

Women Empowerment through Beeralu Lace Industry in Southern Province

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Abstract

Beeralu lace industry is a cottage industry introduced by Portuguese. This is a traditional industry inherent from Southern Sri Lanka. Due to lack of attention and less profitability, the moribund lace industry makes weavers poor. Hence, this research attempted to identify the potentials, challenges, and suggestions to empower women in the industry. A field survey was carried out in *Weligama* and *Habaraduwa* Divisional Secretariats and 40 samples were selected from each division according to simple random sampling technique. Pre tested questionnaire was administered to collect data. Data were analyzed by descriptive and analytical statistical tools. Over half of the sample (73%) sells their products through middlemen. Middlemen and South Asian Partnership Sri Lanka (SAPSRI) buy beeralu products throughout the year but at a lower income range. The main challenges that they are facing are seasonality, lower prices (mean value -1.1375), and less government intervention (mean value -0.2000). Although they have considerable profit, it doesn't value their effort and sweat. SAPSRI empowers women through various programs but the government provides raw materials only. Majority sells their properties or mortgage as a coping strategy. With all these, it is reasonable to say that the beeralu industry is a neglected industry. Since, the perception of women who are in the industry is positive there is a scope to develop. Further, the access to raw materials, access to social capital, and the positive attitude have been identified as potentials. In fact, it is important to empower these women by establishing marketing and training centers, introducing loan schemes, and conducting leadership and awareness programs.

Key words: Beeralu, Empowerment, Vulnerability

Introduction

Beeralu lace industry was introduced to Sri Lanka by Portuguese in 15th century. This is a traditional and a cottage industry handed down from mother to daughter especially in southern Sri Lanka. This industry mainly targets the tourism industry. With the introduction of the open economy in 1977 and a surplus of employment opportunities for women, village women left their homes to work in factories. Aftermath, beeralu lace making became almost extinct and now this depends on fewer elder women (Lanka library forum, 2011). In fact, the future of the beeralu lace industry is in a question. Therefore, by involving women who are not doing any other jobs can be engaged in this industry. In this vulnerable condition they need empowerment. Therefore, this research attempted to identify the potentials, challenges, and suggestions to empower women in the industry.

Methodology

Weligama divisional secretariat division from Matara District and Habaraduwa divisional secretariat division

from Galle District were selected for field survey due to higher proportion of beeralu lace makers (Weligama 704, Habaraduwa 376). Forty beeralu lace makers were selected from each division by using simple random sampling technique. Primary data were gathered through pre-tested questionnaire survey. Further information via informal discussions with government officers and marketers were collected. Secondary data were collected from books, internet and other relevant sources. Data analysis was done by mainly Wilcoxon Sign Rank test and Kruskal Wallis statistical test other than the descriptive statistics in order to draw meaningful reasoning towards the objectives.

Results and discussion

Results revealed that the majority of beeralu lace makers are over 50 age (61%) and educated below Ordinary Level (97.5%). Therefore, this industry depends on older women community. All women bread winners engage fulltime ($X^2=6.57$). Over half of the sample (73%) sells their products through

middlemen. Sales through middlemen and South Asian Partnership Sri Lanka (SAPSRI) show a demand throughout the year but at a lower income range since they buy at lower prices (Rs.20- 25/yard). Shop owners are suffered by seasonality of the sales. Their sales are high from November to April. Majority (65%) engages as an additional income source where their main income source is fishing. The perception regarding the industry was analyzed through Wilcoxon Sign Rank test. According to that, private sector intervention (mean value -1.4875) is somewhat good rather than government intervention (mean value -0.2000). Although the demand (mean value 1.6875) is at a satisfactory level, the perception on price (mean value -1.1375) is unsatisfactory. Perception regarding the middlemen intervention is also bad (mean value -0.4500). Even though they have a considerable profit, it doesn't value their effort. The perception of women is positive toward the industry. The access to raw materials, access to social capital, additional income and the attitude are the main potentials.

The community was empowered through the government by only providing raw materials; NGO (SAPSRI) by providing loan, raw materials, training programs, marketing facilities, exhibitions *etc.* Fifty eight percent of the community has memberships in neither committees nor organizational help. Awareness on marketing strategies, marketing facilities and new

technology are very poor because they have not been linked with customers directly. Women's decision making power at enterprise level is not pleasurable since majority has not membership in committees. According to the Kruskal Wallis test, the burning issue is the low prices (mean rank 120.50) for lace products. With these problems, they use coping strategies up to some extent such as selling or mortgaging their own properties and mutual transactions. Majority used to sell or mortgage own assets than mutual loan. Banks do not like to provide loan since they have no assets as collaterals. Sometimes, they reduce consumption even. There are some problems which they have suffered are shown in Table 1.

According to the table 1, lower prices are the biggest problem. Therefore, responsible people should involve to stabilize the prices. Marketing and training centers should be established for training. Introducing loan schemes at a lowest interest rate will be a path for large scale industry. They should be educated with leadership programs and awareness programs on capacity building since they are lacking knowledge on marketing techniques and new technology. It is wise to popularize this industry by arranging exhibitions and promotional campaigns especially in the tourist season.

Conclusion

At present the lace industry depends on older women generation due to the poor participation of younger generation. Majority sells their products through middlemen. Therefore, they have gained marginal profits for lace products. Although, the lace products have a good demand in tourist season, during the off season they have no proper market. Though they use coping strategies, they do not have established any safety nets. Government and private sector intervention are not at a satisfactory level comparing to NGO. Low price, lack of capital, middlemen intervention, less access to market, lack of trained people are the main challenges they are facing today. The perception of women who are in the industry is positive. Further, the access to raw materials, access to

Table 1: Problems of beeralu lace industry

Problems	Mean rank	Homogeneous group	Priority
Low price	120.50	a	1
Lack of capital	211.50	a	2
Middlemen intervention	240.50	a	3
Less access to market	249.50	a	4
Lack of raw materials	315.50	a	5
Seasonality	412.50	b	6
Less reputation	457.50	b	7
Lack of trained people	556.50	c	8

Rejection level = 0.05, Critical Z value 3.12, Critical value for comparison 91.321

social capital, and the mental condition are the potentials. Obviously this is a life supporting occupation for the fishing community but majority has not been empowered. In fact, it is needed to empower this women community in order to mitigate their vulnerability while ensuring the sustainability of one of traditional

handloom industries, beeralu industry in Southern Sri Lanka.

References

Lanka library forum 2011. Beeralu lace making, Sri Lanka.