

GENDER BASED CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

PROJECT: Co-producing a Shock-Resilient Business Ecosystem for Women Led/Engaged Enterprises in Nepal (The CREW Project)

Co-producing a Shock-Resilient Business Ecosystem for Women Led/Engaged Enterprises in Nepal (CREW) is a 2.5 year Participatory Action Research project funded by the International Development Research Centre, Canada and led by Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS) in collaboration with Aria Solutions, NIMS College and Himalayan Bio-Trade Pvt. Ltd. (HBTL). CREW engages with women involved in vegetable production and sale (Arghakhanchi), wintergreen collection (Dolakha), and legume production and sale (Ramechhap).



Small-scale vegetable sellers in Jagata, Arghakhanchi carry their produce to the Sandhikharka, Gorusinge highway about 22 kilometers away from their village. They also sell their vegetables at their local *haat-bazaar*, providing economic support to their families while also fulfilling care burdens. The distance that must be covered to find a market for produce is a major constraint faced especially by younger women*.

GENDER BASED CONSTRAINTS

Women entrepreneurs in Nepal operate on the lower ends of value chains, with little opportunity for value addition and business growth, largely due to the **gender-based constraints** of a patriarchal system. These gender-based constraints intersect with other social identities such as age, caste/ethnicity, education levels, and has a compounding effect in creating a disabling environment, more so for particular categories of women. Three groups of women currently face multiple jeopardies:

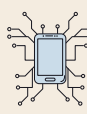


1. Self-employed in agriculture
2. Self-employed in own agri/forest product-based businesses
3. Daily wage laborers

An 'ecosystem of support', a gender responsive entrepreneurial ecosystem that can have multiplier effects on post-pandemic business revival and gender equality is proposed in the research .

*All photos are credited to the CREW staff at SIAS.




PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

CREW is designed as a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that recalibrates its elements based on empirical findings to ensure that the needs of women are identified, and action is taken for socioeconomic change. The study is nested within proposed interventions for the community. While the overall objective of the PAR is to co-produce workable solutions for shock resilient economic activities for women's self-reliance, four specific objectives are also considered:

-  To understand **gender based constraints** to women's economic empowerment for agri/forest-based enterprises in Nepal
-  To facilitate **technological innovations** to create an 'ecosystem of support' for women engaged enterprises
-  **Capacity development** for women farmers and entrepreneurs to increase their **agency** in collective action
-  To **disseminate knowledge** and inform policies to enhance women's economic empowerment

POLICY ENVIRONMENT

While a number of good policies and legislations are present to provide economic entitlements to women, they are not effectively translated on the ground.

-  Gaps in clear institutional mechanisms and tools, such as **implementation guidelines** for translating policy to positive provisions
-  Limited monitoring of policy outcomes at all levels of government and private sector
-  Higher tax brackets for women with registered enterprises

TYPES OF GENDER BASED CONSTRAINTS FACED BY WOMEN IN RURAL NEPAL

A quick overview of emerging patterns based on qualitative data analysis from field sites reveals the following:



1. SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

In the form of overburdening from unequal care responsibility, mobility restrictions, wage differences, limited involvement in decision making processes



2. POLICY CONSTRAINTS

Lack of effective translation of good policies on the ground



3. TECHNOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

Limited information on production and marketing, limited access to digital and agricultural technologies



4. ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

Limited financial literacy and access to loans, limited knowledge of marketing strategies, limited access to transportation and infrastructure



5. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRAINTS

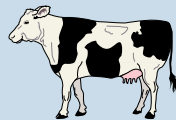
COVID-related mobility constraints, closure of weekly markets, and decreased access to other markets, and climatic constraints to agricultural work

GBCS IN NUMBERS*

The study conducted a survey in a sample of 422 households from the study sites examining the types and extent of GBCs women face. Apart from widespread time poverty due to household responsibilities coupled with farm work, low levels of land ownership and networks with local authorities were also pervasive issues.



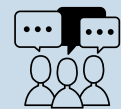
55% of women in Ramechhap shared that women do more household work than men do



43% of women in Ramechhap shared that women do more work caring for livestock, such as collecting fodder and milking



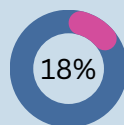
22% of women in Arghakhanchi shared that women do more work applying pesticides, although men claimed otherwise



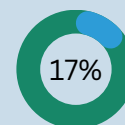
34% of women in Arghakhanchi shared that women are more active in attending social events than men are



38% of women in Ramechhap shared that women do more work marketing their produce



Only 18% of women in Ramechhap and Arghakhanchi owned land, although all women farmed



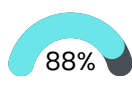
Only 17% of farms were formally registered, meaning the majority of them could not access grants and subsidies

POSITIVE CHANGES AT SAGARMATHA CO-OPERATIVE

More positively, the Sagarmatha Co-operative from Rampur, Ramechhap, which markets and sells legumes and has been working with CREW, has seen a drastic increase in female participation at both executive and membership levels.

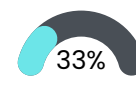


Women's membership in Sagarmatha co-operative has increased by 105%

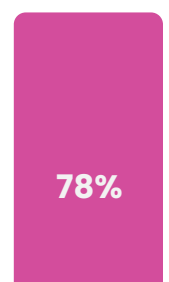
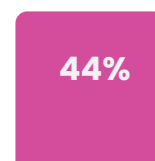


INCREASE IN SHARE CAPITAL

The share capital of the co-operative has increased by 88%, and its savings have increased by 33%



INCREASE IN SAVINGS



The number of women in the co-operative's executive committee has increased from 44% to 78% from November 2021 to October 2022.

(*The data have been drawn from the CREW baseline survey conducted until April 2022, and the second technical report finalized in October 2022.)

GENDER BASED CONSTRAINTS ACROSS DIFFERENT NODES IN THE VALUE CHAIN

Gender based constraints to women's economic empowerment are experienced differently by women based on their positionality in a mesh of intersecting power relations in the value chain. The constraints also vary with the nature of the products. For example, women involved in wintergreen harvesting in Dolakha and legume production in Ramechhap were not impacted as much by the constraints of COVID-19, as the products are seasonal, and harvesting and marketing periods did not overlap with COVID-19 closures. However, women involved in vegetable marketing in Arghakhanchi were severely impacted as COVID-19 restrictions included *haat bazaar* closures, decreasing their access to markets.

GENDER-BASED MOBILITY RESTRICTIONS



Due to stereotypes about transportation and travel being especially unsafe for women, they are discouraged from traveling alone to sell vegetables in Arghakhanchi, which restricts the markets they can access. Older and married women have more freedom in this regard, and women reported they had less freedom to pursue economic activities when younger or newly married.

WAGE DISCRIMINATION



In Arghakhanchi, a woman gets Rs. 500 a day while a man receives RS. 700 for the same work. The gap is higher in Dolakha, where women earn Rs. 500 while men earn Rs. 1000. The difference is justified by claims that the intensity of labor involved in what men do is much higher; farmers also prefer to hire men as far as possible. While men are preferred to work in wintergreen distilleries, women are engaged to wintergreen collection as it is considered as less labor intensive work.

WOMEN ARE PRIORITIZED LESS IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES



Women are not consulted in public decision making, even when said decisions can have an outside impact on them. In Arghakhanchi, the *haat-bazaar* was closed due to COVID-19, which decreased production and income for women, but a year later the local government decided to change the location of the *haat-bazaar* without consulting small farmers and women. The current location is less accessible to small sellers and consumers and is largely only beneficial for wholesalers.

LIMITED ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY



Women from lower castes in Arghakhanchi reported that they often did not hear about government schemes that could help them. Similarly, women from lower income and education levels were not aware of the utilities of smartphones beyond making calls. It is also mostly men who attend public forum trainings and form networks while finding out new information from such discussions.

LOWER LEVELS OF EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE



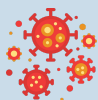
Many women put forth that lower levels of education made them feel less confident in taking on leadership or decision-making roles. Women in Arghakhanchi also said their lack of experience in dealing with finances barred them from reselling vegetables. Other community members also chalked down this lack of experience and education as the reason women cannot take on responsibilities at higher value chain nodes.

LACK OF FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCES



Although microfinance schemes and local cooperatives are present in Arghakhanchi, they only provide small loans at high interest rates and for low amounts of times. Most women do not have bank accounts, and many lower income women think they do not need it. Similarly, the rate of land ownership even among women who farm is extremely low.

CHALLENGES



Smooth functioning of the reopened *haat-bazaar* is not prioritized much in Arghakhanchi, since **marketing vegetables is locally disregarded as the problem of small/women farmers**



Women can face a **triple burden** of farming, care work and representing families in community efforts, meaning participating in more activities can be additional stressors



The national **financial crisis and current credit crunch** has made it difficult for farmers and entrepreneurs to acquire additional funding



Farmers are **hesitant to adopt new techniques** due to generational trust in traditional methods

POSITIVE CHANGES



Increasing access to finance through local groups and cooperatives is seen especially in Arghakhanchi, giving women crucial financial assistance when needed



If assisted with capacity development, some women were ready to **actively collect produce** and sell them to external markets, **moving up in the value chain**



Women farmers in all 3 research sites are **increasingly aware of gender discrimination norms**, and how they affect their economic condition



Women farmers, local partner cooperatives and local government have expressed **enthusiasm in collaborating with CREW**



Few women with smartphones and internet used them to **learn about agriculture and nearby markets**, a positive effect which can be amplified



A lead farmer and woman champion from Jagata, Arghakhanchi organizes her produce for the recently re-opened *haat-bazaar*, a critical source of income for small and women farmers.

WAY FORWARD



Integration of **climate agenda**, alternative energy and low carbon initiatives in agriculture value chains needs to be pursued continually.



CREW will continue to emphasize and accelerate the **integration of digital marketing** to improve existing value chains, and integrate collaboration with local governments and private sector as well.



Women champions who have been identified from their communities and groups can **access provisions** set aside for women's economic empowerment and climate change activities to improve existing value chains with better market linkages and female participation.



Continued focus will be placed on making existing agricultural cooperatives and enterprises more gender inclusive and responsible, and to engage **more women in local governance** and decision making processes.