

May-2008

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Recommended Citation

Mutandwa, Edward; Sigauke, Noah; and Muganiwa, Charles P. (2008). Urban Women's Participation in the Construction Industry: An Analysis of Experiences from Zimbabwe. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 256-268.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss3/14>

Urban Women's Participation in the Construction Industry: An Analysis of Experiences from Zimbabwe

By Edward Mutandwa¹, Noah Sigauke² and Charles P. Muganiwa³

Abstract

This paper analyzed the impact of urban women's participation in the construction business on income generation, gender roles and responsibilities, family and societal perceptions in Zimbabwe. Problems and constraints affecting women's participation in the sector were also identified. A total of 130 respondents were purposively selected from four urban cities namely Chitungwiza, Marondera, Norton and Rusape. Structured questionnaires and focus group discussions were used as the main data collection instruments. The findings of the study showed that women's businesses in construction were profitable and constituted an important source of family income. However, business growth was negatively affected by limited access to finance, lack of suitable equipment, high cost of inputs, and training in business and marketing skills. There was also greater gender burden created as women sought to strike a balance between the social roles and economic activities even though the community had a positive perception towards their involvement. There is need for re-orientation of the national housing policy so that it explicitly incorporates the specific needs of women in the construction industry. Strategies that reduce gender burden on women also need to be explored.

Keywords: Construction, National Housing Policy, Urban, Women, Zimbabwe

Background

Globally, the construction industry contributes about 1/3 of gross capital formation and is an important vehicle for economic development through built environmental assets such as houses, roads, utility networks, schools and clinics (Kenny, 2007). However, much of the construction activity has been taking place in developed countries as opposed to developing economies as the latter are faced with numerous challenges related to skills scarcity, lack of financial and technology resources necessary to stimulate vibrant construction work (van Wyk, 2006) resulting in formalized urban cities failing to cater for the housing needs of people living in developing countries. The unprecedented levels of urbanization characteristic of most developing countries have resulted in the emergence of slums and informal settlements. The UN-Habitat's Global Report on Settlements (2003) estimates that by 2010, the levels of urbanization for

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Africa, Asia and Latin America will be 42,7%, 43% and 79% respectively. Developmental challenges that include spread of disease pandemics (cholera, dysentery), supply of unclean water, poor infrastructures and poor service delivery are common in these regions.

As with most developing countries, Zimbabwe has been characterized by high rates of urbanization since the attainment of independence in 1980. Following the rescission of restrictive pass laws by the predecessor government, the urban population grew from 23% in 1982 to around 30% in 1990 as most people sought to work in the urban cities (UN-Habitat Global report on urban settlements, 2003). This led to an escalation in demand for housing, which subsequently led the government of Zimbabwe to enunciate the national housing policy. This policy framework facilitated the production of 15000 housing units annually between 1980 and 1994 and 18000 units from 1995-1997 that decreased to only 3000 units between 1998-2000 (Zimbabwe National Housing Delivery Program, 2005, p12). The decline in the delivery of housing units is attributed to contracting budgetary allocations and an inauspicious macro-economic environment characterized by hyperinflation (according to CSO, 2007, inflation stood at 14000% in November, 2007), shortage of foreign currency and negative economic growth. Even though housing delivery has been declining since 1990, the gender dimension of housing units produced between 1980-2000 is not clear and it is also acknowledged that many households do not have security of tenure. In rural areas, women owned between 31-34% of all private land (CSO, 2000, p54) between 1995 and 1999, a scenario that could also be extrapolated to the urban areas as gender biases still permeate the different sectors of the economy.

Over the years, housing provision has largely been dominated by the public sector with minimal private sector participation. The fiscal burden has resulted in housing demand exceeding supply. Anecdotes show that housing stock deficit in 1990 was 200,000, whilst it was 670,000 in 1995, and 1,250,000 in 2005 (Zimbabwe's national housing delivery program, 2005, p15). It is often argued that the emergence of informal settlements is linked to the burgeoning housing backlog in the country. Informal settlements in areas such as Epworth (where the population stood at 200,000 in 2001 (CSO, 2001) and Porta farm in Harare as well as backyard shacks in urban areas such as Mbare have been used as sources of accommodation by the urban poor. In Mutare, a city located on the eastern side of the country, there were 34,000 backyard extensions compared to 27,000 legal houses in the town in 2005. The concept of informality in housing [defined by Wells (2007) as lack of regulation in informal sector of enterprises, informal labour, the informal construction system and informal buildings] has nevertheless remained illegal according to the Regional Town and Country Planning Act Chapter 29:12/1976 and the Urban Councils Act Chapter 29:15/1995 (Zimbabwe's National Housing Delivery Program, 2005). Consequently, government driven operations (such as Operation Murambatsvina) have been implemented to rectify the problem of informal settlements and illegal structures thus reducing slums from 3.4% in 2004 to 1.1% in 2005. Demolitions as corrective strategies have also been used in other countries such as Angola, Kenya, and Nigeria where women and children are usually amongst the most affected (1.7% of directly affected households were women headed in Zimbabwe).

The National Housing Policy spells out a participatory development strategy, which recognizes the involvement of all key stakeholders in housing delivery. It also recognizes non-discrimination on the basis of gender as one of its key facets (National Housing Policy for Zimbabwe, 2000). However, the construction industry in the country remains largely dominated by male workers. This can often be attributed to social and cultural attitudes towards women's participation in technical and engineering fields (Australian Agency for International Development, 1997). Of the 105,567 persons formally employed in Zimbabwe's construction sector in 1999, only 6.3% were women and they mainly operated at the menial level (CSO, 2002, p65). Women employment pattern in construction is similar to other countries. In the Czech republic, for instance, 2,7% of entrepreneurs in the construction sector were women in 2007. Furthermore, 4.55% of influential positions in the construction business were held by women in that country (Putnova, 2007). In South Africa, the construction sector is the third most important sector contributing an estimated R25 billion per annum. However, women participation has largely been restricted to free community work and about 8% of construction sector managers are women (Mjoli-Mncube, 2005). In North America, 10% of the construction participants are women (Sigcau, 2004).

These inherent biases led to the promulgation of the National Gender Policy in 2001, which seeks to promote gender equity and equality in full recognition of the needs of Zimbabweans. Increasing private sector participation in housing construction resulted in various initiatives being developed in the sector. The Women in Construction project was started in the year 2002 by a local development agency as one of the harbinger women focused construction programs in the country. The operational areas included Chitungwiza, Norton, Rusape, and Marondera, which are some of the main urban cities in Zimbabwe. The project's main thrust was to promote women participation in the construction sector through technical training in the molding of low cost bricks (soil stabilized blocks), ceramics and tiles among other products. The long-term vision of the program has been to ensure that women ultimately own houses in urban areas. Facets of the project include training, networking, technical development, information and advocacy in relevant aspects of construction. Since its inception, the extent of impact of the program on women livelihoods is not clear. Therefore the main objective of the study is to assess the impact of the project on income generation, gender roles and responsibilities, societal perceptions and family relations.

Literature Review

An overview of Zimbabwe's macro-economic and socio-economic context

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country located in Southern Africa covering 39,037,000 hectares. It is bordered by Zambia to the northwest, Mozambique to the east, South Africa to the south, Botswana to the southwest and Namibia to the west. It is situated between 15 and 22° south latitude and 26 and 34° east longitude.

Figure 1 Map of Zimbabwe



The Central Statistics Office [CSO] (2002) estimated that the country's population stood at 12.5 million in 2002, with 52% being women and 48% men. This figure has not changed significantly as the country has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa along side Botswana and South Africa (21% of the people in the 15-49 age group were infected, as of 2006). Since 1999, Zimbabwe has been facing macro-economic instability characterized by hyperinflation, shortage of foreign currency, high interest rates and high unemployment rates (80%). The rates of inflation have been 32%, 58%, 57%, 55%, 400%, 1042% and 165000% percent in the years 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2006 and 2008. Foreign direct investment declined from US \$ 440 million in 1998 to US \$ 3.6 million in 2005 resulting in severe foreign currency bottlenecks. These developments are largely as a result of inimical political relations with the Western countries following the implementation of the fast track land reform program. The hyperinflationary environment coupled with the existence of multiple exchange rates has resulted in escalating costs of production of goods and services, negative economic growth and increasing poverty levels. According to Zimbabwe Human Development Report (2003: 13), an estimated 57% of the population lived below the Food Poverty Line (FPL) (an indicator of hunger or extreme poverty) in 1995 and this increased to 69% in 2002. In terms of general poverty, the proportion of the population below the Total Consumption Poverty Line (TCPL) was 74% in 1995 and 80% in 2002. Reduced consumption spending and lack of access to mortgage loans for individual and corporate consumers have generally meant that infrastructure developments have been stifled in the country. The following section delves into the various policy instruments

that have been implemented to improve urban housing, an analysis of their efficacy and problems faced in urban housing since the country's attainment of independence.

National housing policy in Zimbabwe

Prior to 1980, the then Rhodesian government implemented restrictive pass laws to curtail movement of people to urban areas during the war of liberation. Consequently, most black people resided in rural areas termed tribal trust lands (TTL). After independence, the government of Zimbabwe repealed pass laws through Repealing of Pass Laws (1980) amendment instrument. This resulted in an influx of people from rural to urban areas coupled with an upsurge in the demand for houses. This required changes to be effected to the national housing policy as embodied in the government of Zimbabwe (GOZ)'s long-term development plan. The national housing policy has gone through a number of revisions incorporating the following: Rent control regulation (1982), Introduction of Home Ownership, The National Housing Fund, The Pay for your house scheme (1995), National Housing delivery Policy (2000) and National Housing Program of 2003 (Zimbabwe's national housing delivery program, 2005). The collective effects of these policy regulations were to provide security of tenure for people, mobilization of funds, and protection of tenants from prohibitive rental hikes and decent accommodation to the urban population. Since independence, the government has also been promoting the establishment of housing cooperatives and provided assistance through training, auditing, legal services, loans and surveying services (Government of Zimbabwe, 1984). The relative housing supply to demand ratios for 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005 are: 7.5%, 2.6%, 0.3% and 0.2% respectively. These figures indicate that housing supply from the public sector has been very insignificant in solving urban housing problems in the country. Successive decline in housing supply is a result of general macro-economic volatility that has been experienced in the country since 1998. The shelter condition of women and children is poor and this is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of women are not aware of sources of housing finance, legal advice and information on building technologies (Intermediate Technology Publications, 2001).

The government of Zimbabwe crafted the national housing delivery program in 2004, which was predicated on the following aspects: decentralization of management of State land to local authorities, establishment of Zimbabwe Habitat Secretariat on human settlement development, use of appropriate technology through cheap alternative building materials, establishment of Building Production Brigades and review of minimum housing standards to make housing more effective.

Constraints to housing policy implementation

The problem of housing has been in the last few years compounded by lack of financial capacity on the part of national government and municipalities to embark on full-scale housing development hence the high statistics on homelessness (Zimbabwe's National Housing Delivery Program, 2005). At the household level, a number of generic factors have also been affecting access to housing in urban areas and these are *inter alia* legal conditions, high transaction costs associated with drawing up of housing plans and approval, dearth of appropriate sources of credit, low incomes and prohibitive land prices

and high costs of construction materials. Most modern and traditional laws have traditionally been biased towards male ownership and control and in some cases, laws may bar women from acquiring or disposing of land without their husbands' consent. Institutional procedures of acquiring land often involve transaction costs (i.e. registration fees), which may be prohibitively high for resource-poor households.

Urban housing policies generally do not cater for the specific needs of women. In a study of 5 housing cooperatives (four in Harare and 1 in Bulawayo) in Zimbabwe, Vakil (1994, p15) observed that women roles in these cooperatives conformed more closely to traditional domestic activities and men assumed most of the leadership roles. Lack of appropriate training of women in management, technical and non-traditional skills were noted as constraints that limit women participation in construction activities. These observations are corroborated by the South Africa experience, where Mjoli-Mncube (2005) indicates that the dearth of technical, financial management and associated sources of credit, marketing and business skills have been a major hindrance in the effective participation of women in South Africa's booming construction sector. A study by Eliufoo (2007) in Tanzania revealed that women working in construction sites were subordinated and their perceived position in the society resulted in limited access to appropriate skills in construction. The author suggests technical training as a strategy that could be used to improve women participation in the construction industry. Dainty, et al (1999) assessed women participation in the United Kingdom's construction sector and observed that the environment was characterized by hostility, discrimination and resentment against women employees. The aforementioned constraints facing women in the construction industry have led to private sector initiatives such as the Women in Construction project which broadly seek to address the gender imbalances that currently characterizes the Zimbabwean construction industry through policy and advocacy and direct provision of the requisite technical, and business management skills and equipment for use by women.

Research Methodology

Study sites

The Women in Construction Project was started in April 2002. Its main goal was to reduce poverty and gender inequality in Zimbabwe through increased access by women to construction sector livelihood opportunities. The purpose is to reduce gender barriers to women's participation in construction sector through training, networking, technical development, information and advocacy. The project has been operational in the urban areas of Chitungwiza, Marondera, Norton and Rusape, which are urban cities in Zimbabwe. These cities were chosen as harbinger sites for the project and they were chosen as research sites to inform scaling up operations. Chitungwiza and Norton are dormitory suburbs located about 25 and 65km respectively from Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe whilst Rusape is located in Manicaland Province and it has relatively larger population. Marondera town is located in Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe. Project partners included local authorities, women's organizations, micro finance institutions and other development organizations.

Population and sampling method

The target population for the study consisted of all members who participated in the project. There were at least 12 groups of at least six people each in Chitungwiza, two in Norton, at least twenty-three in Rusape while there were some individuals in Marondera. Purposive sampling was used as the sampling strategy to identify respondents on the basis of active participation in the project. Groups that were not included in the survey had not been supplied with equipment and other materials for use in their respective businesses. This sampling strategy permitted identification of groups that were making bricks and tiles for sale. A final sample size of 130 members was used for the survey and a sampling intensity of 44% was achieved.

Data collection instruments

Two main data collection instruments were used in data collection: structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. Structured questionnaires were administered to 130 project participants. The broad areas captured by the structured questionnaire were social, economic, institutional, training, production, and environmental aspects related to the project. The structured questionnaire was pre-tested with 10 respondents from Chitungwiza to ensure reliability and validity of the instrument.

Focus group discussions (FGDs), by their nature call for trust building between communities and outsiders, so that respondents 'open up' and able to share their information. FGDs helped the researchers in collecting data on social effects of the project and as a basis for triangulating data collected using structured questionnaires. By fully participating in identifying an array of social, economic and political factors that influence the project, the respondents were able to highlight problems and prospects they faced in their livelihoods. Basically, the FGDs served the purpose of letting the local people familiarize themselves with group discussions and to allow them to gain confidence that they can 'teach' outsiders about their environment and livelihoods.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved quantitative and qualitative means. Data analysis for questionnaires involved cleaning and organizing data (data preparation), describing data (descriptive statistics) and analysing relationships using various inferential statistics including One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). For data analysis the researchers used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results and Discussion

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Of the 130 respondents who participated in the survey, 85% were women while 15% were men hence reflecting the women focused nature of the project. Fifty five percent of the participants resided in Chitungwiza, 35 % in Rusape, 8% in Norton and 2% in Marondera. This sampling distribution was related to the level of construction activity and number of active groups in the respective areas. Respondents were generally literate with the majority (72%) having attained secondary level education followed by 25% who

had primary level education. The average age was 35 years while the mean household size was 6 members per family. Most of the respondents (63%) were married while 22% were single and 11% widowed.

Respondents' livelihood bases

Characterization of respondents' livelihood bases was important to identify the position of construction activities relative to other income generating activities. Accordingly, the various income-generating activities were ranked using their percentage monthly contribution to family income. Income sources in order of contribution to household income were: vegetable vending (38%), cross border trading (16%), paid employment (15.5%), sewing for local sale (14.3%), construction related products (10.4%), frozen ice cool sales (2.9%), poultry products (1.7%) and candles (1%). Vegetable vending and cross border trading were dominant in Chitungwiza were 61% and 51% of the respondents respectively indicated participating in these economic activities. These findings could be explained by the increasingly informal nature of the economy in recent years, where most households now eke out a living in the informal sector and the deregulation of production and distribution of goods and services in the country. Twenty percent of the respondents in Chitungwiza and 18% in Rusape indicated that they used income earned from sale of bricks to pay for school fees for their children.

Construction business in women's daily activities

In contemporary development thinking it has come to the fore that merely transferring technology to the poor is not sufficient for their empowerment. In this respect, the researchers found it expedient to examine the relationship between the project and daily activities. The researchers observed that women had to strike a balance between household chores and economic activities. Major activities that women were involved in included cooking, fending for children, washing clothes, income-generating projects such as construction, vegetable vending, and attending other social gatherings such as churches, funerals etc. These patterns were similar in the four research sites. Respondents involved in the construction business spent an average of 7 hours in this line of business. These results also reflect the situation that is typical in most developing economies. In rural Bangladesh, for example, total working time per day for women was about 7.81 hours per day in 2000 (Hossain, et al, 2004). Most women woke up as early as 4 o'clock in the morning to do daily household chores such as sweeping the house (30 minutes), cooking (1.2 hours) and washing of clothes (1 hour). By start of a normal working day (8 o'clock), most of the aforementioned daily chores would have been accomplished. Others delegated work mainly to their children in cases where the children could do the work. This was common among married women who were above 35 years and had grown up children to assist in household chores. Women in paid employment, who constituted 17% of the sample, hired domestic workers to do household chores. There was general consensus that by end of day (ended at between 6 and 8 o'clock in the evening), women were exhausted because they were involved in strenuous construction work which entailed mixing cement, sand and quarry stones, fetching water using wheelbarrows, and sieving soil. This was exacerbated by the fact that all the equipment

they used-sieves, shovels, wheelbarrows, -were not particularly designed to suit their needs.

These factors militated against the realization of full economic potential among women. Wickham (2001) remarked that even though women may be in the labour force, they are not achieving their full economic potential because their specific needs and characteristics are often overlooked. The multiple roles of women in family, society and business are potential and actual sources of conflict (Elizbarashvili, undated). Real progress in closing the gender gap may depend on developing programs that reduce the “double-burden” of family and market work (Tigges and Green, 1994). In Cambodia, Lao Peoples Republic and Vietnam, promotion of the concept of shared family responsibilities, child care facilities and related support facilities have been suggested as strategies which can assist in the realization of women’s full economic potential in all facets of economic activity (Indochina Seminar on Women participation in economic development, 1996).

Although families and the general community claimed that they supported women participation in the construction related businesses, there were no identified instances in which men volunteered to do household chores such as washing of clothes and cooking. It is still considered a cultural taboo for men to perform certain household activities such as sweeping outside the house. Deconstruction of societal beliefs and attitudes in gender roles and responsibilities at the household level is yet to be achieved.

Characterization of construction activities: productivity and markets

A range of construction related products were made and these included soil stabilized blocks (SSBs), tiles, ceramics and concrete basins. The researchers sought to determine the levels of productivity in the different projects. SSBs were made in Rusape and Chitungwiza, with an average of 800 and 300 bricks per day respectively. In Chitungwiza, up to 25 tiles could be made per day but there were limitations imposed by lack of adequate inputs mainly cement and river sand. The financial returns/1000 bricks are shown in Table 1. A gross profit of US\$ 640 per 1000 bricks was realized (using the official exchange rate benchmark of 1US\$=Z\$55 at the time of doing the research) whilst total costs of production accounted for 34% of the gross profit resulting in a net financial profit of US\$416.34 per 1000 bricks made.

Table 1 Financial returns from SSB production

	Item (Z\$)/1000 bricks	Item US\$/1000 bricks
Gross profit	\$35,200.00	\$640.00
Variable costs		
Labor	\$2,342.00	\$42.58
River sand	\$2,250.00	\$40.91
Water	\$1,612.00	\$29.31
Cement	\$4,563.00	\$82.96
Quarry stone	\$416.00	\$7.56
TVC	\$11,183.00	\$203.33

TFC (10% of TVC)	\$1,118.30	\$20.33
Total costs	\$12,301.30	\$223.66
Net financial profit	\$22,898.70	\$416.34

Soil Stabilized Blocks (SSBs) were cheaper than conventional bricks and therefore preferred by locals involved in constructing their own houses in the various sites.

Constraints faced by respondents in construction activities

Problems faced were mainly related to sources of credit (69%), and inputs such as cement, river sand and quarry stone (62%), suitability of the equipment to women’s needs (54%), high cost of inputs and lack of marketing training to exploit lucrative markets (40%). Constraints related to finance and absence of lucrative markets were particularly noted in Chitungwiza, as 60% and 67% of the respondents respectively felt that accessibility to finance and lucrative markets were a major problem. This could be linked to the intensive competition in housing construction and high demand for housing facilities (Chitungwiza town is a dormitory town, where the majority of people work in Harare, the capital city) that exists in the town unlike Rusape and Marondera, which are smaller cities. Thus the problems faced by respondents are related to locality socio-economic characteristics. Most conventional brick manufacturers in the four sites used firewood during the brick production process. However, SSBs are not burnt thus posing minimal damage to local forest resources. Lack of adequate inputs factors could explain why the construction business emerged as the fifth most important source of family income. These observations are consistent with Vakil (1994), Mjoli-Mncube (2005) and Eliufoo (2007) who argued that women face a wide range of problems that include lack of technical, financial management, business skills as well as access to finance resulting in limited growth opportunities.

Suitability of equipment used by women

Women were involved in the entire production cycle from fetching water, mixing to actual product making. A wide array of tools that included wheelbarrows, sieves, trowels, moulds, picks, metal buckets and shovels were used. Respondents rated the suitability of equipment in terms of ease of use by employing a five point likert scale that ranged from 1-very good through 5-very poor. Generally, the equipment was rated satisfactory to poor and there were no significant differences in opinion among respondents from Rusape, Chitungwiza, Norton and Marondera ($p>0.05$). According to the views of women, sieves and molds were not particularly suitable as they were considered to be heavy during use.

Institutions working with women’s groups

A number of women focused organizations were working with respondents. These included the Civic Forum, Women in Business and Zimbabwe Women Resource Network Center. Fifty eight percent of the respondents indicated that these institutions

were effective especially in lobbying and advocating for changes in the National Housing Policy which has often been argued to be gender-neutral as it assumes the male-headed nuclear family as the norm and not explicitly recognizing the unique needs of women-headed households (Vakil, 1994, p8). The organizations were also actively involved in lobbying and advocating for cheap credit windows of opportunity to facilitate purchase of inputs required in the construction business as well as technical and business training for women.

Societal perceptions on products made by women

Most of the respondents (83%) were of the opinion that the local community and their respective families welcomed their participation of women in the construction business. A number of people from the community who were interviewed indicated that products made were of high quality and relatively cheaper and thus highly preferred. Appreciation of their work by families and the community has led to increased self-esteem (54%) among women. These research findings are consistent with the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI)'s observations that recognition of work among Bangladeshi rural women participating in various economic activities increases self-confidence and therefore an important aspect in women social development (Hossain, et al, 2004).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The paper assessed the impact of the Women's Construction Project on income generation, gender roles, responsibilities and societal perceptions. The findings of the study indicate that the construction business is a potentially lucrative and profitable business venture for women due to increasing derived demand for housing construction materials such as tiles and bricks in the country. Profits made and recognition of products by community, have led to increased self-confidence among women. Construction activities contributed approximately 10% of household income per month. The realization of full economic potential has however, been negatively affected by lack of suitable construction equipment which is often seen as heavy, access to finance, high cost of inputs mainly cement, and appropriate business and marketing skills. Study findings also showed that there is increased gender burden (total working hours of about 9 hours per day) as women sought to strike a balance between their social responsibilities and economic activities. Even though there is generally a positive community perception towards women participation in a non-traditional occupation such as construction work, this has not reflected at family level through sharing of roles and responsibilities. This is attributed to a largely patriarchal society in which men dominate the socio-economic, cultural and political milieu in the country. Research findings point to the need to re-orient the national housing policy framework in Zimbabwe so that it explicitly incorporates the specific needs of women which are related to the provision of suitable construction equipment, access to credit window of opportunities, and training in business and marketing skills. There is also need to explore strategies that can reduce gender burden that arises due to the conflict between social and economic activities. Shared family responsibilities, affordable childcare centres, and greater nation-wide

dialogue to break some of the entrenched and perceived socio-cultural taboos associated with men being involved in certain types of household work could be used.

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