



Reflections on Women's Economic Empowerment in the Northern Sri Lankan Crab Sector

Introduction

Female participation in the Sri Lankan labour force remains at half that of male participation, even though women often complete more primary and secondary education than men.¹ The percentage of economically active females has stagnated at around 35% for the past decade, and those that are active are more likely to be found in the informal economy.² Because of this dynamic, the Market Development Facility (MDF) in Sri Lanka, an Australian-funded economic growth program, has prioritised understanding the constraints to female employment, intervening in sectors that have the potential to significantly impact women directly or indirectly, and monitoring the results of those interventions on women's economic empowerment (WEE).

¹ Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey 2014.

² Ibid.



the under-exploited Northern waters and processing the seafood elsewhere. MDF spotted an opportunity to potentially increase value addition and women's employment through supporting companies to expand into Northern-based seafood processing.

This document shares reflections from formative research into WEE issues resulting from new employment of female crab processors and from increased crab prices for women from crab fishing households in northern Sri Lanka. Qualitative research explored the social norms of female participation in the labour force, and the impact of increased income on women's control over household income, workload, and spending patterns.⁴

Findings



Female employees: Processing their way towards new roles

One of the sectors that MDF identified as having the potential to increase women's participation in the labour force was the seafood industry in Northern Sri Lanka.³ Following a 30-year conflict, the North continued to exhibit higher rates of poverty and lower rates of female labour participation than elsewhere in the country. The seafood sector was relatively unsophisticated, with outside companies sourcing a wide range of species from

MDF's support to crab processing and export companies in Northern Sri Lanka resulted in 368 jobs, 90% of which have been filled by women. Most of these women were not economically active before working at the processing facilities. Receiving at least minimum wage (Rs 13,500 per month) and benefits such as transportation and pension contributions, women are making important contributions to their household income generation. And one-

³ For more information on MDF's work in the crab market, see the complementary document "Systemic Change in the Sri Lankan Fisheries Sector: How Multiple Actors and Factors Have Contributed to a More Competitive and Inclusive Fisheries Sector".

⁴ In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were held with a sample of female employees and women from fishing households. The purpose of the research was to explore women's economic empowerment in both categories to better understand factors that inhibit or support female employment and any economic or social impact from increased income on household dynamics. Using purposive sampling techniques over a one-week period, it was not seeking to attribute causation between interventions and impact, but to merely begin to understand some of the WEE issues in Northern Sri Lanka from women's perspectives. Additional research may deepen MDF's understanding of continued low rates of female labour participation and intrahousehold dynamics.

third of active processing employees in the sample examined are from female-headed households, providing the only source of income for their families.

Although variations in norms towards women working are found in the north, attitudes towards work seem to be slowly changing. Some of this is driven by economic reasons, as the increased cost of living or high levels of debt drives some women into the work force. Many women expressed hope that their daughters will complete their education and find permanent work, suggesting there is greater ambition and acceptance of women participating in the labour force more generally, even if it is slow to change.

Several factors seem to be important towards contributing to increasing female participation in the labour force. Location, flexibility, a support network, and visibility of other women working were all frequently cited by active employees as reasons why they decided to pursue employment and remain employed. As most working women do not have additional support to help with their domestic duties, limiting travel time and allowing them to pick up children and run daily errands contributes to keeping them in the labour force. Domestic responsibilities, including cooking, cleaning and childcare, remain the responsibility of women, so most women's workloads do not necessarily decrease with employment. However, some have been able to purchase time - savings cooking appliances (gas cookers, refrigerators, and blenders) or do benefit from a supportive family network, reducing some of their domestic burden. An important, but often under-recognised factor in increasing women's participation is literally seeing other women work. As the density of crab processing facilities increased over time, it became more normal to see women

going to work at the factories, thus encouraging other women and men that this was socially acceptable.

Women have historically managed household finances in the north, and this appears to still be true for women that earn their own income. Although men make decisions about fishing - related investments, female employees retain control over household expenses, whether she or her husband earned the income. Female employees prioritise investing any extra income in children's education or saving for future expenses by purchasing gold or depositing in a formal bank account.



Women in Fisher Households: Managing money, mending nets, and investing in the future

In addition to exploring WEE issues with female employees, MDF wanted to understand household dynamics and impacts on women's agency from increased crab prices. Thus, the formative research also included a sample of women from fisher households to probe these issues.

In interviews with women from fisher households which had no women working outside of the home, social norms tended to be slightly more conservative towards the concept of women working. This was less so in households with at least one woman working outside the home. Although the formal participation of women in the industry remains low, but growing, most women in fishing households participate in fishing, albeit indirectly. The research confirmed that most women in fisher households do contribute significantly towards fishing income, often spending several hours per day in the high season

repairing nets and preparing dried fish. But as this is conducted within the household, it is socially accepted.

In addition to contributing to fishing income, women in fishing households also manage household finances, like female employees in seafood processing businesses. Decisions on fishing investments are made primarily by men, but most other household expenditure decisions are made by women. An important indication of their access to information was that nearly all the women were aware of the increase in crab prices, even if they were not directly involved in the transaction.

The impact of those prices, however, was difficult to quantify and isolate. This is to be expected, as fishing households produce multiple species throughout the year and income varies by amount of catch, which itself is influenced by a range of factors beyond increased industry demand. Weather patterns, catching practices and an increased number of crab fishers all affect volumes. For those who did report extra income as a result of increased prices, typical investments included more fishing nets, paying off debt, purchasing gold or saving for their children's education. Reports of increased alcoholism or domestic violence as a result of increased income were not uncovered during the analysis, with most women suggesting alcoholism was decreasing over time.

Conclusion

A more competitive Northern crab industry has resulted in jobs for hundreds of women, many of whom had never worked before. By adopting labour practices to account for barriers to women's participation, Northern women are contributing to changing social norms one day at a time as well as providing additional income for ever-increasing expenses. A more competitive industry has also contributed to an increase in market price, which has a far wider outreach than female processing employees. Women in crab fishing households, although technically not employed in the industry, often spend hours per day repairing nets and sorting catches, suggesting that their contributions to fishing incomes are not insignificant. Both employees and women from crab fishing households continue to exert agency over household income and many investment decisions. Extra income, whether derived from employment or price increases, allows Northern women to expand their fishing activities, reduce debt and invest in their children's future.



Market Development Facility is an Australian Government funded multi-country initiative which promotes sustainable economic development, through higher incomes for women and men, in our partner countries. We connect individuals, businesses, governments and NGOs with each other, and with markets at home and abroad. This enhances investment and coordination and allows partnerships to flourish, strengthening inclusive economic growth. In Sri Lanka, MDF works in diversifying tourism and improving authentic Sri Lankan goods.



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