

GENDER, WORK, EMPOWERMENT: WORKING WOMEN IN RURAL SRI LANKA

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1. INTRODUCTION: EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

This paper concerns self-empowerment of women engaged in small group activities carried out under the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP hereafter) in Matara District of southern Sri Lanka.

My trip to Sri Lanka in October 1990, after 8 years since the last visit, confronted me with numerous issues. As a member of the Country Study Group for Development Assistance to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, organized by the Japan International Cooperation Agency, I had a chance to visit the Matara IRDP office. I did interviews with local development officials, as well as women participating in income generating activities in KS village within the district. From those experiences, I became interested in the linkage between my original study of working Sri Lankan women and women's issues in development.

I had already been deeply impressed during my previous fieldwork to see how vigorously and industriously Sri Lankan women were working, without complaining about their living conditions.¹⁾ During my visit in 1990, I received the same kind of impression from the women participating in the rural development.

There is another side to the criticizing of the current state of development cooperation which is said to be ineffective due to disregard of local culture and the failure to adjust to local needs. Few anthropologists have described positive aspects of development projects. They generally criticize them from the viewpoint of cultural relativism. Development projects are considered to be imposed by Western culture against local culture.²⁾

However, the women participating in income generating activities, with whom I had interviews, expressed their joy and showed their vitality in ways which any ob-

jective analysis or quantitative evaluation of development projects can scarcely make clear.

The affirmative side of development should be investigated, in terms of empowerment of the socially disadvantaged women in the process of involvement in development projects. Significance of the transition from resigning oneself to one's fate to establishing individual autonomy should be emphasized as a starting point towards economic independence. This transition seemed to represent a movement towards self-empowerment for Lankan rural women.

Their merry, bright talk impressed me strongly enough to pursue a further live-in survey concerning gender, work and empowerment of the village women from a holistic, anthropological viewpoint. Through an intensive, qualitative analysis, as anthropologists usually do, the inner, mental aspects of their empowerment process might be made clear.

In this preliminary report, a rough sketch of women's small group activities in KS village is presented. The live-in field surveys were conducted in 1990, 1997 and 1998, for four months in total.

2. IN KS VILLAGE

As of 1990, IRDP projects were in progress in about 10 districts in Sri Lanka. Half of them were concentrated on large-scale market-oriented regional schemes, such as provision of economic infrastructure and introduction of cash crops. Roads and irrigation channels were constructed to enhance local production. The remaining work focused on the multi-purpose small-scale projects operating concurrently in some target villages where many poor families were living: for instance, women's self-employment activities, accompanying micro-credit schemes, voluntary labor to develop village infrastructure and other development activities to improve the living standard of the rural poor. The main objective of IRDP in these latter projects was to support voluntary participation of local people in rural development.

The case of the Matara IRDP, which was launched in 1979, is a useful example to consider concerning participation in rural development. 90% of the project cost is granted by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) and 10% is

funded by the Government of Sri Lanka. The first phase extended from 1979 to 84, the second phase from 1984 to 88, the third phase from 1988 to 92, the fourth from 1992 to 95, and the last one will end in December 1998, after 20 years of operation in the district.

KS village is one of the target villages where local people live, in particular, at low economic standards. Various development projects have been carried out, from constructing a day care center on a *Shramadana* (unpaid communal labor) basis,³⁾ to cooperative housing construction and planting tea trees in home gardens, etc. In addition to these activities, women have been engaged in various income generating activities.

Women participating in these activities normally start discussing improvement of their living conditions in a group of as many as ten members. They hold meetings once a week, or every other week, so that they may collect small amounts of money for joint savings. They may also designate particular members to focus on a specific enterprise, to be run individually at a later time.⁴⁾ When any woman is ready to undertake her business, she may borrow money from the group fund, by rotation, to start or to enlarge her business.

Having established her business, a woman could be recommended by the social mobilizer to borrow money from the Community Credit Service without security, on a group solidarity basis.⁵⁾ The social mobilizer in KS village is called the *Samaja Niyamaka*. He is in charge of creating awareness among the rural poor, stimulating them to become more active in decisions concerning their own lives. He promotes savings plans and the start of income generating activities.

Women in KS village are engaged in the following enterprises:

(1) Making brown-colored envelopes

After purchasing used paper bags (cement containers) from a big cement manufacturing company in Galle Port, workers peel them into four or five sheets of paper and make envelopes of various sizes. The material cost of paper bags needed to make 500 envelopes is 250 rupees and 500 envelopes are sold for 510 rupees.⁶⁾ One can make 500 envelopes if working 8 hours a day.

(2) Cracking granite

A huge block of granite is cracked into small pieces, which are sold as construction materials for roads and houses. 5 hours of work a day for 3 weeks is the time needed to produce pieces of granite that can be sold in appropriate sizes. The total sales price for the pieces is 3000 Rs., while the material costs 800 Rs.

(3) Knitting socks and caps

From a knitware factory, excess from the trash is recycled as knit woolen socks and caps for babies. Rural women do this work at home. The sales per month totals 1000 Rs.

(4) Stuffing nuts and seasoning materials

Workers stuff tiny bags, which resemble lipstick in shape, with a variety of nuts, pepper, tamarinds, etc., and sell them as food and seasonings for breakfast. For 1 kg of nuts, the material cost is 48 Rs, and 12 Rs more for the plastic bags; the sales price is 80 Rs. It takes half a day to make tiny bags for 1 kg of nuts.

In addition to the above activities, sewing clothes, packing ingredients wrapped in betel leaves, making sweets, making mats and bags from coir yarns, and making shoes are practiced.

3. INCOME GENERATION/SELF-EMPLOYMENT IN THE FIELD OF "WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT (WID)"

In the field of WID, the type of projects discussed to this point is known as "income generation / self-employment". The objective is to alleviate rural poverty as well as to meet the basic human needs (BHN) of the rural poor. Since the 1970's, such small-scale projects, linked with the micro-credit scheme of the Gramin Bank type, have been implemented through the efforts of many poor women. The projects have been given approval due to their encouragement of active local participation and secured debt service ratio. They have been regarded as successful examples of self-help development. Since the 1980's, when income generation / self-employment was introduced by the IRDP, this element has been seen as indispensable for participatory development.⁷⁾

Despite these positive evaluations, there have been numerous criticisms as well.

These criticisms can be summarized in the following three points:

First, the sustainability and repercussions of these projects remain doubtful even among the development planners and practitioners. For example, a British geographer who took part in the Matara IRDP for ten years as a resident planning adviser on the donor side, made the following comment about spreading effects of the Matara IRDP:

"The participation in small-scale projects, including income generation, has given little effect in raising their economic standard while the other construction projects physically improved their living environments. It remains doubtful if the projects are sustainable after we leave this country. The impact or effect of the projects should be measured neither by the fact of how many villagers participated in a project nor how much it contributed to the improvement of their living conditions, but by the fact of how long it continued. The most important factor to bring sustainability to these projects depends on the entrepreneurship of participants. For example, the lack of entrepreneurship lies as the reason behind the failure of job-training projects of the Matara IRDP aimed for unemployed youth."⁸⁾

There have been rising doubts about effects to raise the economic standard of poor rural women, because the money has not been invested in business but dispersed as daily expenses. It may be a reasonable criticism that these projects can hardly "alleviate poverty", since most of the participants are not able to do much to increase their cash income

The second criticism concerns small-scale, peripheral characteristics of women's income generation. Income generation is not main-stream development, the argument goes, but nothing more than an extension of traditional, informal work done by village women. Government officials as well as feminists make this criticism, though from different viewpoints. Feminists say that these female activities will not bring any change to the male-oriented development system, although the income generating projects are the first example of partial recognition of the important role of women's

economic production within the development world. On the other hand, government officials point out the limited economic effect of these projects and try to promote participation of women in the formal labor force through strengthening the "economic" capacity of women. Both groups criticize the marginality of income generation, although their final goals are contrary; i.e. reconstructing in the case of feminists, and in the case of the officials, maintaining the development cooperation system that has existed since the Second World War.⁹⁾

The third criticism concerns the question of self-awareness and participation. Are rural women aware of their disadvantageous social situation? Is the participation in development based on their own will? Or are they forced to participate against their will? This raises the question of interaction between internal drive and external influence, and the conflict of local culture as opposed to universal value orientation. Cultural relativists insist that external development organizations impose the Western vision of development and gender equality, irrespective of local gender ideology; no positive effects are introduced, only more hardship for rural women in the form of overwork.

4. EMPOWERMENT AND SUBJECTIVITY

The significance of these criticisms should be noted, but it does not account for the internal phenomena within the minds of women as a result of participation in small group activities. When we discuss what women's empowerment is, deeper consideration into their mental world and establishment of women's subjectivity is required.

Previous study of WID has focused on only visible effects of group activities on women, but more emphasis should be placed on inner, mental aspects, and the sense of accomplishment gained by women through participation and mutual cooperation in their development activities. Political and gender aspects of women's empowerment are important, but so is this inner aspect.

In the field of WID, meanings of the word "empowerment" can be classified into three types. First, official development agencies make much of women getting objective ability accepted in a market economy.¹⁰⁾ Second, others, like members of

NGOs, attach importance to women's problem-solving and decision making abilities.¹¹ Third, feminists insist that women must have the power to change the current development system which is not only profit-oriented, but also male-oriented.¹² In any case, "empowerment" means getting the social power to remove obstacles in the pursuit of one's own well-being, which brings self-reliance and self-confidence to an individual living in the modern world.

In this connection, the last criticism concerning the failure in general of income-generating activities does not correspond to the case of women in KS village. Even if they cannot get economic independence or be freed from poverty, they can use their money for their own purposes, such as getting clothes or school supplies for their children, instead of always asking for their husbands' permission. They begin to feel they are able to achieve something through their cooperation, talking about problems and sharing work experiences. They enjoy the animation and excitement of group discussion. They know well the effectiveness of the information given by government officials and other group members. The project has been continued for more than 10 years and through periodic discussions and activities, the women are on familiar terms that they have never experienced in cooperation of the *Shramadana* type. The feeling of achieving something together enables them to have the modern sense of empowerment. They could not have begun their businesses without the help of group members, along with the support of development agents. Having viewed this state of women in development, it seems self-reliance is a starting point for the empowerment of poor women. This empowerment leads to a more individualistic, modernized self-image.

The apparent status of women in KS village is relevant to the specific context in which the village was established, in 1961 under a so-called "village expansion" program or settlement scheme. The settlers were married, landless people who differed from one another in their birth place, jobs and caste affiliation.¹³ But being heterogeneous in their culture and lacking money, the settlers on their vacant land could not help but collaborate with each other to improve their standard of living through self-help efforts and voluntary labor cooperation, in development activities for village construction. In this process, the integration of the village was produced.

Building basic infrastructure on a *Shramadana* basis was not imposition of Western viewpoints of development.

In addition, the villagers soon recognized the important roles of women in development because it turns out that men tend to participate in *Shramadana* activities only at the beginning, while women have been continuously involved over longer time periods. Men have shifted their attention to more individualistic income generation or other beneficial activities within the village framework. In contrast, women have not been traditionally entitled to participate in such activities.

According to my findings in this research, the small group income generating activities under IRDP have enabled women for the first time to make their own decisions and utilize the benefits from a cash economy. For more than 10 years they have enjoyed working together in a way that is different from participation in past community development. Participating as individuals in income generating activities has given them opportunities for empowerment as people living in the modern world. This is reflected in the positive aspects of their income generating activities.

In summary, it can be concluded that four points are vital for empowerment of rural women. First, their labor must be evaluated in the form of material reward. Two, they must be able to deal freely with the reward. Three, they share with each other the experience of expressing themselves in public and appreciating each other's activities. And, finally, they collaborate, having clear aims and making definite decisions so that each may pursue her own assignment individually.

Notes

- 1) Omori, Motoyoshi and Yoshiko Taniguchi, 1990.
- 2) Especially Japanese anthropologists have taken a critical attitude towards development co-operation. Generally speaking, they are reluctant to be involved in development projects.
- 3) In Sinhalese, "*shrama*" means energy or labor, while "*dana*" means donation and sharing. "*Shramadana*" means sharing working experience and mutual help. It has been frequently used as the symbolic word to express self-help development activities since the 1930's, done by Rural Development Societies.
- 4) In 1997 there were 10 groups in the East division of KS village and 9 groups in the West division. These groups have been established under the guidance of the social mobilizer called "*Samaja Niyamaka*" who is living in the village and employed by the Matara IRDP (These groups are referred as Samaja groups hereafter). Members of Samaja groups in total are 59 (East) and 61 (West) respectively. In addition there exist similar kind of income generating groups in KS village, which are recently founded under the influence of *Samurdhi* Movement inaugurated by the present government of Sri Lanka (These groups referred as Samurdhi groups hereafter).
- 5) The Cumulative amount of lending from group funds in 1997 reached 304,062 Rs (East) and 297,733 Rs (West). Numbers of lending cases are 484 (East) and 503 (West) respectively. On the other hand, lending from CCS amounted to 444,400 Rs (East) and 171,500 Rs (West). Numbers reached 177 (East) and 83 (West).
- 6) Roughly speaking, 1 rupee was equivalent to 2 yen in 1997. Per capita G. N. P. at current market prices in 1995 was 36,183 Rs.
- 7) Taniguchi 1995, Taniguchi 1997.
- 8) Taniguchi, 1998; 253-254.
- 9) Taniguchi, 1997; 236-237.
- 10) For instance, Ministry of Foreign affairs, JAPAN, 1995; 213.
- 11) Coady International Institute, 1991, etc.
- 12) Rathgeber, 1990; 489-502.

- 13) These newly settled villages are generally called "colonies". Matara District is divided into 14 Divisional Secretary Divisions, and in each division, 20 colonies or so have been established under various housing schemes. Most of them were constructed after 1977, when the country shifted its economic policy towards capitalism. KS village is one of the earliest colonies. Each settler was given 20 perches of residential land, but no land for cultivation.

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