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WOMEN'S ACCESS TO DECENT WORK*

by

SUBHANGI HERATH
Senior Lecturer
University of Colombo

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

Limited access to decent work has been identified as a major impediment for the advancement of women in many parts of the world and hinders the possibility for women to live as dignified human beings enjoying equal rights with men. Despite the growth of labour force participation of women and the intensifying opportunities for women to enter into remunerated work and to become economically independent, it is more and more evident that access to ‘decent work’ is becoming a serious issue world over, especially in the developing world. This paper focuses on deficiencies in skills training as a vital factor that hinder the access to decent work and looks at the possibilities of developing skills training as a tool for the promotion of women’s entry into decent work via formal and non-formal training. It also discusses the barriers for achieving this objective and the strategies that could be adopted in promoting the process of skills training and young women’s employability deriving evidence from the Sri Lankan situation.

The Definition of Concepts

The main concepts employed in the paper are ‘Decent Work’ and ‘Skills Development’ both of which has been widely discussed and debated over the years. The terms have many different interpretations based on the value judgments that could be made with regard to both these terms. The concepts have a high social cultural value rather than an economic one and would be highly contextual in their meanings. It is not the intention of the paper to deal with the conceptual ambiguities of the terms. As stated below, the paper takes into account the ILO definitions of the terms, which are universally accepted in understanding and assessing the levels of access to work and the conditions of work.

Decent Work

“Decent work” is a concept that was first introduced in 1999, in the Report of the Director-General to the International Labour Conference meeting in its 87th Session. The report stated that the primary goal of ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, within conditions that provide them freedom, equality, security and human dignity (ILO, 1999, p. 3).

The report in elaborating the conceptual meaning of the term decent work as it applies to the world of work today discusses four components of the concept that need to be taken into account: creating employment, guaranteeing workers’ rights, extending social protection and promoting social dialogue. The component of employment covers the full range of work including both formal and informal sector work of all kinds, self-employed and home workers, opportunities for work, remuneration, and working conditions. Social protection component looks at if the social and income security of workers are assured in the context of work and the third component, workers rights, is concerned if the work assures the fundamental rights of workers including absence of forced labour, child labour, discrimination and exploitation at work. The component of social dialogue brings in yet another important aspect with regard to work, the freedom of speech for workers or the

ability of the workers to present their views, to facilitate discussions and to negotiate in work-related matters (ILO, 1999; Ghai, 2003).

The 2001 report of the Director-General of ILO further elaborates the concepts of Decent Work in addressing the global challenge of the dearth of decent work delineating a broad and highly practical range of issues that need to draw the concern of those dealing with the issue of decent work which finely articulated the continuing mission of ILO within the new concept. He writes,

"It is about your job and future prospects; about your working conditions; about balancing work and family life, putting your kids through school or getting them out of child labour. It is about gender equality, equal recognition, and enabling women to make choices and take control of their lives. It is about your personal abilities to compete in the market place, keep up with new technological skills, and remain healthy. It is about developing your entrepreneurial skills, about receiving a fair share of the wealth that you have helped to create and not being discriminated against; it is about having a voice in your workplace and your community. In the most extreme situations it is about moving from subsistence to existence. For many, it is the primary route out of poverty. For many more, it is about realizing personal aspirations in their daily existence and about solidarity with others. And everywhere, and for everybody, decent work is about securing human dignity" (ILO, 2001).

Skills Training

The term skill, similar to the term decent work, is highly contextual and therefore could have varied definitions depending on the context. In general terms skill is cleverness at doing something, resulting either from practice or from natural ability. Skill also could be defined as a job or activity that requires training and practice. Ability to produce solutions with regard to a problem domain or proficiency gained through special training also is regarded as skill. Moreover, skill could be the ability, coming from one's knowledge, practice, aptitude, etc., to do something well. Skills, with or without training contribute to developing competency, excellence in performance; expertness and dexterity. Soft skills is an area that has drawn much attention in the recent years which refers to a person's ability to encounter and adjust to new situations supporting the delivery of productive outcomes.

In the context of learning, work and employment, a number of specific skills have been identified in the World Development Report of the World Bank (2007); thinking skills (critical and creative thinking), behavioural skills (perseverance, self-discipline, teamwork, the ability to negotiate conflict and manage risk), specific knowledge (including numeracy and literacy) and vocational skills (a mix of specific knowledge and skills to perform jobs that rely on clearly defined tasks). In defining the term further, the report says, "Basic skills denote the set of minimal abilities needed for further learning, work and life, including numeracy and literacy and basic levels of behavioral skills (decision-making skills, teamwork, the ability to negotiate conflicts and managing risks), specific knowledge applied to real-life situations and vocational skills (World Bank, 2007:71).

Skills in the context of women's entry to decent work could be defined as those facets that give an individual the ability to perform in a specific manner, making choices that help them to live productive and rewarding lives catering to improve their quality of life.

Formal and Non-Formal Training as a Tool for Full Employment

Despite the rapid increase of women's labour force participation it has been noted that it is universally lower than men's. One of the major reasons is the nature of female labour force, which is often marked by disadvantageous features including lack of training, skills, access, opportunities etc. produced by the social cultural contexts catering to existing gender disparities. The male-female differential in labour force participation is clearly visible in the South Asian and Pacific regions and lower in advancing and developed economies with certain internal specificities. The most remarkable feature in the gender disparities of labour force participation perhaps could be the sector of employment where much of the female labour force in the developing part of the world concentrates in low-skilled, low-income generating economic activities including part-time and casual work, creating a significant gap between the quality of employment between men and women. A discernible portion of female population seems to be underemployed. The proportion of young females who are neither in school nor in labour force is considerably higher than the proportion of those for males (World Bank, 2006). Lack of opportunities and skills for employment compels women to seek employment in countries with higher incomes under unskilled categories of labour under deplorable working conditions. During the decade of 1997-2007, 72 per cent of those Sri Lankans who migrated for work has been female domestic workers (Foreign Employment Bureau, 2007).

Much of the issue can be attributed to lack of skills that could be a consequence of lack of opportunities for training. Both formal and non-formal training could either be incorporated within the field of formal education and vocational training or informal family and community-based training. Community- and family-based non-formal training provide numerous opportunities for young people who become left out from the formal sector of education and training, especially the rural and urban poor in the developing world. However, the opportunities for women in the latter often depend on the cultural notions on such training. Certain family trades are passed on strictly to male offspring in certain societies while in some other societies, women stand a better chance in access to family- or community-based knowledge and skill training. For instance, the attitudes towards women's participation in certain non traditional trades seem to be positively changing among many Sri Lankan families despite the prevailing public reluctance to accept women in those trades (Herath, 2002). Nevertheless, the same study showed that women face many barriers in performing at the community levels and also do not receive as much support from the spouses as they receive from the parents, therefore they often have to sacrifice the job for the sake of family life. Moreover, research have demonstrated that family and community centered traditional apprentices have many drawbacks including ignoring new technologies, standards, and quality (Johanson & Adams, 2004).

Formal training is generally incorporated within primary, secondary and tertiary education, whether it is classical education or vocational training. Formal training provided at the

schools during childhood, adolescence and early youth together with the informal training in the family and community during these years are essential in skills development (Knudsen, 2004). Therefore, the investment and efforts taken for continuing education up to secondary and tertiary levels could equip a young person with many skills essential for the labour market today. Recent evidence shows that the education, which lacks skills training, is one of the biggest challenges for full employment. In Sri Lanka unemployment rates among young women with secondary or higher education have been considerably high over the years than among those with no schooling (Census and Statistics, 1946 -2009, Jayaweera, 2002, 2010). The question of ‘compatibility of education’ with the qualifications leaves more educated behind, especially women, due to the nature of education they receive which lacks not only the technology-based skills but also basic skills. In Sri Lanka, enrolment of women in engineering courses in universities and vocational education institutions has been respectively 25 per cent and less than 20 per cent (Jayaweera, 2010) despite the high enrolment of women in senior secondary education (56 per cent) and university education (53 per cent) during the last four decades, contributing to the high incidence of female unemployment which approximately doubles those of men (Jayaweera, 2010).

Growing concerns on quality and relevance of education are related to the opportunities produced by the global market economies. Education without formal or non-formal training in basic and technological skills does not equip young men and women with the competencies necessary for the global economies. A large number of firms in developing countries have identified inadequate skills of the employees as a major impediment for their regular functioning (World Bank, 2006). Universal primary or even secondary or tertiary education, which is deficient in the requirements of the labour market thus, does not seem to give the returns expected from those levels of education. High rates of school dropouts on the other hand at various levels, primary or secondary, do not provide the opportunity for those children to enhance their innate skills, which they obtained in the early childhood. In a global employment scenario where different forms of skills beyond basic skills are required, those who have developed fewer skills will inevitably be in a disadvantaged position.

Synergy between the training and requirements of the employment markets is a fast growing issue which negatively impacts the workforce in many developing countries, especially women. Thinking and behavioral skills have become essential for the current employment market, both state-owned and in the private sector as in many countries in the developing world public and private business ventures need to compete with each other for their survival and development. This is a highly visible phenomenon in the banking and industrial sector. Moreover, advanced skills such as the problem solving ability or vocational skills also have become indispensable in the industrial sector. Computer literacy has become a basic requirement for many jobs and an association of higher wage premiums has been identified with it (Autor, Katz, and Krueger, 1998). Development of as many skills as possible including soft skills seems to make an individual more advantageous over the others in order to have access to decent employment. Furthermore, continuous involvement in skilled jobs has been identified as a contributing factor for development of human capital. A relationship has been established between experiences gained in skilled jobs and increase in adult reading comprehension and nonverbal cognitive abilities (World Bank, 2006). Worldwide statistics

and data confirm that those who have developed skills through education and training are less vulnerable for exploitation in the labour market (Foreign Employment Bureau, 2007).

Barriers to Skills Training for Women

Barriers to skills training could be identified within four major areas of training of women.

1. Deficiencies in incorporating skills into formal education
2. Hindered entry into science and technology based education
3. Problems in access to formal education or early dropout rates
4. Lack of access to skills-based non-formal training
5. Social and cultural impediments hindering skills training and development

Formal training is generally provided in the form of formal education and in an institutional set up. Although the major tendency of the formal educational institutions is to combine the skills with theoretical knowledge, skills aspect is often ignored in classical education (World Bank, 2005a). Skills-based fields of education will thus be separated and brought within technical education and science education, which are usually male-dominated fields of study. Economic and social relevance of education, especially higher education is questionable in many developing countries. Sri Lanka is a country, which achieved gender parity in education at the primary, and secondary levels and has a noticeably higher rate of women entering higher education in all fields (57 per cent). However, a considerable proportion of university graduates who followed arts and management streams of study where women are a high majority, which often is over 70 per cent of the student enrolment, have failed to enter into jobs in the growing private sector in the country or gain employment at all. Sixty three per cent of the unemployed graduates were arts graduates in 2005 and only 12 per cent of the graduates in the Arts streams found employment within three months after graduation while 55 per cent of their counterparts in the science and management streams entered employment within the same period. The major obstacles have been the inadequate information technology and communicative (English) skills, and poor adaptability to the working environment which delineates the dearth of behavioral and vocational skills (World Bank, 2005b). Women often do not have opportunities outside formal schooling and regular curriculum revisions do not take place in many developing countries often enough to take the labour market demands into consideration. Gendered curricular and gender segregation in sports and other extra curricular activities also could be a hindrance for women's skill development.

Low representation of women in science and technology based education still is a clear barrier for them to enter into decent employment. Shortage of facilities for science and technology based education together with low representation of women in such education create a highly disadvantageous situation for women in the labour market confining them to low-paid assembly line jobs and marginal employment in the informal sector (Kottegoda, 1991). Although women in many societies face no constitutional discriminatory practices that prevent them entering these fields, prevailing gender disparities hinder their entry into these fields.

School enrolment has increased worldwide as a result of the implementation of programmes to achieve Millennium Development Goals, however, early dropout rate is still an issue. Absence of schools or opportunities after primary education due to less affordability, distance to school, lack of encouragement or less motivation for learning, poor teaching, poor school environments early employment, health reasons (HIV/AIDS and other health issues), early marriage and pregnancy and displacements influence the early dropout rates. Girls are particularly left behind as they would be most vulnerable in this scenario (World Bank, 2006). In many of the low-income countries, access to education is low in remote, disaster and conflict-affected, poor and backward areas, particularly affecting women's education. What is most significant however is that due to the nature of education they receive, women will not have opportunities to gain or develop skills which are needed not only to access decent employment but also to have a dignified life.

Very often women do not have access to skills-based non-formal training such as vocational training. Such training could be received within the family, in the community or at workplace. Social cultural barriers often affect women in gaining the opportunities available around them. Low social acceptance for vocational training also precludes women in entering these fields of training. Family vocations of technical nature are usually passed onto male children. Gender attitudes often hinder women in developing their skills within non-formal settings other than the work place. In Sri Lanka, it is not only the learning but also the practice that seems to be hindered due to social attitudes which seriously discourage women's entry into these fields (Herath, 2002).

Social cultural impediments are the most critical factors that affect skills development of women. Social attitudes towards women's training outside classical education, family responsibilities, pregnancy, fewer opportunities and hindrances for further training contribute to a highly disadvantageous position for women in this regard. Lack of self-confidence due to their gendered upbringing is a pervading issue among many women despite their education in facing challenging work environments. Early childhood training, which is essential in the later development of skills, often negatively impacts women due to gender socialization processes. Moving up the skill ladder by changing jobs for higher wages and developing skills in the process is not an easy task for women as for men due to their family-centered responsibilities. Lack of a safe learning environment, sexual harassment in or outside the learning environments, and derogatory attitudes towards women and labeling of women achieving outside the accepted women's roles and responsibilities also could be barriers for women's opportunities for skills development.

Strategies to Increase Young Women's Employability

The following suggestions could be made based on the above discussion.

1. Improve women's entry and continuity in formal education especially in the low-income countries
2. Give priority for skills development aspect of education and incorporation of skills into existing curricula

3. Take steps to increase family and peer support for women's education
4. Make more information available through raising awareness among women helping them to make better choices
5. Take steps to encourage women's entry into vocational training through more publicity, recognition and facilities including scholarships etc.
6. Promote women's interest in skill development and training in an early age to empower women so that they become good decision-makers in making choices
7. Increase women's entrepreneurship training and improve facilities including bank loan systems and market opportunities
8. Improve skills training at the secondary and tertiary levels of education, including soft skills catering to increased competency
9. Take gender-specific measures to improve education and training, e.g., distance to educational institutions, specific arrangement for transport, counseling, addressing health issues
10. Effectively mainstream gender priorities within the policy planning
11. Take steps to bridge the gap between school and work with a gender focus through apprenticeship, work placements etc.
12. Address the labour market biases affecting women through proper state level mediation
13. Strengthen monitoring and evaluation specially with regard to female education and training
14. Provide support for maternity and child care, which is essential for education, training and continuing employment of women
15. Take more acute steps to address gender issues affecting education, training and work of women, including violence, gendered education, gender discrimination and harassment at work places.

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