can be viewed as a step towards meeting women’s strategic needs. Creating an environment for improved accessibility to credit, raw material and markets, and developing independence and leadership qualities are likely moves towards women having control over production resources leading towards increased equality.

Conclusion

Income generating activities should be viewed not merely as avenues of improving living standards, but as avenues of reaching women’s long term equality in terms of equal opportunities in access to resources, and empowerment. Recognising and addressing women’s practical and strategic needs through interventions is the key to this. A training of this nature has the potential to address both practical and strategic gender needs, provided that a holistic approach is taken in the design and implementation of the programme. Absence of a conscious effort to recognise women’s specific needs and constraints largely limits the potential. A holistic view would include practical skill training as well as creating a support network by which women’s participation, access to and control over resources is increased.
References


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Striking a Balance, Gender Awareness in Swedish Development Cooperation, SIDA Information Office Publication,1990
Annex Table 1

Basic Statistics on the Training Course

<table>
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<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of trainees</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of organisations</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. still working with the sending organisations</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. involved in food processing by 1993</td>
<td>1 (14.2)*</td>
<td>2 (12.5)</td>
<td>8 (33)</td>
<td>5 (38)</td>
<td>5 (62.5)</td>
<td>5 (62.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage of female participants</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* figures in parenthesis are percentages

Source: Cathy Rich Memorial Food Processing Training Unit at International Centre for Training Rural Leaders.