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Women Advisory Service Providers in Food Processing Sector: Case of Punjab, India

1. Background

Inclusion of rural women in scientific and technological endeavours and realizing women's intellectual potential is a big challenge in developing countries.

Women play a decisive role in many facets of agricultural sector. Creating multiple opportunities for



women in agribusiness enterprises is a challenging task. Central Institute of Post-Harvest Engineering & Technology (CIPHET)—a unit of Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Ministry of Agriculture, New Delhi, made efforts to support the public extension system through commercialisation of processing technologies through social capital, capacity building and transfer of processing technologies among peer members and other rural women. The target group was most vulnerable component of society i.e. poor rural women of high risk areas (as international border with Pakistan is nearby) where it was difficult to be more market-oriented activities. Convincing to pay for advisory services initially appeared quite difficult as people are accustomed of receiving plenty of free inputs from governmental programmes. Initially women were reluctant to come out of their homes for better livelihood options.

2. Description of how the new development works and how it is changing real lives

CIPHET built the capacity of rural women in food processing technologies in a phased manner. In the first phase, during 2000-2003 about 350 rural women were trained at Abohar campus free of cost. Out of these trained women, some innovative ones were selected for providing paid services in rural areas and were

named as *Women Service Provider (WSP)*. During the period (2001 to 2008) nearly 3000 women were trained on various value-addition and processing technologies through on-campus and off-campus trainings. This provided them with an opportunity to be self employed and earn some livelihood support for their families. On the other hand beneficiaries' i.e. rural women were trained in the real social settings/workplace. Consequently a number of self help groups (SHGs) were formed, trained, and linked to the market with an intention to empower the rural women socially and economically.

Though no comprehensive monitoring & evaluation system was set up, however, an evaluation was done to assess the impact of training and capacity building on level of knowledge, changes in attitudes and behaviour aspects. Nearly 50% of the members earned their income from SHG activities in the range of US\$42 to US\$68 per month, 30% of them earned less than US\$ 68 per month. The group stabilization rate was found to be 60%. Unemployed women and youth got employment as service providers and middle men. Knowledge of SHG members increased significantly (knowledge gap 60%). It was observed that increase in experience and family size of group members were significantly correlated with the gain in knowledge level. Some indications of behavioural change were also observed viz., risk taking behaviour, application of marketing strategies, creativity, positive attitude, problem-solving ability, self-confidence, leadership qualities, group cohesiveness, information receiving pattern and knowledge regarding financial aspects. Significant change was observed in the areas i.e., socio-economic upliftment; education & training; marketing & entrepreneurship qualities; technology adoption & participatory research; and banking/credit aspects.

3. Hurdles were overcome

- Increased the knowledge level on processing technologies and marketing strategies
- Reducing the burden of public extension system
- Positive attitude of credit institutions
- SHG s stabilisation
- Breaking the barriers of women
- Reduced the exploitation by the local money lenders.
- Increased the income and social status of members

4. Comments and experiences of developers and users

In conclusion it can be said that, MOAS can promote participatory extension and development. Hence, programmes for rural upliftment must integrate the vital dimensions, such as formation of social capital; pro-poor financial and credit support system; market-driven and decentralized extension system; diversification towards high-value enterprises, value addition and processing; need-based skill development through training; media-mix for technology transfer; informal education at rural level and strong political will.

However, extension system needs to be re-oriented and revitalized with new knowledge base in emerging technologies and methodologies. Besides effective cooperation and coordination among the stakeholders, what is most essential is to infuse positive and favourable intentions and attitude, self-confidence and capacity for self-determination among the clientele system.

5. Limitations/constraints/future challengers

- Lack of knowledge regarding marketing strategies
- Distant location from market/city and research institutes
- More area to cover by extension functionaries
- Negative attitude of banks for providing credit
- Lack of group stabilization
- Illiteracy and prevailing customs prevent the rural women to come out from homes for SHG activities (training and marketing)
- Exploitation for loaning by local money lenders

6. Responses from relevant/significant bodies (e.g., partner organisations)

The activities i.e. training need assessment through participatory rural appraisal techniques, capacity building of rural women, formation and stabilization of SHGs, linking with financing institutions and nearby markets, advisory services through WSPs for promotion of processing technologies, promotion for SCR, effective transfer of processing technologies through SHGs and monitoring and evaluation activities were carried out by CIPHET with the supportive role of other agencies. The project and activities of CIPHET was fully funded and supported by ICAR, MoA, New Delhi. Though private sector was not involved, but Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) like *Panchayati Raj* Institutions and NGOs did play an important role in this initiative. The agencies involved were:

- CIPHET, Campus Abohar, (Punjab)
- Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Abohar under the administrative control of CIPHET
- Zonal Coordinating Unit (under Extension Division of ICAR), Ludhiana, Punjab
- IFFCO—a multinational organization working on principals of Cooperative with Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS) as members.
- Panchayati Raj Institutions, like Gram Panchayat (an elected body of villagers) under three tier Panchayati Raj System
- NITCON, Chandigarh (Punjab)
- Ministry of Small Scale Industry, Ludhiana chapter (a Government of India institution)

- Punjab Agricultural University (Division of Food Science), Ludhiana, Punjab
- NGOs like Bharat Vidhya Parishad, Aobhar.

7. Lessons learnt

- Additional committed extension personnel required
- Women do not have land title
- More women service providers needed
- Efficient monitoring and evaluation design required

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