

# Handicrafts: a Source of Employment for Women in Developing Rural Economies

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ALL OVER THE DEVELOPING WORLD it is being said that women should have a greater share in economic activity. Alarming figures are cited regarding the low level of participation and crash programmes are drawn up to deal with the problem. In fact, the question can only be raised meaningfully when the real position has been assessed. In most parts of the developing world, and especially in rural areas, women's time is so fully occupied that they are barely able to cope with their existing duties and responsibilities.

To draw up a realistic programme for increasing women's labour force participation, therefore, it is necessary first of all to examine the social structure in which they are placed. In rural society woman is seen as a home-maker and as the man's helpmate in the field. She grows food for the household, looks after the animals, preserves vegetables and fruit, repairs the walls of the house, draws water, cooks, and makes and mends the family's clothes. In her spare moments she spins wool. Furthermore, during most of her adult life she is either pregnant or has a nursing child at her breast, or both.

At an age when they can barely take care of themselves, young girls are saddled with the responsibility of looking after a still younger child and assisting their mothers with the domestic tasks. When there is any formal education to be had, it is usually the male child that gets it. In many societies a girl of 11 or 12 is considered ready for marriage.

Thus a close scrutiny of the way village women in developing countries spend their time shows that they can do nothing more unless some way is found of reducing their routine tasks. The women themselves are in no doubt about this. At a recent seminar in Africa <sup>2</sup> the female

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<sup>2</sup> See the report of the Regional Seminar for Africa on the Integration of Women in Development, with Special Reference to Population Factors, Addis Ababa, 3-7 June 1974 (New York, UN doc. ST/ESA/SER.B/6, 1975). See also David A. Mitchnik: *The role of women in rural development in the Zaire* (Oxford, Oxfam, 1972).

participants identified the following activities as being the most burdensome:

- carrying water
- performing agricultural tasks with traditional tools
- carrying wood and heavy loads
- pounding and grinding
- cooking with traditional equipment and fuels.

The lack of cheap transportation to markets and of organised outlets for surplus products was also cited as a major inconvenience. In enumerating these points the women indicated that the main problem is the lack of time- and labour-saving facilities in rural areas.

Even assuming some progress in these directions, it is obvious that, to have any hope of widespread acceptance, economic activity for women must be compatible with their role as home-makers. Hence the promise offered by handicrafts.

### **The case for handicrafts**

In many countries women are already the custodians of crafts, which are part of the cultural life of the people and have been passed down from mother to daughter. Such crafts may be closely linked with folk rituals and festivities, and have thus been preserved over the centuries without loss of intrinsic quality.

In many parts of Central Asia and the Middle East, for example, carpet weaving is the mainstay of the family. The sheep are sheared by the men, after which the women wash the wool, sort it and comb it out. Both sexes spin it as they go about their daily routine. The women then colour it with dyes made from herbs, roots and tree-bark collected from the forest or from the kernels, skins and seeds saved from fruit and vegetables. After this the carpet can be started. Once it is on the loom, the household becomes creditworthy and the local shopkeeper, who often acts as the middleman, will provide the essentials of life such as wheat, salt, oil, tea and sugar, and even wool, on account. Formerly any surplus production was always sold at the local weekly markets or at fairs. Later, when the commercial value of the craft was recognised, the middleman appeared and organised production and marketing, not always with happy results.

It is essential that the importance of handicrafts and the role of women in artisanal production should be recognised in development planning. Perhaps they can best be appreciated by consideration of the following factors.

#### **EMPLOYMENT**

One of the major problems faced by any developing country is the provision of employment. Many such countries are primarily agricul-

tural. Agriculture, however, does not provide year-round employment and during periods of drought a high proportion of the population may be out of work. Usually, large numbers of people living in rural areas are still engaged in subsistence farming. Though mechanisation increases output, it often renders still more people surplus and lengthens periods of unemployment. As is well known, this leads to mass migration from the rural to the already overcrowded urban areas, where the new arrivals anyway lack the necessary skills for finding employment. The education system, often colonial in origin, is usually not geared to producing technically qualified persons. This leads to a surplus of unskilled candidates for the available jobs with consequent exploitation of labour and the possibility of political instability as its corollary. The most exploited of all are the women, who are generally paid less for equal work.

An imbalance between rural and urban employment opportunities further exacerbates this problem. Anything that can be done to expand opportunities for remunerative employment in rural areas, drawing on traditional skills and using local raw materials, therefore deserves the closest attention in development planning.

#### TECHNOLOGY

In an emerging economy, the level of technology and available skills is fairly primitive. Even if it were possible, it is not desirable to effect too rapid a change from primitive to advanced technology. It is essential at first to improve the existing technology—which in practice often means the handicraft sector—and to set about introducing intermediate technology only when the base of the educational system has been built up and technical schools and vocational training institutions have been in operation for a while.

Another argument in favour of developing the handicraft sector is that the improvement of existing technology and the adoption where necessary of new tools and techniques require far less capital investment than the introduction of more sophisticated technologies, while the artisan, by contributing not only labour and time but also some of his or her savings or future earnings towards the purchase of better tools, acquires a greater sense of personal involvement.

#### INVESTMENT IN TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT

The question of investment in training and its returns to the economy is another important factor. The per capita investment for training craftsmen in traditional skills is far less than that required for modern industries. An annual investment of US \$200 for a period of one to two years would enable a craftsman to earn \$450 per annum even in countries like Nepal and Afghanistan, where per capita income is below \$100 per annum. The investment in plant needed to promote handicrafts is also far less than for any intermediate-technology industry, which is significant

when resources are limited and employment opportunities must be provided at different skill levels. A self-contained unit for processing textiles (or a woodworking or garment-making unit, etc.) can be set up with an investment of from \$500 to \$50,000. The smaller of these figures would be for a workshop operated by a single family of three active members, while the larger one is for a workshop employing 80 to 120 persons. The capital would also not remain blocked for long, since the start-up period in this sector never exceeds two years.

Handicrafts have another advantage over modern industry in that workplaces and manufacturing processes can be improved without any lengthy interruption of production.

#### RAW MATERIALS

In many countries the products of agriculture, forestry and mining are exported in the raw state. If they were processed first—which it is within the power of a good many handicrafts to do—a great deal of employment would be generated and the added value would bring in far more foreign exchange. In addition, some products could be marketed locally instead of having to be reimported.

#### MARKETING

Marketing is another important factor. Large-scale modern industries in developing countries have to compete with those of industrialised countries which not only have a great deal of experience and high standards of manufacture, but also a reputation in the market and powerful publicity organisations to promote their products. It is thus no easy task to find a market for the new products. In the case of traditional handicrafts which are a national speciality, however, a market exists in developed countries, which have a surfeit of machine-made goods, surplus purchasing power and a fascination for “exotic” hand-made products.

The flexibility of production already referred to is another advantage here. Changes in consumer taste can be catered for rapidly and without great expense by traditional industries.

#### SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS

The most important argument of all in favour of the development of handicrafts is sociological. As societies evolve over the centuries, they develop their own norms, their own set of values, which in non-industrialised societies assign a role to each individual as an integral part of the community. One must not suddenly destroy the basis and values of a way of life without putting some valid alternative in their place.

Contrast the concept of man promoted by the advocates of industrialisation in the past two centuries with that of traditional societies. The first sees man as motivated by self-interest, in a competitive society,

whereas in the second he is seen as an integral part of the tribe or community with defined rights and duties in a co-operative endeavour. Instead of trying to change these values we should build on them. Rapid industrialisation without any attention to traditional employment sectors would tear society from its moorings, bringing in its train the usual evils of juvenile delinquency, broken homes and a life lived under constant pressure. It may prove fruitful for the Third World countries to remember Mahatma Gandhi's message of self-reliance, of the need to develop village industry, to preserve national cultures, and to avoid imitating consumer-oriented societies. In India, for example, great importance is attached to the development of facilities for handicrafts in both urban and rural areas, and nowadays this sector is not only one of the biggest employers but also one of the most important sources of foreign currency.

### **The promotion of handicrafts <sup>1</sup>**

In order to develop the handicraft sector on the right lines there needs to be an institutional framework which penetrates to the basic production units at village level, supplying the women with improved equipment and tools and training in the associated techniques.

Often minor adaptations of traditional equipment suffice to raise efficiency and improve the quality of the product. In the case of the primitive narrow loom, for instance, if the reeds are changed and a simple pulley system is introduced for the warp, the weaver can produce greater widths to suit modern market requirements. Longer warp threads can also be accommodated in the narrow space, thus reducing the labour of preparation and also keeping the warp threads under cover, making it possible to work the loom throughout the year. Again, in the case of pottery, the mounting of ball-bearings on the wheel allows output to be tripled. In the processing of fibres, primitive methods of extraction are not only tedious but wasteful. The use of even hand-operated Respador machines increases extraction by 100 per cent and reduces labour time by 75 per cent. In such ways the application of modern research and technology to traditional crafts and skills can yield excellent results.

Tools and equipment should be such that they can be used in the home. They could be supplied at subsidised rates and, as mentioned above, bought by the women over a period of time out of their earnings. In addition, there is a need for centres offering common facilities such as the provision of raw and semi-processed materials, designs, technical

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<sup>1</sup> In this connection the reader is referred to the report on the ILO/ECA/YWCA/SIDA Workshop on Participation of Women in Handicrafts and Small Industries, Kitwe, Zambia, 9-20 December 1974 (Geneva, doc. ILO/TF/AFR/R.19, 1975). The recommendations adopted by the Workshop, concerned as they are with the development of both handicrafts and small-scale industry in urban as well as rural areas, are considerably more comprehensive than the proposals presented here.

guidance, finishing, quality control, packing and marketing of the products. These can also develop the ability to work together.

A programme of this sort does not disrupt the pattern of life. By tending to eliminate the middleman, moreover, it can help to secure a better return for the work put in. But it obviously calls for a considerable long-term educational effort at several different levels. Not only do certain elementary management skills need to be imparted, but a favourable climate of opinion has to be fostered by encouraging a greater spirit of enterprise among women and more comprehension on the part of men. Such conditioning can begin at a very early age.

Obviously, what has worked in one country will not necessarily be applicable to the very different conditions obtaining in another. The only absolutely common feature is the fact that both society and the women themselves benefit when the latter participate in economic activity, and that in rural societies handicrafts are the most suitable means of enabling them to do this while continuing to perform their vital role in the home. The details of organisation and production will and indeed should differ from continent to continent and from country to country. However, it may not be irrelevant to cite one successful example of promotion in this field.

Experience in India has shown that women tend to adopt improvements in techniques and designs more quickly when their effectiveness has first been demonstrated, and with a certain amount of assistance they have proved themselves fully capable of forming co-operative societies. Indeed, the co-operative spirit already exists among the women, since they are used to working together on the occasion of festivities or during times of crisis. The strange thing is that in many areas co-operative education and assistance in the formation of co-operatives are given only to men, even where the women do most of the work. In many countries of the Middle East, for instance, although the women do the actual weaving of carpets, it is the men who form the co-operatives and direct all their affairs. Clearly, the women will need assistance in forming co-operatives and also in managing them until they are able to cope with the organisation themselves.

Here again, the Indian co-operative promotion programme appears to be a good model. The Government offers a loan of up to ten times the share capital. In addition, managerial assistance is provided to the extent of 100 per cent during the first year, 75 per cent during the second, 50 per cent during the third, and 25 per cent during the fourth. By this time the women are either able to run the society themselves or to pay for a manager out of its earnings. They take great pride in looking after the affairs of the co-operative and in contributing to the prosperity of the community.

Co-operatives are of course an effective means of organising production in urban areas as well, but they have to be closely linked with

marketing agencies that can place their products and provide guidance concerning market trends.

Thus promoted by governments or public agencies and combined with appropriate facilities and training, handicrafts and rural industries represent the best method of providing gainful employment for women without disturbing the existing pattern of society. Better economic returns must go together with a sense of greater fulfilment both for the individual and for the community.

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