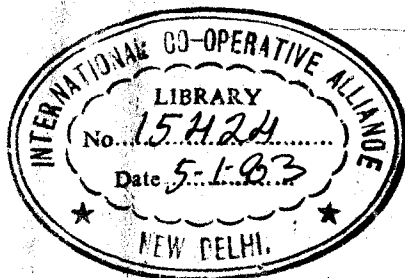


INTERNATIONAL COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE  
Regional Office for East, Central & Southern Africa  
P. O. Box 946  
MOSHI  
Tanzania

THE COOPERATIVE WOMEN'S CONSUMER PROJECT  
EXPERIENCE IN SRI LANKA

10th - 29th June 1982



334:3-055.2(548.7)  
ICA

by :  
Zakia Meghji (Mrs)  
Programme Officer  
Women & Youth  
August 1982



## INTRODUCTION

This short report on my experiences in Sri Lanka is based on my ten days stay in Sri Lanka. The main objective of the visit to Sri Lanka was as follows:

- (i) To visit the SIDA/SCC women consumer project and study its operations with a possibility of setting up such a project in one of the countries of the Region.
- (ii) Exchange of ideas and information between women activities in our Region and women activities in Sri Lanka.
- (iii) To visit women cooperators and see how they are involved in cooperative for comparative purposes.
- (iv) To discuss women cooperative affairs with my counterpart in the New Delhi Office in India.

## THE COOPERATIVE WOMEN'S CONSUMER PROJECT

In its bid to involve more women in cooperatives, the Consumer Guilds in Sweden decided in 1976 to collect funds and support a women's project in a developing country. It was ultimately decided that this project should be in Sri Lanka in South East Asia.

The reasons for picking Sri Lanka are that :

- (i) being a pilot project it is easy to administer it in a small country;
- (ii) literacy standard especially among women is quite high - 80% among women;
- (iii) in some cooperative societies women's committees had been formed.

### Project Activities :

In October 1978 the project was officially inaugurated and actual field work started from 1st January 1979.

The Project was to go by phase so that experiences obtained from one phase could be used in the next phase.

### Phase I (1979)

Started with five societies around the school of co-operation in Polgolla. This was done so that school of cooperation facilities could be utilized. The following types of societies were chosen :

- two economically good societies
- two economically weak ones
- one urban society

### Phase II (1980)

An additional ten societies were added, making it fifteen.

### Phase III (1981/82)

Fifteen more societies were added.

Since the project was going to deal with nutrition, consumer protection, family health, there was need to understand food habits in the areas. Thus a survey was carried out to collect information on type of food available, food preparation habits, women involvement in cooperatives. This survey was done in ten societies which had women's committees.

### Training to Women Leaders

Since what was required was to influence women in societies on understanding nutritious food and its preparation, on health, family planning, etc., there was a need to give the women leaders, training and education on this, so that they could in turn educate others.

Women leaders undergo training by stages. The workshops are as follows :

1st Workshop - Introduction to the project, introduction to cooperation and by-laws, basic nutrition: Here group-work is combined with lectures. Also use of flip charts, food pyramid, etc., is utilised.

2nd Workshop - Responsibilities of committee members, child nutrition, preparation of weaning food, etc : concentration here is on practical work, e.g of role play on how to deliver a talk, preparation of balanced meal.

3rd Workshop - Food preservation. (The type of food depends on season)

4th Workshop - Good budgetting, and kitchen improvement.

5th Workshop - Home gardening

6th Workshop - On income generating activities

7th Workshop - Consumer protection

The leaders are also trained on preparation of teaching and education materials, special guest lecturers are also invited sometimes.

#### Educating members :

The trainers who are leaders from different societies and who have undergone the above training, liaise with Education Officer in their societies to conduct education programmes for women. In fact at the time when the Project started there were no education officers. However the women consumer project necessitated this change. As a result there are now education officers in most societies who are incharge of education programmes. A number of them are women.

The education officer conducts a workshop once in every two and half months. These workshops are attended by branch women leaders. The number however is not supposed to exceed forty-five. Demonstration classes are given on nutrition, balanced diet, hygiene, family planning, etc.

Workshops are also held at district and national levels.

#### Support to Women's Committee

In the beginning the attitude of men to the project was not very positive. The cooperative societies thought that this would create an additional burden on their part. However since the project was greatly supported by the government, through its responsible ministry of cooperatives, non-governmental officials had to accept it ultimately.

One can however see that now there is definite support on the women consumer project and women's committee in general. In all societies I visited a certain sum of money was allocated to women activities.

Women's attitude to the project is very positive. They are happy as they are now being recognized. Women's interest was aroused though not on the same level. For some women the project was a way of getting a job, scholarships, etc. Sometimes there were petty jealousies fighting for leadership positions.

The age of women involved varies from society to society. In most societies there was a mixture of young and old people.

Some societies have done very well, while others have not done so well. Reasons for failures are several. Some of the failures are due to the following reasons :

- (i) Some women leaders expected economic benefits from the project. However, when they found that it was purely an education programme, they left the project.
- (ii) Some expected to get scholarships and go to foreign countries.
- (iii) Those who are not re-elected into leadership positions become inactive and sometimes tend to criticize the project.
- (iv) Political, caste and racial issues tend to interfere with those conducting field work e.g the leader going to educate women of another religion, political party or caste, is not listened to. This means that when they do not get fullest cooperation from the society they tend to get discouraged and opt out.

Apart from these, the project also experienced other problems. These are :

- (i) Leadership problems - When leaders were elected, they were not aware of the role they would play. Later they found that they had to utilise part of their free time on the project, and some leaders were not prepared for this.

Not being good teachers - Some leaders could not make good teachers. This meant that whatever knowledge they gained they could not share it with others during workshops.

Superiority Complex - Some thought they were too high to rub shoulders with others.

Status Conscious - Some thought that going out for field work was not being feminine and was too low for them.

Lack of time - Some did not have enough time for workshops.

Dispute between organisation - There were other organisations dealing with some aspects that are covered by the women consumer project. These created disputes initially.

Changes in the project staff - Since project staff have to be experienced and trained in their field, it is very expensive if staff keep changing e.g since the project started there have been three changes in the consumer post..

Some societies feel there is interference in the day to day activities of their societies. e.g the idea of having women voluntarily going into a consumer shop and cleaning it up, insisting to put sales tags, etc., is too much of a bother for those who have been used to a certain way of carrying out their activities. This may also appear as a challenge to some cooperative leaders.

Other activities - The spillover effect of the project ideas is very good. Women are now involved in number of self-help activities. Everyday they think of new activities that can be carried out. For example, women organise funeral on a self-help basis.

The savings promotion scheme has become very important and popular in the project and more societies are involved in this scheme.

It is definite that women membership to societies has greatly increased in different societies since the inception of the women consumer project.

## Lessons to be drawn from the Project and its relevancy to our situation

### Introduction

I was able to visit different societies in Sri Lanka I met the members, women committee members, leaders of societies at different levels. I held discussions and gave talks to the different societies visited.

I held both formal and informal talks. I feel that the idea of introducing such a project is very good. When I say very good, I mean that the project can lead to more participation of women in cooperatives.

The theme that runs throughout our activities is participation or involvement of women in cooperatives. We have managed to involve women in various ways. Either through exclusive women societies or through having a women activity within the larger society, or by just encouraging women to join existing cooperative societies.

### Combination of business and social aspect of cooperatives

Most of our activities are business oriented. Either production of handicraft for sale, having a restaurant which brings in money, having a shop which apart from giving service also brings in profit in money terms to the members.

The idea of educating women in other subjects like nutrition, family planning, health, etc., though has been there, has not been very well co-ordinated and effective.

The Sri Lanka Project gives us an idea of linking economic nature of the cooperative with the social aspect. The combination of social education and economy - in fact these two things have to go together. One cannot fully participate in a cooperative society if one is not healthy.

I therefore feel that this aspect be introduced in cooperatives in our Region. This can be started on a pilot project bases in one country of the Region, preferably in a small country.

### Women's Committees

In order that these ideas reach a larger number of women, there is need to have contact women in these societies. The idea of having women's committee in each society is very good. This gives a feeling to women that they are being represented and that their ideas are being listened to. Women, especially rural women feel more at home among fellow women. Thus it will be easy to involve more women in cooperatives since they know they are among their own sex. This in fact is a good way of bringing women to a higher level in cooperatives and later to be able to feel confident and free to express themselves when men are around. However, the idea of having women's committee and activities should not be looked upon as a permanent thing. This situation should be used as a stepping stone to a higher situation of equality. Equality between male and female. To feel equal to express oneself, to elect and be elected in leadership position.

### Material support to women

There is a saying that says - to give is not a sign of richness. Apart from moral support given to women, but also material support must be given to them, especially in the initial stage. A small amount of money budgetted for women affairs by the society goes along way to boost the morale of women. Even though the women consumer project does help from time to time especially with training the societies should try to be self-reliant and show their support by giving women all support possible.

### Voluntarism and dedication

It is very important to raise and maintain enthusiasm and dedication of the women's committee. The success of this project very much depends on their dedication. A lot of work or rather most of them offer their services to others without expecting much in return. Workshops and meetings where demonstrations on nutrition, cooperatives, etc., are held are thus run by women leaders. The only thing they get is the fare from their homes to the different societies scattered around. This means that for any project to succeed this idea must be built from the very beginning.



## Proper Survey

Before the project starts proper survey is needed. Since the basic idea is to educate women on balanced diet and link the ideas with cooperatives, it is therefore important to know the types of food available in the area, and how it is prepared. That is why this was done by the project. The food pyramid has become a very popular sign. This is used in all the workshops. It has also been prepared on a wooden frame with different parts to it that can be fitted in and taken out like a jigsaw puzzle.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that the idea of the women consumer project based on the Sri Lanka experience should be tried in one of the countries of the Region for East, Central and Southern Africa.

This will be one of the best ways to ensure fuller participation of women in cooperatives. We should expect to have more women as members as years go by, and fuller recognition of women's potentials by cooperative leaders.

## A Case Study

I have visited many societies and seen their activities. Since most societies resemble each other in their activities and organisation, I will just give description of one.

In all societies visited women are very active. They attend sewing classes and later start stitching garments, They start producing children's clothes.

All societies undergo training covering same stages. This means that teachers are trained together and they in turn train these women.

The women consumer project was going to hold an examination in all the societies to determine their level in sewing and in other handicraft activities.

Nutrition which include preparation of food, balanced diet, family health, family planning is taught to women members. Practical classes are held in which food is prepared for sale. Some societies have small consumer shops run by women. They utilize this shop to sell their things. Otherwise they utilise society run consumer cooperative society. From time to time exhibitions are held and sales are also made here. Women are also encouraged to take part in agriculture production. Competition is held every year to determine the best home garden. The National Cooperative Council which is the apex of Sri Lanka sometimes organise poultry-keeping training at the school of agriculture. Members are sent for training who later assist poultry farming in the area through advice, etc. This training is co-ordinated with the women consumer project.

One can see that women are involved in many activities. depending on their situation. They are confident and thus whatever they do they do it voluntarily and with a big heart.

### The Nallur Multipurpose Cooperative Society

The Nallur Multipurpose Cooperative Society has thirty two branches. Amalgamation of societies took place on 30th March 1971. Membership as at 31st May 1982 was 9299. Out of these there are 2626 women.

The Nallur MPCS has been selected in the 3rd Phase of the women consumer project. Through women's activities the two main communities - the Sinhalese and the Tamils have come together.

Women are engaged in different activities. The idea is to involve women in management positions as well. The women's committee are campaigning to involve all those women above the age of eighteen in the area covered by the society.

The women's committee started the savings campaigns which has become very popular. They have so far saved 150,000 Rupees. Every month a lottery is organised and there are three winners.

The society through the women's committee also conducts cookery classes, and also markets products prepared by women. Bites are sold at the University of Jaffna canteen. By last year 1981 they had a net profit of 1500 Rps from the canteen. As a result they opened another canteen at the Art School.

Exhibitions are held monthly where some of the items are sold.

Women are educated on nutrition, family health and other related subjects. There is very good co-ordination with other government departments. Women trainers have been trained by the Adult Education Officer in the area. They attended twenty-four sessions on adult education methods. They were also lectured by other university lecturers on related fields.

Income generating activities are greatly encouraged. Education and training is offered in handicraft, poultry-keeping, cattle breeding, etc. This is encouraged to increase their income.

There is an orphanage in the area and women's committee teach these orphans to be self-reliant by producing different items for sale. Tutorials are also given on different subjects.

The women's committee in its bid to increase knowledge among women have set up a library where members can borrow books. A small amount of 5 Rps is contributed by members. The school children also make use of this library.

Apart from supplying bites to the University canteen the women's committee also supply meals for weddings.

Cultural aspect is also encouraged by the women's committee. Cultural shows and dancing and other cultural classes are also held. Discussions on such issues as dowry are also held to educate the younger generations, especially.

The women's committee is getting support from both the Movement and the Department. For example, 15,000 Rps was voted for the 1981/82 women activities by the society.

\*\*\*\*\*