

Social Innovation

“Initially, when I had to go out for work, my husband would send his two sisters with me. Now, he doesn't. Now, he has no problem when I want to go out on my own.”

Skilled Women-Mason, Self Employed Women's Association, India

Percentage of Women in the Workforce:

Bangladesh

- **24% of the employed labour force**
- **91% of women and 87% of the men are informally employed**

India

- **women comprise 31% of the total workforce, and 32% of the informal workforce**
- **96% of the female workforce is informally employed**

Sources:

ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific; Asian Development Bank. Women and Labour Markets in Asia: Rebalancing for Gender Equality. (Bangkok: ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, 2011), accessed January 17th, 2012, www.adb.org/documents/reports/women.../women-labor-markets.pdf

Maligalig, D.S.; et al.. 2009. Informal employment in Bangladesh. ADB Economics Working Paper Series No. 155. (Manila, ADB). 26.

“In 2006, 1.7 million people worked in the informal economy and in 2010 the number had grown to 2.2 million people. Of the over two million people engaged in Nairobi's informal economy, about 68% are women.”

Source:

Mary NjeriKinyanjui, “Crossing Boundaries: Women in Informal Sector and Urban Dynamism.” Bergen University, Department of Geography. <http://www.uib.no/geografi/en/seminar/2011/09/crossing-boundaries-women-in-informal-sector-and-urban-dynamism>. Accessed January 17th, 2012.

“Globally, out of 1.3 billion people living in poverty 70 percent are women. Women comprise the poorest of the poor and are the most vulnerable section of society.”

Source:

<http://www.cawinfo.org/2011/03/wage-discrimination-against-women-in-informal-sector-aggravating-poverty/>. Accessed on January 17, 2012.



Imagine

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Strides in Process Innovation: Women's Transformative Power

An Editorial by Dr. Vinita Sharma

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My experience at the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, has taught me that women have an immense capacity for catalysing change and enabling process innovation. The best ideas for innovative programmes that yield tremendous on-the-ground success do not come from my desk. They come from the women of our villages, who are expert multi-taskers, innovators, and managers of their own resources.

It is certainly this government's duty to facilitate its citizens' efforts to improve their lives, especially in the face of dizzying global upheavals and climate change vulnerability, as well as economic and cultural change. Still, our role as government workers has always and foremost consisted in supplying the materials required for improvements, while the energy, and transformative power flow from the women who realise these improvements. If I were to stop going into the field, my ability as a facilitator would simply dry up, and I am convinced that the set of circumstances I have just described holds true for most interactions between local populations and programme planners.

To ensure the effectiveness of policy measures and their tight linkage to on-the-ground practice, government workers must immerse themselves in local milieus and become both recipients and instruments of women's expertise in the needs and capacities of particular socio-economic and cultural contexts.

As co-operative efforts take off the ground, surprising innovations emerge, channeling unexpected outcomes. I will draw on my Department's experience in the village of the Mandi in the state of Himachal Pradesh, where the Government of India implemented a programme on the cultivation of a high-value medicinal plant called Picrorhiza kurroa, which is used in the treatment of Hepatitis B. This innovative initiative was proposed to encourage crop diversity and alternative means of income generation.

The course of the scheme was Picrorhiza kurroa: although its roots cannot be harvested until the women of the Mandi district in households partly on proceeds from plant cultivation programme was in three-year waiting period prior to would have meant the loss of an this rare plant. Rather than allowing Mandi district took part in the mushroom cultivation programme whose purpose was to sustain the local households during the three-year waiting period that preceded the harvesting of the target medicinal cash crop. Since mushroom cultivation requires excellent household hygiene, the women of Mandi readily implemented improved hygiene practices



Picrorhiza kurroa

influenced by a peculiarity of can be sold for a handsome profit, three years after planting. Since the Himachal Pradesh run their the yield of their lands, the medicinal danger of failure due to the need for a harvesting. Aborting the scheme enormous investment in the seed of the project to fail, the women of the planning and execution of a parallel

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into their lifestyles through their determination to bring their entrepreneurial venture to a successful conclusion. The fortunate side effect of this interim livelihood scheme was that the village garnered public acclaim for its superb cleanliness, and the population saw a dramatic decrease in the incidence of diarrhea and morbidity. Resulting income generation successes from the parallel mushroom and medicinal plant growing schemes gave the women a sense of empowerment and personal achievement. Further, the Prime Minister's award for maintaining an impeccably clean village environment bolstered the self-esteem of the entire community. Such additional achievements were not at all the intended objectives of the medicinal plant scheme, but the incorporation of innovative process design elements triggered a chain-reaction of fortunate outcomes.

This has been just one among many stories of how a programme undertaken with the full participation of local women is bound to result in innovative measures enabling the emergence of multiple benefits. In the case of the village of Mandi, the enormous advantages included women's heightened cognisance of their own decision-making and problem-solving capacities, income generation, improvements in the health of the community, and a sense of pride in the achievements and positive lifestyle changes of Mandi residents. We must therefore stress the necessity for the empowerment-oriented participation of women in innovative programme planning and execution, and pay tribute to our women's achievements in process innovation, ensuring that neither our society, nor the women themselves take the magnitude of such accomplishments for granted.



Innovation is the ability to see change as an opportunity - not a threat

Bill Gates

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Informal Sector Innovations

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India has recently celebrated the festival of lights, with decorative earthen lamps which have probably passed through the hands of several enterprising women working in the informal sector before they reached our homes and illuminated our doorsteps. It is amazing how this latent workforce emerges from the shadows and dominates the sales of traditional festival-related merchandise with clockwork regularity. This is the humblest form of innovation at which this silent workforce excels. It is unfortunate that innovation by women in the informal sector goes unnoticed and uncaptured, as a result of which women find themselves unable to leverage or add value to their short-lived and seasonal efforts for sustained economical advantage. Perhaps that is why so many women who work in the informal sector remain poor despite their contributions to the economy.

In this very situation, it is then heartening to note that the spirit of some women working in the informal sector is indomitable enough to rise above being merely dependent sub-contract workers and casual wage earners to become independent own-account producers and finally become employers of other women. However, the precise relationship between informal employment and the intensity of poverty appears only when informal workers are disaggregated by sub-sectors of the economy, status of employment (i.e., employer, self-employed, worker), and gender, as has been summarised below:

Gender, Informality and Poverty¹

Gender and Employment in the Informal Economy

- The majority of women in the informal sector are own-account traders and producers or

casual and subcontract workers. Relatively few are employers who themselves hire paid workers.

- Men and women tend to become involved in different activities or types of employment even within the same trades. In many countries, for example, male traders tend to have larger scale operations and deal in non-food items while female traders tend to have smaller scale operations and deal in food items.

Gender and Income in the Informal Economy

- The average income of both men and women is lower in the informal sector than in the formal sector.
- The gender gap in income/wages appears higher in the informal sector than in the formal sector and exists even when the women are not wage workers.
- The relatively large gender gap in income/wages in the informal sector is largely due to two interrelated factors.
- Informal incomes worldwide tend to decline as one moves across the following types of employment: employer – self-employed – casual waged worker – sub-contract worker. Women worldwide are underrepresented in high-income activities and overrepresented in low-income work (notably, subcontract work).

Innovation as the Catalyst for Change

An essential catalyst required for an informal sector worker to make the transition from being an informal sector wage earner to being a producer is, undoubtedly, innovative. A study conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women in a publication called 'Innovation for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality' has identified the core levers that are essential for innovation to empower women and transform gender relations.

Technology, Change in Social Norms and Economic Resilience

At the most basic level, innovations can benefit women simply by improving their well-being in

¹ This summarises the findings of two papers commissioned by the World Bank and written by S.V. Sethuraman (Independent Consultant, ex-ILO) and Jacques Charmes (Institute of Development Research and University of Versailles, France) who reviewed the existing literature and statistics, respectively, on the links between gender, poverty, and the informal sector.

terms of health, nutrition, income, even life span. Beyond vital improvements in well-being, innovations can lead to women's empowerment, securing freedom and resources for women to make decisions, build confidence and act in their own interests. Deeper and truly transformative innovations reshape men's and women's roles, affecting long-term change. Examples abound of instances where only yesterday women were immobile, but today move freely; where women were silent but today have a voice; where women were dependent but today are the engines of progress for their families, businesses and communities.

It is equally important to identify the potential for innovations and promote them rather than adopting a top-down approach. The clear advantage in following this approach is because grassroots innovations by women take into account the prevailing socio-cultural norms, which, in turn, influence the nature, activities and results of these innovations. There is a sense of organic growth in this process, which deserves acknowledgement and nurturing.

Informal Sector Innovations by Rural Women

Rural women's experience offers examples of successful innovative endeavours that help women transcend the boundaries of their homes and influence policy decisions at various levels. In an NGO-led Water and Sanitation programme in Gujarat, women insisted on the inclusion of bathrooms alongside toilets. This model was later adopted as a standard unit for future programmes. The positive impact of this decision on the health and personal hygiene of these women bears ample testimony to the power yielded by innovative thought. Innovations are apparent in water management activities as well, from installation of RO water filtration plants for selling potable water to creating pedal-powered water pumps.

Informal sector innovations by women can also be captured the field of renewable energy and household improvements: where women are both



mainstream users and producers, they can also prove to be effective agents of change. Women are responsible for the collection storage and use of biomass and fuel for cooking. They also face the consequences of carbon emissions on their health and well-being. Apart from influencing the design and development of efficient cookstoves, innovations can even influence kitchen layouts and home designs. A participatory approach will cert

Innovations abound where visible advantages are assured: for example, in mobile telephony. Traditional skills form a firm basis for inculcating innovation with the help of appropriate technology, financial assistance, management and access to markets.



ainly yield encouraging results in this sector.

Rural women have proved to be repositories of traditional knowledge of agricultural practices, alternative and natural medicine, food and nutrition, etc. It is a vast area with the potential for encouraging informal sector enterprise for the documentation and marketing of this invaluable and fast-receding knowledge base. However,



appropriate technological support as well as communication encouraging behavioural change would be required to incubate the idea and lead it to fruition.

Informal Sector Innovations by Urban Women

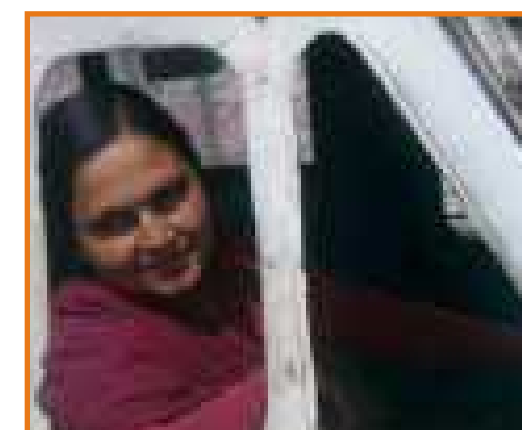
Similarly, in urban areas, informal sector innovations are successful in meeting specific needs of the urban lifestyle by providing cost-effective and quality products and services. Behind the successful 'dabba wallahs' service which has received extraordinary exposure is an army of home entrepreneurs churning out tiffins for numerous office goers and senior citizens who require assisted living. Similarly, there is a new cadre of women taxi drivers that convey lady passengers arriving in the city on late night flights to their destinations. Clearly, this is a case of innovation in response to the need of a specific niche. In the same vein, health care, child care and other care-giving services are provided by women



in the informal sector.

Mainstreaming Informal Sector Innovations

If the basic principles of marketing can be applied and a bridge created to link informal sector workers with the existing needs for products and services, several micro enterprises can spawn from this effort. However, it is important to allow the women to lead the innovation and devise products and services that work both for them as well as for their customers and clientele. Support services for



Women taxi drivers in Nepal have identified a need and are addressing it through innovating thinking. Similar businesses, such as Priyadarshini Taxi, are also available in Mumbai.

providing access to finance, opportunities for pilot testing and assistance for providing technology solutions, networking and counseling should be made available to assist and bring them into the mainstream, where and when required.

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Informal sector innovation by this beauty parlour owner in Gujarat is addressing the aspirations of women living in small towns.



Lami Alhassan,
member of Kanfiahiyili shea
butter processing group, Ghana
Source: USAID
Photographer: Louis Stippel

Formalising the Informal Sector: The Role of Women

Ms. Vositha Wijenayake

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Sri Lankan Youth Climate Action Network (SLYCAN)

Recent years have borne witness to a huge leap in terms of women's empowerment and innovation conducted by women, who have come to claim new opportunities in a range of sectors. These reforms are allowing women to become financial contributors to their households and to make conscious changes in their own lifestyles and earning potential, as well as in the fabric of the global economy. Such progressive strides have elevated women's self-esteem, and motivated them to seek better work conditions and standards of living. However, the situation of women employed in the informal sector remains highly problematic. While informal sector employment allows women to earn livelihoods that are not accessible through other means, it does not permit workers to lay claim to many employment benefits that are available within the formal sector. Economic and social development efforts must therefore incorporate solutions designed to improve the condition and protect the rights of women employed in the informal sector.

Informal sector employment is frequently the only available means of earning a living for many women, especially those who lack education and training necessary for entering the formal sector. While informal sector work allows women to earn the incomes without which they would be unable to run their households, current conditions pervading the informal sector simultaneously deprive women of job security and render them susceptible to systemic disadvantages. The employer category within the informal economy is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and females comprise the most vulnerable layers of the informal labour force. Between 50 and 75 per cent of all informal women workers currently engage in "vulnerable employment." According to pervasive assumptions, men are generally considered to be "breadwinners," while women are perceived to be the "secondary earners" within a family unit. As a result, women tend to be more vulnerable to dismissals and have lower levels rates of job retention and rehiring.

Economic development cannot progress toward a more equitable distribution of financial and social benefits without concerted policy measures to



improve the labour conditions of and prevent systemic discrimination against the most vulnerable members of the global workforce. The need for policy development targeting the informal sector is currently becoming all the more urgent due to the economic downturn accompanied by increasing anxieties regarding forced migration and climate change vulnerability.

Pervasive poverty is an additional problem facing women workers of the informal sector, the vast majority of whom fall into the category of the “working poor” despite the typically arduous labour and long hours associated with informal livelihoods. Informal sector earning opportunities tend to be insufficient for enabling women adequately to provide for their families, or to ensure that their children receive an education that would make it possible for them to occupy a more advantageous position in the labour market. Low wages within the informal sector tend to perpetuate a vicious cycle of poverty in the absence of social protections.

In addition, women have also been much more likely than men to work from their own homes. This category includes the self-employed who are engaged in family businesses or operations. Although working in the home provides women with income-generating opportunities, the blurred distinction between “place of work” and “place of residence” leads to a host of disadvantages that prevent the women from gaining the protection of employment and labour rights. Further, working within the home removes women from the public eye. Decreased workplace visibility makes it more difficult for women to gain legal and social recognition as workers, reducing their opportunities to access social protections, skill upgrading, and placements in trade unions whose bargaining power and emphasis on solidarity could make an enormous difference in their condition. The recent global financial and economic crisis has

further demonstrated the need for greater gender equality in the labour market – a measure that would enable developing nations to utilise the talents and labour power of women, and consequently empower economies to resist shocks and to support recovery and poverty reduction programmes. A methodology in achieving this objective can be perceived as investing in women's full economic potential, providing venues to increased productivity and economic growth. It also provides support to a more balanced and sustainable development. Investments in gender equality play a key role in harnessing the domestic demand and rebalancing growth in developing Asia.

In a world plunged into a global economic crisis, women are frequently the most affected. An observation of the financial crisis which began in 2008 has illustrated that it is the women who have disproportionately shouldered 'the brunt of the impacts because they were already structurally disempowered and marginalized in the labour market before the crisis.' Furthermore, in developing Asian countries, women form the 'buffer workforce,' which is composed of 'secondary earners' or 'added workers.' Despite forming the economic buffer, women themselves had few buffers against economic crises and the range and effectiveness of buffers available to informal sector workers were inadequate. To address the issue of women's vulnerability in employment situations, promoting stronger domestic-led growth in place of export-led growth during the post-crisis era, shifts to green jobs and green enterprises as well as deeper regional integration across Asia are urgently needed. To reach this end, supporting women's entrepreneurship as well as small and medium-sized enterprises, assisting women in agriculture and rural employment and establishing gender-responsive social protection systems will play a key role. Public employment programmes have been recognised as a valuable tool in addressing the deficits existent in the informal sector. However, in

the creation of such employment programmes, one needs to address the rights of those affected, as well as the challenges they face. In addition to this, governments must seek to reduce the deficit of decent work in the informal economy and institute a 'level playing field' for informal workers. In order to facilitate this, the following conditions must be satisfied:

- **Protection of informal workers and enterprises through the legal recognition of commercial rights for informal businesses, as well as labour rights, property rights and social protections for informal wage workers.**
- **Improvement in the productivity of informal enterprises through promotional programmes**
- **Enhancement the employability of informal workers through capacity building.**
- **Measures to support small producers and enhance women's entrepreneurial skills and opportunities**
- **The implementation of participatory policy-making**
- **The inclusion of informal sector representatives in rule setting and collective bargaining institutions and processes**
- **Targeted measures intended to aid those who are especially disadvantaged or subject to discrimination, such as domestic workers, young obsekers or migrant workers**

Formalisation of informal enterprises and informal jobs is another means of addressing the vulnerability of the informal sector. In order to

reach formalisation, the focus needs to be placed on legally recognised rights and the benefits of formal operations. This entails the creation of incentives for informal enterprises to formalise socially responsible employment practices, and parallel regulation of labour markets to extend the same basic worker benefits and rights to informal wage-workers as those currently available to formal workers.

Expansion of formal employment opportunities and attention to both quantity and quality in the process of job creation are also key factors in the empowerment of women working in the informal sector. Thus, gender-equitable measures should promote the employability of workers, especially by ensuring that women have access to the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance the ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure new jobs, and enter the labour market more easily at all stages of the life cycle.

From both a moral and an economical perspective, societies cannot afford to remain consciously ignorant either of women's role in the informal sector. The benefits of cheap informal sector labour and the fulfilment of “buffer functions” by the economically marginalised cannot remain an incentive for ignoring social and economic injustices. In achieving economical and social growth, social equity and social justice, the situation of women workers of the informal must be taken into account: it is for societies and governments to provide 'economic buffers' to those who themselves play the role of 'buffers' during economic crises.

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Women and labour markets in Asia: Rebalancing towards gender equality in labour markets in Asia / ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific; Asian Development Bank, Bangkok: ILO, 2011. p. 56

[Http://www.adb.org/documents/reports/women-labor-markets/women-labor-markets.pdf](http://www.adb.org/documents/reports/women-labor-markets/women-labor-markets.pdf)

Women in the Informal Sector: Innovative Pathways

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The informal sector of a nation's economy does not come under conventional forms of governance. Businesses and enterprises in the informal sector are not taxed or monitored by authorities, nor do they contribute to a nation's GDP. The informal sector is, nonetheless, an integral part of all economies across the world. Informal employment makes up 48 per cent of non-agricultural employment in North Africa, 51 per cent in Latin America, 65 per cent in Asia and 72 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. In India, as in many other sub-Saharan countries, the percentage rises beyond 90 once agriculture is taken into account. Further, women constitute the greatest proportion of the workforce in the informal sector: up to sixty per cent in the developing world. Significantly, many of these women are the primary earners of



their families, yet the vital importance of their work tends to be unrewarded due to the low wages as well as the lack of access to employee benefits, training and legal protections characteristic of the informal sector. Women's untapped skills and potential could go a long way in bringing about gender equality and consequently, improved economic efficiency. This can remove barriers that prevent women from having equal access to education and economic opportunities.

Women's Untapped Skills and Talent

Equal opportunities for women and men can have an immense impact on development and productivity. Women's labour accounts for nearly two-thirds of the total global working hours but they receive only one-tenth of the total world income. In the agricultural sector, women are often unpaid or underpaid, although they constitute 43 per cent of the total agricultural workforce. The underuse and misallocation of women's labour in both the formal and the informal sectors is leading to economic losses. Gender gaps in earnings and productivity persist across all forms of economic activity—in agriculture, in wage employment, and in entrepreneurship. Although women have entered the labour force in larger numbers in recent times, this change has not translated into equal opportunities and equal pay for men and women. Women still are more likely to be engaged in unpaid family employment or work in the informal wage sector.

Innovation: Key to Women's Empowerment

Innovative approaches are key to progress toward women's economic resilience and supporting women in overcoming livelihood barriers and producing a more equitable flow of financial and non-financial opportunities. Innovations that benefit both the formal and the informal sector include products and services such as microfinance, including credit, savings and insurance; legal and social strategies to increase women's access to productive assets and viable employment opportunities. Researchers point out that state-led innovations for women's economic resilience can rapidly reach large numbers of self-employed as well as wage-employed women and demonstrate incremental improvements in women's well-being and empowerment at individual and household levels. However, before

Pursuing these innovations, we need to keep in mind that the introduction of skill building for women to bring them on par with men is a must for a sustainable approach to innovation, especially in the informal sector's labour force.

A grassroots-level, holistic and gender-equitable institution-building process is an alternative innovation path for improving women's well-being and achieving their empowerment at the individual and household levels. The informal sector must



Barefoot Engineers from SEWA

provide physical and social security to women beneficiaries. To achieve the best results, any sector has to adopt a strategy that aligns the work to the culture and tradition of the target population.

A strategic partnership between government, the public sector and civil society is a crucial component of women's empowerment. These three players can lead innovations, and no single sector has the unique pathway to success.



Smallholder Woman Farmer, Zambia
Source: IDE Zambia

Partnerships leverage broader reach and resources to yield wider, larger-scale results.

Many organisations and sectors are trying to leverage innovation to improve the lives of poor women and empower them to realise their potential. When innovations are introduced and diffused with a gender lens to determine their implications for women's well-being, empowerment and gender equality, a powerful, untapped strategy emerges—a strategy that has the potential to transform women's lives and do transform the lives of millions of women. Engaging women from the very first step of innovation processes can go a long way toward ensuring that these measures address women's needs and bring about positive and significant impacts on women's empowerment. In order for innovations to change women's lives and bring about a lasting and enabling influence, women must play a central role in the design of innovative approaches to social and economic empowerment.

If the goal of improving women's opportunities and standard of living is to be achieved, a host of existing barriers will have to be dismantled and removed. The key to this lies in organising people for concerted work toward this end through the power of unity and collective voice.



Woman street vendor: Pusan, South Korea

Maricel Merlo - A San Francisco Success Story

Written By: Fundación Paraguaya

Seventh of ten brothers and sisters, Maricel Merlo was born in a modest home some five kilometres from San Pablo Kokueré, Paraguay. From the time she was very little, she had to go out with her siblings and sell vegetables door to door in the nearest town, walking many kilometres each day. 'As long as I can remember, we would get up very early and the younger ones accompanied Dad to the field to work,' said Maricel. 'My older sisters stayed at home helping Mom with household chores.' Sometimes, it was her turn to gather wood so her father could heat the mud oven from which they extracted the essential oil from sour orange leaves, called petit



grain, in order to sell to an intermediary. At other times, Maricel helped separate the weeds from the yucca root branches that would have to be planted.

From the age of five, Maricel would put on her school uniform every day at noon and walk five kilometres with her siblings to the little school where she received her first three years of education under a lush, shady tree. 'Ever since I was a little girl, I dreamed of studying and helping my family,' explained Maricel. 'I knew that by staying in San Pablo Kokueré I was not going to achieve that. I watched as others finished their schooling and went off to work as household

domestics.' As she was about to complete her elementary and junior school studies, her uncle told her about an agricultural high school where, alongside learning about agriculture and livestock, one could also develop entrepreneurial skills. In January 2006, Maricel arrived at the San Francisco Agricultural High School with a handful of goals and dreams: get that technical agriculture high school diploma, a quality education, learn entrepreneurial skills and acquire competence in business.

During her three years of studies, Maricel received technical business training in high quality entrepreneurial competencies and skills. She developed useful skills and knowledge for immediate and practical application in agribusiness, both at the university and on the family farm. These skills and abilities have enabled her to enter the workforce and improve the quality of her life. Three years later, in December 2008, Maricel was part of the first batch of women graduates of the San Francisco Agriculture School with a technical high school diploma. In less than three months, she found a job, and today she is Adviser for the Rural Women's Committee of the Fundación Paraguaya in the Department of San Pedro. Here she helps about 280 women access resources to invest in productive activities and trains them in skills such as communication, personal and family budgets, teamwork and business administration. She plans to save some money so that she can go to University and study agronomy.

Source:

LEAD Pakistan, Final Report, 2011. Entrepreneurship and Skill Development through School-Based Enterprises: Has it worked for women? p. 29

Women Builders Drive Innovation

In an Indian state that survived a major earthquake at the turn of the millennium, the women have come together for mutual empowerment to address their communities' needs. In Gujarat, the people had a need for reliable, disaster-safe housing. The women needed stable sources of income that would not force them to migrate; they also needed to gain a sense of respect in the community, to gain a sense of professional confidence, and to have their voices heard. Through a confluence of three streams for change, the women's movement, the labour movement and the cooperative movement, women are offering innovative solutions to provide for immediate necessities. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a builders' trade union heading the forefront of social innovation.

Uncompromising when it comes to gender equality, the SEWA trade union includes a 50-50 mix of men and women as shareholders, and a mix of seven women to four men on the ruling committees, elected by villagers to address the local people's needs when it comes to housing design and construction. Women work alongside men as skilled and semi-skilled masons. Over time, the men of the rural communities in Gujarat have come to recognise women as their equals. Now, some men even claim that women can surpass their male counterparts in their performance: "The work that we do, they can do, but a lot of the work that they do, we cannot." Such sentiments are proof of truly effective cultural innovation taking place in the region.

An additional innovative aspect of SEWA's work is their success in having made available a local production base in the villages—a source of livelihood for women that allows them to earn without migrating long distances away from their homes, but also gives them the opportunity to work outside their villages if they wish to do so, and if the income is satisfactory. The women are involved in productive labour, such as the construction of door and window frames, and the production of building materials such as bricks. Away from home, women

are involved in the construction of water harvesting structures and toilet blocks.

Another major innovation achieved by SEWA is the tools and equipment bank, which ensures that skilled workers within the company do not have to turn down job opportunities just because they do not have the necessary instruments. By paying nominal usage fees, all members can solicit work on their own, by posting their own tenders. The tools and equipment bank provided by SEWA allows workers to respond to incoming orders and begin projects without delay.



Women builders, SEWA

SEWA's women participants are independent, and can sustain themselves without the support of their husbands. Their self-sufficiency has helped to elevate their confidence levels. These women have now travelled to different villages for work, and they now command a new sort of respect. On being asked about how their lives have changed since they have become part of SEWA, one woman says: "We used to stay quiet, but not anymore." Her fellow SEWA member adds: "We have become strong."

Contributed by:

Development Alternatives Group

Women in the Driver's Seat ...CARE Bangladesh Shows the Way

During my recent visit to CARE Bangladesh, I was particularly moved on meeting with its female drivers—not the well-heeled ones driving their own cars, but those who do it for a living, often called chauffeurs when they drive privileged people around. Why was I moved? What was so special? Reflecting on these questions, I realised there are many reasons for this—personal, professional and societal. The experiences and the stories of these women drivers demonstrated that with a lot of courage and conviction and a bit of support women can break free from the rigid traditional norms that restrict them, and move into new roles that help them realise their full potential.

CARE Bangladesh, the innovator under the spotlight in this issue of Imagine, has identified two concurrent needs: first, the need for women drivers to access job opportunities in a traditionally male-dominated field; second, the need for women to assert their right to mobility despite the pressures of conservatism. To address these two requirements, CARE Bangladesh introduced a striking process innovation by training female drivers and marketing their services in a cultural context still reticent to accept women's mobility and independence. What CARE Bangladesh has achieved is not just a successful initiative but a movement that demonstrates a world of possibilities. What was thought to be impossible just 10 years ago is now a well-accepted reality.

I received a message from CARE Bangladesh about the arrangements for my airport pick up. It said, 'You will be picked up by a CARE driver. She will be holding a placard with your name on it.' I re-read the message once again and only then did its significance hit me. Yes, I am going to be picked for the first time in my many travels with CARE by a female driver. That was when I really started looking forward to the experience.

At Dhaka airport, I was met by Rekha Akter, dressed in a traditional Bangladeshi outfit, nothing really differentiating her as a professional driver from the many other women at the airport. As our car started moving through the slow traffic, I noticed that every time the vehicles stopped, the drivers in the vehicles around us would start looking casually around and would simply stop in amazement when they found a lady sitting in the driver's seat. Most of them would not take their gaze off until the vehicles from behind started honking. I hardly saw any other car being driven by ladies in Dhaka streets. Used to the numerous women drivers on Delhi's roads, I was not surprised at my driver's gender. However, what really amazed me was Rekha's cool and dignified demeanor. She seemed oblivious to all the attention that she was drawing and drove on with a professional expression.

What attracted these young women coming from poor families to driving vehicles were the freedom of movement and the possibility of seeing many different places as also earning a decent income.

Of course, this journey is not without its share of challenges. Night driving, especially in remote areas, is a real challenge. What if the vehicle breaks down or the weather turns bad? And, of course, societal and family pressures keep surfacing. As one of the women drivers said, 'It needs constant effort to keep my job. I am lucky to have a cooperative husband but after a couple of years, my husband asked me to leave the job. He said, "Now that you have tried it, stay at home. There is no need for you to work. I am capable of taking care of you and our children." However, I feel good about working and feel that if both of us earn, we can give a better education and life to our children. I will continue in my efforts to convince him and hope that I can continue to work as long as I want.'

Despite all the positive experiences, I heard that some managers don't want women to be assigned as their drivers. Despite motivational efforts, women drivers have apparently not yet been appointed for private home use because of social stigmas associated with the issue. In addition to the women themselves, who took the initiative to be where they are, we also have to recognise and appreciate the pivotal role played by the CARE leadership, the Gender and Diversity Team, the cooperation of the Transport Service Department and male drivers in CARE Bangladesh. The male drivers are, by and large, cooperative. In the words of the women drivers, 'They taught us how to fill forms required by the transport department and they sometimes step in to do late night duties in our place if required.'

Women drivers of CARE drive sedans, three-tonne vehicles, pickups and microbuses. They work for offices both in the city as well as in a number of districts. They are considered to be more law-abiding and honest in comparison with their male counterparts. CARE Bangladesh has trained nearly 50 women so far and currently employs around 22 female drivers. The women trained by CARE are now increasingly being hired by other UN organisations and NGOs, thus creating a movement of sorts. An innovative idea piloted by CARE Bangladesh as part of their efforts to promote gender equity, which was confronted by opposition, has now become something that every one is proud to be a part of. It has been successful in supporting women's entry into a traditionally male-dominated profession.

I wish to end this note by an interesting anecdote that one of the women drivers shared. 'Once, after dropping off some CARE staff for a meeting, I was waiting next to the car. A middle-aged man saw me and asked with a lot of doubt in his voice, "Do you drive this car?" To this, I replied, "No, I just sit in it."'

Source:

The credit for the Article rests with CARE Bangladesh and Ms. Madhuri Narayanan.

<http://gender.care2share.wikispaces.net/file/view/Women+in+the+drivers+seat-CARE+Bangladesh+shows+the+way-+8+March+2009.pdf>

