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RESEARCH NOTE

Vocational Training for Women in Informal Employment*

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Vocational training is a link between education and employment. After completing a basic level of general education, it allows students to acquire skills and training for selected occupations. The success of a vocational training course thus depends on the ease with which students are able to access jobs. The greater the ease, the better the course has judged the market and the demand side of the picture. Generally, when discussing vocational training, we are concerned with children in school and the alternatives available to them.

However, in the context of India, the fact is that a large number of children drop out of school before acquiring basic literacy or numeracy skills, and that a majority of young adults are thus to be found in various kinds of miscellaneous jobs for which schooling and literacy are not barriers to entry.

Although the usual understanding of vocational training does not extend to the role it could play in allowing young adults to make up for what they missed earlier – some basic literacy/ numeracy and certification of skills, this paper suggests that there is considerable potential in such an approach, and discusses a pilot programme that tries to do this.

Section I reviews the situation regarding informal employment in India and the niche that women occupy. Section II examines new approaches to vocational training that are able to reach out to those in informal employment, and Section III concludes with some suggestions regarding the best approach to vocational training for women in informal employment.

Women in Informal Employment in India

Out of a total workforce of around 398 million in 2000, an estimated 93 % was in informal employment. For women, the percentage is even higher, around 96%. In the case of agriculture, 99% of women (and men) are in informal employment. In non-agricultural work, 86% of women and 83% of men are in informal employment. This

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informal workforce, outside of agriculture, consists of employment in informal enterprises in the unorganized sector, as well as informal employment linked to formal enterprises. The latter includes sub-contracted workers as well as a range of other workers such as domestic service and other service work. In terms of absolute numbers, women are one-third of all workers in the informal economy. Certain sectors are largely informal – aside from agriculture, 94% of employment in construction is informal. (ILO 2002).

In addition to being in informal employment, women tend to be concentrated in lower wage work (Chen 2003) so that they are over-represented at the bottom end of the informal employment pyramid.

This picture of where women are located in terms of work is an outcome of several factors, including traditional gender roles and relations that have limited women's mobility and restricted their choices, lower levels of education, skills and training, and institutional and legal constraints that further make it difficult for women to undertake independent entrepreneurial activity.

In light of the nature of women's participation in the economy, vocational training and skill development programmes which are not confined to children alone but extend to young adults can be significant ways of empowering women in their working life, particularly if they can build on and strengthen their existing skills.

In this context, it is important to include in our view of possible skills, a wide range, including the skills that people already have and which they are using in their current work. The fact that earnings might be low or prospects limited does not justify the conclusion that workers in the informal economy are 'unskilled'. As Braverman put it, 'It is only in the world of Census statistics, and not in terms of direct assessment, that an assembly line worker is presumed to have greater skill than a fisherman or oysterman, the forklift operator greater skill than the gardener or groundskeeper, the machine feeder greater skill than the longshoreman, the parking lot attendant greater skill than the lumberman or raftsmen.' (Braverman 1974: 430) Whether we recognize a particular ability as 'skill' or not is often related to the manner of its acquisition – skills acquired through experience, apprenticeship or handed down by older family members, rather than through any formal systems of training or certification, are often not recognized as such.

Approaches to Vocational Training

It has been estimated that 'there are 2484 vocations in India which can be clubbed into about 462 'vocational families'. Not more than 100 such 'vocational families' are actually covered by the existing vocational training infrastructure' (Chandra, in Chadha 2004: 34). The need to extend the scope and outreach of vocational training has been recognized by the Planning Commission. (Govt of India 2002, Tenth Plan).

The outreach of Vocational Training

While enrollments in school are high in Class 1, given the high drop out rate only a small proportion of those enrolled complete the full 12 years of schooling. In 1993-04 in rural

India, only 0.7% of women and 2.8% of men were graduate and above and in urban India 14.6% (both men and women). Levels of illiteracy remain extremely high, and according to the 2001 Census around 46% of women and 24 % of men are illiterate.

Only 5 % of the Indian labour force in the age group of 20-24 years has obtained vocational training. The corresponding figure in industrialized countries is much higher (between 60% and 80%) and even when set against developing countries this is very low (Mexico has 28%, Peru 17%). (Vol. 1, Part 2.1083).

From the 42nd Round of the NSS (1991), a detailed description is available of persons in the technical education stream. This data shows that 21.29% of rural males with some level of technical education are from the bottom four fractile groups. In the case of women, this percentage is 28%. In the case of urban males, the percentage is 19 and for urban females it is 14. However very few persons from the bottom four income fractile groups are to be found in pre-secondary institutions, whether government or private.

Or, to put it another way, few persons, and fewer women, without a secondary level of education, have been able to access technical education.

Under the Constitution of India, vocational training is a concurrent subject of State and Central Governments. While the Central Government has the responsibility of developing policy, training standards and procedures, certification, etc, the actual implementation is largely up to the State Governments. The Directorate General of Employment and Training in the Ministry of Labour, Government of India established around 50 Industrial Training Institutes for imparting skills in various vocational trades. The gender gap in the opportunities offered is evident from the fact that in 1974, only 4 ITIs and 1 Craftsman Training Institute were open to women, with a total capacity of 258 seats. Moreover these offered training in traditional trades.

Recognition of the inadequacy of this provision led to the Vocational Training Programme for Women launched in 1977. As a result of this effort there has been some expansion in the institutional network for women. This now includes

- a National Vocational Training Institute for women at Noida, and 10 regional institutes in different cities including Mumbai, Bangalore, Trivandrum, Hissar, Kolkata, Tura, Allahabad, Indore, Vadodara and Jaipur. These are able to train 3500 women at a time. A new initiative is the training in Business Services/Entrepreneurial Development to encourage self employment. This is a Central scheme
- under the State governments, a total of over 47,500 seats are offered to women in 224 women-exclusive ITIs and 551 wings in general ITIs. Around 20-25% of the seats are reserved for women in general ITIs.

Courses offered by these institutes are structured and have a defined curriculum. The duration varies from 6 months to 3 years, with 8 hours of training/ teaching on each working day. The entry eligibility is 10th pass or in some cases 10+2 pass. A few courses are open to those who are 8th pass. The minimum age at entry is 14 years of age. An attempt is made to enable post-training placement through Placement Cells at the

institutes. The target group for these courses is thus women with a basic level of educational qualification, who are in a position to study full time at urban centres.

Some short term courses have been developed to extend the outreach of these courses. These are of 2-8 weeks duration with flexible timings and around 2500 women receive training in these courses every year. But even these shorter courses are unable to meet the challenge of providing training to women with lower levels of education/literacy, and who may be unable to spend the whole day at a place of study.

Conceptual basis of vocational training/ skill development

A distinction can be made between generic skills, vocational skills, and job specific skills.¹ Generic skills are 'transferable skills that are of general benefit and can be applied across occupational groups' including reasoning skills, work process management skills and personal values and attitudes such as motivation, discipline, judgment, leadership and initiative. Vocational skills are the 'specific 'technical' skills needed to work within an occupation'. Job specific skills are those 'required for a very specific function such as operation of a particular piece of machinery or employer wide skills (e.g. in-company quality standards or specific working methodologies)'. The need today is increasingly for generic skills.

The Report of the National Commission on Labour (2002) recommended a 'new modular approach to vocational training, which will aid multi-skilling, impart skills attuned to the needs of the labour market, and in consonance with the latest technology.' (Vol. 2:98)

This modular approach holds out considerable promise. It can be adapted to allow the development of several levels or 'tiers' of skills, allowing people to move between work and training and upgrade their qualifications in slow steps rather than necessarily all at once. A woman who initially trains in a certain skill, will after some experience want to take herself to the next level of skill. For example a woman trained initially in plant nurseries could graduate to more skilled tasks and could upgrade her knowledge of plant management and commercial possibilities. Another example is of health practitioners, certification being desirable for each of the following: Doctors (with the various levels of specialization that already exist), Nurses, Para-nurses, Midwives (with various levels of competence), Traditional healers (with various levels of competence), and Community health workers. We could build a system of continuous learning whereby a person can move from one 'threshold' to another as her competence and experience grows. This would require us to bring down the barriers that currently exist between various categories of skill to allow mobility through training, and allow even those without formal educational qualifications to access the first levels of skill training.

Women in informal employment thus both need generic skills, and the opportunity to upgrade their skills, to be able to stay competitive in a rapidly changing world of work.

¹ See for example the National Skills Task Force, established in the UK in 1988.

Pilot project for urban women in informal employment²

Against this background, several attempts have been made especially by NGOs, to provide training and skill development to a target group that falls outside the reach of the ITIs and other more conventional approaches. One example, a programme that attempts to connect existing vocational training institutes with NGO effort in empowering poor women, is currently being piloted in Delhi and Bangalore as a project of the International Labour Organisation.³ The project has identified a few partner NGOs through whom the training is given. New training modules have been developed, attempts made to develop market linkages and to provide a range of support to women to enable them to explore new work opportunities. The target group is women living in slum communities.

In Delhi, out of a total population of 13.8 million (as per the Census 2001), an estimated 30-40% of the population lives in slums. While for Delhi as a whole, over 87% of males and 75% of females are literate, one estimate for the slum population suggests that 40% of all workers and 65 % of women are illiterate here. Only 3% of women have acquired education above the secondary level (see Mitra 2003). The population of Bangalore according to Census 2001 is 6.52 million. Estimates of the slum population vary between 20-25% of the city's total population. The literacy rate for the city as a whole in 2001 stood at 88.36 % for males and 78.98 % for females. Among the slum population, it was estimated that around 49% were illiterate in 1992. (Benjamin 2000). As far as work and income sources are concerned, in both cases construction accounts for a large share and almost all workers are casual/ contract workers without security of tenure or job related benefits. In Delhi, a majority of the women work as domestic servants in neighbouring homes, or undertake sub contracted home based work. In both cities, the slums are characterized by poor drainage, lack of toilets, water and electricity, and poor housing.

Partner NGOs in the ILO- Government of India project are expected to undertake pre-project activities, to mobilize the community, help in awareness generation, provide support services such as child care facilities, nutritional supplements for children. Other complementary activities include medical aid, health check-ups, information dissemination about health, hygiene and sanitation, HIV/AIDS and STDs, workshops on constitutional rights and rights at the workplace. The NGOs conduct a needs assessment to identify the training that would be acceptable to women in the target communities. Efforts to form Self Help Groups have accompanied the training effort.

A recent review of this project threw some light on what are the positive aspects of such an approach, and what are the constraints that still limit the achievements of the approach. Started in 2001, a total of 1,600 women have been trained in Delhi and Bangalore under this project in the first 2 years.

Among the positive aspects of the programme, are the following.

² This section draws upon a report recently written on the programme. See ISST 2004.

³ See <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/asro/newdelhi/programs/empwmen.htm>

- Access: The project is especially intended to reach out to married women, and literacy is not a pre requisite.
- Flexibility in entry criteria and choice of courses: The project encourages women to acquire non-traditional skills such as electrical wiring, electronics components, assembling transformers and masonry. These modules are being developed by existing government training institutes.
- Holistic approach to training: the project seeks to provide training in life skills as well as the technical training. Support, in the form of child care or counseling, is essential for women to complete and use the training. Influencing attitudes and learning how to tackle day-to-day practical problems is a relatively invisible but not less valuable part of this project.
- Direct and indirect benefits: ensuring that women are able to benefit from the training through increased income is the single most important indicator of the effectiveness of the project. But there are also indirect benefits. Where women have been able to use their training, they have often become role models for the community, and encouraged many other women. One group that has learnt taxi driving, but have not yet been able to set up in business, nonetheless are proud to have asserted their ability in a traditionally male dominated field.
- Follow up and continued support: Counseling and placement has been a major thrust area of the project, and is needed in a situation where women's entry into new trades often encounters resistance from male members of the household or the community.

Thus, what distinguishes this initiative is not just the lowering of the entry barriers, but also the fact that training per se is supplemented by a range of supportive services and awareness raising information dissemination, both during the period of the training, but, very importantly, in trying to provide support even after the training is over. Although the project will judge its success by its ability to raise incomes and provide regular work to the women who have been trained, it is clearly a programme for 'empowerment' as well.

The project has faced certain difficulties, and these are revealing in showing the nature of the constraints that women have to overcome.

- A number of women, particularly in Delhi, opted for training in traditional trades such as textile/garment construction and embroidery. Some women, who had opted for training in non-traditional trades, were unable to continue working in these new areas, mainly due to household pressures, and were found to revert to earlier jobs.
- There is a shortage of trainers available to the NGOs, although expanding the numbers of trainers is itself an objective of the project.
- Perhaps the most difficult part of the effort is enabling newly trained women to access new jobs. Developing these linkages is one of the project objectives. Skills such as taxi driving, horticulture, machine knitting and transformer assembly, repairing household gadgets may require additional inputs other than

training to be able to translate into new opportunities - attitudinal change is needed even when actual employment opportunities and market demand are high, for women to gain acceptance and break through barriers. In some cases markets are fairly stable and there is a level of continuous demand such as in the case of domestic housekeeping. In other cases while demand exist it is more difficult to place poor women who compete with others whose contacts and social networks are stronger.

The project has confirmed that continuous support would be needed to allow women to overcome the age old barriers both within the household and in society and enter non traditional occupations. It has shown both the potential of success as also the difficulties of trying to change the existing patterns of income earning.

Vocational Training for Women – the way forward

Young married women with low levels of education, or none, might not appear to be a natural target group for vocational education. The discussion above suggests that there is some experience to show that it can work, but also that it needs sustained effort on the part of potential employers, institutions for credit and marketing, government institutions, NGOs, the women themselves.

Success in extending the vocational training/ skill development infrastructure to women in informal employment requires on the one hand the creation of appropriate material and modules, lowering the entry barriers, and creating a supportive environment within which the training is offered, which includes assisting in the setting up of facilities like crèches, and developing market linkages. In practice, it is very possible to do all of these, but not without an active intermediary agent: which in most cases is an NGO (see for example, Mitra 2002).

Perhaps the stronger barrier is the countervailing force exercised by prevailing and traditional gender relations, which act as a strong force persuading women to opt for home based work in preference to other opportunities where the workplace is separated from the home. In response to this, the training-work link needs to actively embrace self employed/ home based work, and to develop appropriate marketing structures. The danger with home based work, apart from the feminist issue of static gender roles, is the likelihood of getting into exploitative contractual relations. This can be avoided if women workers are given visibility, encouraged to organize into groups, and thus strengthen their bargaining power and their information about the market. All of this is well done as an accompaniment to training.

In conclusion, training that is holistic includes various supportive activities in addition to the skill/vocational training per se, has great potential to reach out to young women even though they are out of school and may have household responsibilities after marriage.

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