Bringing the Poor into the Export Process: Linkages and Strategic Implications

Breakout Series B:
The Reality of High Profile Options

Export, Poverty Reduction and Women – A Missed Opportunity?

The Issue: Women already participate quite substantially in export. They form a large part of the workforce in labour-intensive export industries, and represent the bulk of workers in export processing zones. Women also run a large number of micro and small enterprises and, by providing support services or intermediary inputs to the production process, often participate - formally or informally, directly or indirectly - in export.

Despite all this, women still account for up to 70% of the world’s poor. Current approaches to engaging women in export rely on creating a competitive advantage on the basis of low labour costs and precarious working conditions and the promotion of low value-added micro and small enterprises through, e.g. microfinance. These may have helped women to survive, but they have not been effective in lifting them out of poverty.

Exports thus have so far failed to turn the tide. To not miss out on a tremendous opportunity, a new approach is required.

But experience confirms that this is easier said than done.

The Proposition: A pro-poor export strategy must have a gender dimension: One that involves a comprehensive, tailor-made set of programmes that are specifically designed to empower women; advocate their views and concerns; enhance their vocational skills and business acumen; identify and demonstrate areas of entrepreneurial opportunity; and abolish barriers to access, financial and otherwise.

To operationalize, coordinate, manage and sustain these programmes, a specific network of institutions and organizations must be created.

Indeed, given that the majority of women’s associations and lobby groups have little in the way of experience with export and international business, the strategy must, in its initial phase of implementation, give central importance to institution building and coordination. This will undoubtedly involve formalizing a relevant coalition among government departments, business associations and NGOs.

Focus of the Debate: The debate will address the following questions:

1. Is the proposition valid? Is a special ‘gender sensitive’ approach required before more women can be brought into the export process?

2. What are the major barriers that prevent women from entering the export process? Can these be effectively addressed under a national export strategy? What non-export related interventions are necessary?

3. What ‘gender sensitive’ export programmes have proven to be successful? How was their success measured? What ‘best practice’ lessons can be drawn from their success?

4. What are the institutional implications of an export strategy with a proactive gender dimension? What institutions/organizations should be involved? Is there a need for a formal partnership among these organizations that delineates responsibilities and ensures synergy? Is there a need for institutional leadership and, if so, what type of organization should assume this role?