

Matching Vocational Skills to Employment: Broadening Opportunities for Women and Girls in Sri Lanka

Centre for Women's Research

Despite the high percentage of Sri Lankan females enrolled in secondary and tertiary education, women have not been able to capitalize upon their educational gains to access economic opportunities as readily as men. The percentage of women in the formal adult labor force in 1995 was 36 percent, representing only a 9 percent increase in twenty years (UNDP 1998), and unemployment rates for women were double that of men in 1992 (United Nations 1995). With the exception of accounting jobs, women tend to be concentrated in culturally demarcated “feminine” occupations—generally lower paying jobs as household domestic, clerical, or semiskilled factory workers. Sri Lanka’s need to redress these gender imbalances grows more urgent as its social and economic activities become increasingly complex and technology-dependent.

Although vocational training is equally available to men and women, gender differences in the types of training received by women is a barrier to equity in employment. Relatively few women are enrolled in technical courses that are seen as belonging to the domain of males, such as engineering or carpentry and woodworking. Similarly, the majority of women students in technical colleges take secretarial, commerce, and home economics courses, which may not prepare them adequately for employment in a changing economy. On-the-job training opportunities for women in private industry are primarily in semi-skilled occupations where the wages are low and the possibilities for professional advancement slim. The nongovernmental training sector has tended to concentrate on income-generating projects requiring minimal training, although a few have pioneered nontraditional employment for women.

In response to the lack of vocational training information available to girls and women, the Centre for Women’s Research (CENWOR) in Colombo designed and conducted a pilot intervention from 1986 to 1988 aimed at increasing the participation of females in nontraditional programs. CENWOR, established in 1984 by a group of women’s studies professionals, conducts action-oriented studies and programs that improve the status of Sri Lankan women.

Objectives

The long-term objective of the CENWOR study was to facilitate access by women and girls to a wide range of vocational skills and employment opportunities. Specific objectives were to:

- ▶ Substantially increase the access of female students and their parents to vocational training information;
- ▶ Expand the knowledge base for advocacy and counseling;
- ▶ Motivate women to enroll in nontraditional training programs leading to remunerative employment in a modernizing economy;
- ▶ Promote more positive attitudes among policymakers, administrators, educators, and trainers about including women in all training programs and economic activities according to their aspirations.

Intervention

The project was implemented in six contiguous sub-divisions in four administrative districts, selected through the Ministry of Education because of industrial growth occurring in their areas.¹ Field visits to these selected pilot locations and discussion with school authorities and female students, administrators of training institutions, and employers indicated an almost total lack of knowledge about the subject of vocational/career choices for girls leaving school. Further, virtually no materials existed that were specifi-

cally intended to provide vocational training information to girls and women. CENWOR’s approach involved: preparing, producing, and disseminating information and motivational materials; designing and conducting school workshops; establishing links with relevant ministries and state training agencies; and using the media to disseminate pertinent messages.

The project appointed a Steering Committee comprising, among others, representatives from the

Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Labor, the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority, and the Federation of Chambers of Industry and Commerce. The Steering Committee stimulated support for the project objectives among policymakers and brought it visibility in the state training sector.

Results

Production of Materials

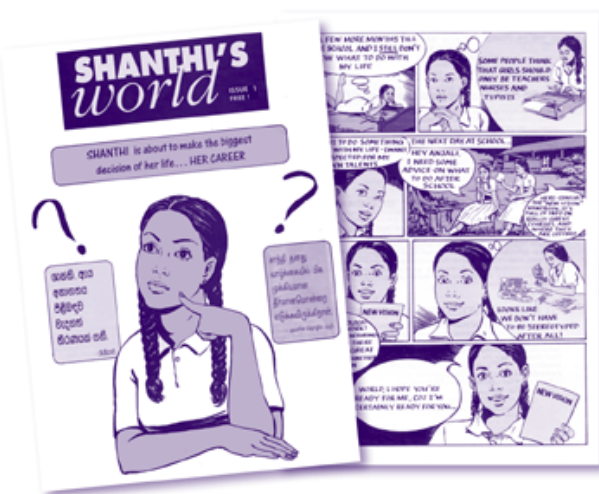
Despite some initial delays, high quality materials were produced in three languages (Sinhala, Tamil, and English). At the post-project evaluation session, they were assessed to be attractive, informative, and thought provoking. Some of the materials were as follows:

- ▶ A cartoon, “Shanthi’s World,” was produced for girls finishing secondary school and on the threshold of making important

decisions regarding employment and/or further education. Noting that it doesn’t have to be only “a man’s world,” the cartoon encourages these girls to diversify their vocational aspirations by considering nontraditional occupations and discusses the importance of preparing for economic change (10,000 of each were distributed).

- ▶ “New Visions—a Handbook on Training Opportunities” was produced to provide detailed vocational information for girls in 24 vocational areas, the market’s projected employment opportunities, as well as possibilities for self-employment—including availability of loans for start-up costs and estimated amounts (3,500 of these were distributed).

- ▶ A short pamphlet for employers, “A Technologically Advanced Society Needs Trained Women,” highlights the advantages and availability of skilled female workers and their potential to improve the productivity of enterprises if given the opportunity (3,500 were distributed).
- ▶ Media materials that were produced included 30,000 posters with photographs and captions pertaining to five nontraditional trades and a set of slides of women engaged in training for nontraditional employment. A video, “Meeting Challenges,” shows women being trained or in post-training employment in nontraditional sectors such as lathe work, welding, masonry, boat and motor repair, and computers.



¹ Originally intended to be piloted in one district, feedback from their Steering Committee convinced CENWOR to expand the pilot area to six sub-divisions: Kalutara and Horana in the Kalutara district; Awissawella on the periphery of the Colombo district; Dehiowita and Ruwanwella in the Kegalle district; and Heliyagoda in the Ratnapura district. The project was extended during implementation through other nongovernmental organizations working in several districts.

Workshops in Schools and Training Institutes

In total, 15 workshops were conducted for over 450 participants.² The basic approach involved: an introduction about the need for gender equity in access to vocational training; a discussion of changing attitudes; a presentation by a nontraditional female role model; and viewing of the aforementioned video as a basis for discussion. These experiences are being used in the development of a training manual for future workshops.

Of the 87 percent of senior girls who completed evaluations, almost all claimed that they had changed their perceptions regarding vocational training, and as many expressed their interest and intention to pursue vocational training because of its usefulness in providing access to employment opportunities, or as an avenue to higher status in society. However, only 63.3 percent of the students reported that they understood the relevance of gender equality in training and employment opportunities as a value. Additionally, the school principals—all men—were largely indifferent to the purpose of the workshops.

The National Youth Services Council (NYSC) requested that CENWOR conduct more workshops, which Swisscontact funded in 10 more schools in the Kalutara district. CENWOR workshops have also had a multiplier effect among collaborating NGOs, who have subsequently conducted their own workshops.³

Advocacy with Key Ministries and Agencies

Advocacy meetings with decisionmakers on the need to increase the vocational training access of girls and women were successful in educating officials about gender equality. They resulted in the opening of all NYSC training programs to women, who had previously been limited to “female-oriented” courses. CENWOR was also asked by the Secretary of the Ministry of Vocational Training to present critical gender issues to a team from the Asian Development Bank preparing a proposal to support a national program in vocational training. Other advocacy activities included:

- ▶ A presentation to the Secretary of the Ministry of Education. The Secretary, impressed by the materials, instructed his field staff to use them and asked CENWOR to advise the Non-Formal Education Division and to provide input into the training of 300 teachers/school counselors in the state’s School Counseling Program.
- ▶ A presentation to the Central Council of the Federation of Chambers of Industry and Commerce, the apex body of employers. Initially, some reservations about women’s economic participation were evident, but the employers’ organizations eventually endorsed the objective of increasing women’s access to middle- and high-level technical jobs, and promised their cooperation.

- ▶ The establishment of links with three international NGOs engaged in the field of vocational training and enterprise development—World University Service of Canada, German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), and Swisscontact. These NGOs and the three local collaborating NGOs with island-wide networks met and agreed to distribute materials and conduct programs in more than half of the districts in the country.

Use of Media and Public Events

Small inroads were made with the video “Meeting Challenges,” which was purchased by numerous organizations in Sri Lanka.⁴ Sections of the video have been incorporated into vocational training programs on national television, and copies were made by other national and international NGOs for their own use. Because of the high costs, the National Television (Rupavahini) broadcast the Sinhala version only once—on International Women’s Day, free of charge.

Conclusions

The project tapped an unmet need for information on vocational opportunities available to girls and women, particularly in rural areas, and the materials and workshops developed for this purpose were very well received. The cost of reproducing the written materials was CENWOR’s greatest obstacle to a wider dissemination. Given an adequate budget, the state and other NGOs can quite easily replicate CENWOR’s pilot efforts.

² Participants included school girls and parents; counselors and teachers; principals; and instructors in training institutes.

³ Collaborators are the South Asian Partnership, Sarvodaya, and the Sri Lanka-Canada Development Fund.

⁴ Organizations included the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission, the Career Guidance Unit of the Ministry of Youth Affairs, the Department of Technical Education, the Textile Training Centre, and several NGOs with national-level exposure.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The following recommendations emerged from the pilot study and its assessment:

► **Broaden dissemination.** To reach even more young women and engage additional civil society organizations, more channels for dissemination of materials and organization of workshops should be explored. Community-level women's groups should be targeted as well as teachers, school counselors, and young entrepreneurship programs.

► **Disaggregate data.** The lack of disaggregated data collected by the training agencies with which CENWOR works made it difficult to monitor the pilot's progress and effects, and has implications for building a knowledge base for use in other settings. These training agencies should collect gender-specific data to serve as a basis for monitoring trends among those entering training as well as graduates who proceed into employment in order to promote more gender-sensitive policies and programs.

The following lessons have implications for future work in this area:

► **Broaden advocacy.** As educational policies in Sri Lanka are currently being formulated, this is a crucial time for advocacy about women's access to vocational training opportunities. The CENWOR project provides an ideal example of how an NGO can help influence policy by translating research into an advocacy strategy. Advocacy about gender equity in training should become part of the wider discourses on education and human rights.

► **Select steering committee strategically.** The contributions of the carefully selected steering committee, composed of leaders and highly placed representatives from the state ministries and training agencies, exceeded expectations and played a major role in advocacy successes. Such a board is essential, and members should be urged to incorporate the project in their national- and district-level programs, and to promote systematic linkages

with state agencies, NGOs, and employers groups.

► **Include males.** Men need to accept women in the workplace and in vocational training programs in order for work of this kind to be effective. Training and promotional materials should portray males and females studying and working together, and the materials should target boys and men to ensure their cooperation.

► **Process and impact take time.** With a goal of changing social norms concerning women's training and employment, projects such as this one can only measure impact over the medium to long term. Nevertheless, advocacy activities as described represent an effective first step in addressing a complex problem. If followed up, results should become apparent in the longer term.

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