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**LEATHER AND FOOTWEAR INDUSTRY SCHEME**

US/RAF/92/200

REGIONAL AFRICA

**Technical report: Policies, strategies and guidelines to promote the  
integration of women workers and women entrepreneurs  
in the leather industry at all levels\***

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>1.0 Overview</b>	
<b>2.0 The importance of gender perspectives in the leather industry</b>	
<b>2.1 Critical areas of concern, strategies, guidelines and policies</b>	
<b>3.0 Women employees in the leather industry</b>	
<b>4.0 Concluding remarks</b>	

## **1.0 Overview**

### **The Leather Project**

The programmes US/RAF/88/100, Regional Hides and Skins, Leather and Leather Products Improvement Scheme, and US/RAF/92/200, Regional Africa Leather and Footwear Industry Scheme, are under implementation in nine countries. One of the aims of the project is enhancement of women's status in the leather and leather products industry.

A women-in-development officer was employed for a period of four years. During the four years, the programme carried out the following activities:

- a) Analysis of employment patterns of women in the leather industry;
- b) Creation of gender analysis in the leather and leather products sector;
- c) Assessment and analysis of the training needs of women in the leather industry.

What emerged was that action to improve the socio-economic situation of women should concentrate on a multiple approach, namely:

- a) Preparing women for better employment opportunities through training in various activities (management, technical skills, entrepreneurship etc.);
- b) Creating an awareness of the role of women in the leather industry by sensitizing managers, employers, project personnel, and industry professional associations;
- c) Creating self assertiveness among women working in the sector so that more women seek advancement of their status;
- d) Organizing study tours for women in the sector;
- e) Providing equipment for a few selected women entrepreneurs in the sector.

Although much has been done, still more needs to be undertaken, especially as there are still areas of glaring inequalities between men and women. The main critical areas of concern are outlined below. Guidelines, policies, and strategies for enhancing the status of women in the leather industry are also suggested. The paper is based on the experience acquired in the project during the last four years.

## **2.0 Importance of gender perspectives in the leather industry**

Before discussing the introduction of gender sensitive policies in the leather industry, it is important to explain the importance of a gender perspective with regards to women's

participation in the labour market, particularly as labour market inequalities and segregation tend to reflect cultural patterns and stereotypes which are present in a given society.

Historically, the concern of "women in development" is that women bear a greater burden of development but that men get the greater share of the resultant income. Esther Boserup in her 1970 pioneering work showed that many development programmes, especially in food production, tended to give the greatest burden to women but gave men the greatest share of the process. If planners do not have a clear understanding of the division of labour in a given sector, development programmes may have unexpected results.

Gender roles are roles which are ascribed to a particular sex by custom and tradition, although the roles could be performed by either sex. For example, in some cultures women are responsible for the slaughter of animals and yet in other cultures, this role is carried out by men. On the other hand, sex roles can be biological, such as breast feeding and child bearing.

In the light of the above, it can be concluded that if gender is socially constructed, it can also be deconstructed as a result of the behaviour of men and women themselves, and through social crises and transformation. There are many examples of women taking over jobs in factories during the second world war, when the men had gone to fight in the war, which therefore radically changed the gender roles of women in Europe. Turning to the gender roles of women in the leather industry, there is no doubt that the leather industry and its employment patterns reflect gender roles as ascribed by society.

Women's sex and reproductive roles, also mean that their participation in the labour market is often volatile and interrupted by responsibilities of child rearing, attending to sick family members and so on. This intermittent participation in the labour market can often mean that their career goals may be limited and their work consciousness different from that of men. However, as family patterns change, with more and more families being female-headed households, there is a growing need for women to enter the labour market in order to meet their cash needs. Therefore a manager who ignores the fact that men and women may bring different constraints and skills to their work situation as a result of gender roles that they play in the wider society, will be missing a very critical variable in his/her production-related programmes.

The concept of "gender inequality" is a liberating concept as it describes roles which are socially attributed and can therefore be changed through example and commitment on the part of those who have the power to change and those who are oppressed.

Women are very active agents of development in the most important spheres of human development. Their entrance into the labour market will, however, require that concrete strategies be put in place in order to ensure that women participate in the formal sector as they bring needed skills and perspective to the work place.

It is important to transform social relations of production in order to create more human work environments, which meet the needs of all our citizens.

## **2.1 Critical areas of concern, strategies, guidelines and policies**

Women entrepreneurs face a multitude of problems which are common to all small-scale entrepreneurs. What accentuates women's problems as compared to men is the structure of society and the daily experiences. As a result of this, businesses headed by women are consistently worse off than those headed by men.

Participation of women in the formal sector in the leather industry is insignificant compared to the size of the female population. In order to increase the participation of women in the leather industry and in the manufacturing sector as a whole, efforts should be directed towards tackling problems that women employees and entrepreneurs face in the sector. Some of the problems faced by women entrepreneurs and suggested strategies are discussed below.

### **- Financial status**

As women have limited or no access to loan finance from financial institutions, the tendency is to dip into their own saving (if any) or borrow from family, friends, relatives or informal money lenders. Due to constraints associated with such borrowing, operations of women in the subsector's enterprises are characterized by continual shortage of working capital which hampers production and might eventually lead to the failure of the enterprise.

Lack of security, failure to close the credibility gap, and alleged presentation of a "non-bankable" proposition are usually cited as the main reasons by unsuccessful small enterprises for not receiving funds.

Regardless of the lending practices of local commercial banks, a significant number of women in the small-scale enterprises do not bother to approach them for funding as they are not qualified and find it cumbersome to submit comprehensive business plans to borrow a few thousand dollars.

Proper books of accounts are a myth to a significant number of these enterprises. It is therefore difficult to gauge the financial performance of their own enterprise in the absence of such accounts.

Other factors which affect the financial status of some of the small-scale enterprises run by women include, neglect, interest repayment, free lending to members of the extended family, and failure to distinguish between cash and profit.

Assistance should be given to women to enhance their status, and thus enable them to obtain long-term access to loans.

Efforts should be made to identify the sources of joint financing and create a network with the regional and international counterparts to promote trade and development.

- Access to markets and market information:

The majority of small-scale enterprises operating in this subsector restrict their target market to their own specific localities with the exception of the urban based enterprises that venture into new regions at the national level. Very few attempt to seek new markets internationally. While inaccessible markets are an impediment, there is also very little available market information for women in small-scale enterprises. The market information circulated by various business organizations is made available to registered members only. The only way that women in small-scale enterprises get information is through informal channels. This can be slow as well as inaccurate.

Most small-scale enterprises do not have any idea about the business environment within which they operate. Even if they knew of sources of information, communication channels would be difficult. Postal and communication services are often inadequate. Language is also a problem as some of the women can only communicate in their own local languages.

While possible immediate solutions would be for these organizations to join business organizations, most perceive the fees to be beyond their reach. The leather associations being established in various countries do not seem to cater for women involved in small-scale enterprises.

Nevertheless, it may be possible to negotiate with leather associations with a view to encouraging them to consider the needs of women in the sector. The associations in the various countries could then be instrumental in a number of areas such as in the dissemination of information on markets, in organizing group discounts on leather prices, and in linking women in the leather industry with big businesses through subcontracting arrangements. There is a need to improve the marketing system by establishing marketing centres and co-operatives.

- Quality products

The quality of small-scale enterprise output produced by women has a bearing on whether or not they would be able to penetrate potentially lucrative markets. The majority of women in small-scale enterprises in the subsector supply their locality who form the low end of the market. The quality demanded by the retailer or wholesaler in the rural areas for example, is not as high as that demanded by retailers in the urban areas. As a result, while adventurous urban small-scale producers, most of whom are men, might be able to penetrate new markets, the rural small-scale entrepreneurs, mostly women, have remained content supplying the local area which is a low quality product, mainly because that is what the market demands. As a result, the women do not aspire to improve their products and by implication, their income.

Women in the leather industry who are keen to have the capability to grow in size and enter new markets should be the ones who are targeted for improvements in the quality of their products. There are a number of ways in which this could be done. In-house training could be provided by specialists in well established companies acting as extension officers attached to



organizations. The extension workers could have a portfolio of small-scale enterprises and visit them on a regular basis in order to improve the quality of production. Another method to improve quality would be to develop a programme whereby women entrepreneurs could undertake occasional attachments with larger firms.

The growth of local small business consultants should be encouraged in order that those consultants can offer women in the small-scale enterprises a variety of services such as accounting/finance, marketing, procurement, at affordable rates. It may be possible for donors to develop a financial assistance programme to such consultants, whereby consultants' fees could be partly covered from a consultancy fund, thereby making consultancy services more affordable to small-scale enterprises.

An aggressive approach towards training of small-scale entrepreneurs themselves should be embarked upon by parties involved in their development. Specific donor funds could be channelled to training and entrepreneurship development programmes.

- Location

Many women in the small-scale enterprise in the subsector operate from home. This can cause problems such as transport costs, particularly for those living in the rural areas. This increases costs for supply of inputs as well as delivery to markets outside the immediate locality. It also makes access to information more difficult. Even when transport is available, poor roads and lack of accommodation facilities constrain selling in other rural areas.

Those who have formal places are experiencing increases in working capital problems due to perceived erosion of their margins by rental charges.

One solution would be the setting up of "parks" by interested parties in designated areas. These mini-factory units would be made available to women at affordable rates. These units should be located in areas accessible to the entrepreneurs and preferably not too distant from markets. They should be in areas where cost of land is low. The premises and infrastructure should be basic. These elements should help to keep the rent as low as possible. Apart from providing accommodation, these parks should also provide a number of other services and activities. These could include:

- a trading company which could wholesale the inputs, such as materials, zips, buttons, to market to the women in the small-scale enterprises and arrange joint contracts and subcontracts. The parks could develop exports. They could also offer equipment sales and servicing of sewing machines;
- a consultancy service to advise small-scale enterprises on financial issues, help develop a business plan for presentation to financial intermediaries, advice on other management issues such as costing and pricing, staffing as well as advice on production matters;

- a group-saving scheme to mobilize savings amongst members. This could be used as collateral to raise loans from financial institutions, particularly credit schemes being operated by non governmental organizations (NGOs);
- transport facilities to help the small-scale enterprises with movement of goods as well as people into and out of the park;
- it may be possible for the park to provide equipment such as sewing machines which could be leased to the tenant, with monthly payments being made together with the rental payments for the premises. Even where it may not be possible to set up a physical park, it may be possible to arrange for a number of these ancillary services to be provided to groups of small-scale enterprises located close to each other;
- the park could also look for those companies which would be interested in subcontracting women entrepreneurs. Subcontracting is useful in the following ways:
  - i) women do not have to spend time looking for markets and assessing raw materials. It can be difficult for women to have access to raw materials in a sector which is dominated by well established companies and by men. Most footwear and leather goods firms have their own tanneries and are thus in a position to provide their own raw materials. The majority of women can not afford to start their own tanneries;
  - ii) most women who work in groups in the footwear subsector are not sophisticated enough to carry out market surveys or for that matter, to compete with well-established firms;
  - iii) subcontracting enables women to concentrate on production. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that in the subcontracting process, women are not exploited. In this respect, they need to learn to cost items properly;
  - iv) subcontracting enables women to have an income on a regular basis.

It should be noted that established companies will only subcontract a group which they believe has the ability to deliver the goods in good time. The quality of the goods needs to be of high standard as well. Hence among the many skills that women need to acquire are contract and production ethics.

- The cost of raw materials inputs:

Leather, thread, zips and buttons are seen as too high.

Whilst large-scale leather goods/footwear manufacturers usually realize purchasing benefits through discounts on bulk buying and are allowed to buy on account, women who run small-scale enterprises usually do not get these advantages. The size of their order at any one time does not warrant them to buy in bulk. Given their continuous cash flow problems and inability to access funds from the financial institutions, it would be unwise for them to bulk buy and have monies tied up in materials until they get firm orders. As a result, women in small-scale enterprises tend to buy small materials of leather at any given time from wholesalers and retailers. This has been and still is proving costly to them as it has a direct impact on their pricing. Coupled with small production runs, the prices often turn out to be higher than those charged by medium- and large-scale companies.

Credit should become a common feature in programmes promoting business opportunities for women.

- Sales tax number

In most countries, it is a requirement of the sales tax authorities for enterprises generating minimum monthly sales of a sum decided by the authorities to be issued a sales tax number. As the sales figures of small-scale enterprises are erratic and most do not reach that amount, this means that they do not qualify for registration with the Sales Tax Department and therefore have to pay sales tax on their purchases rather than buy tax free and charge sales tax to their customers. Consequently, this mechanism negatively affects their cash flow.

Since most women entrepreneurs do not qualify for registration with the Sales Tax Department, negotiations are needed with the Department to make special concessions for women.

- Stereotyping of women

One of the problems that women face in running small-scale enterprises is the general belief that women can not successfully run their own businesses because they are in some ways weaker than men. This belief is unfortunately accepted by some women as well. It is for the reason that management training offered should take an empowerment approach. The empowerment approach enables women to understand why they are constrained by many factors which are specific to them as women. It enables women to locate themselves within gender relations. The training should enable them to reverse the values and attitudes, and indeed their entire world view which most of them have internalized since childhood. This training should enable women to be assertive and confident.

People working for projects should receive gender training in order to sensitize them to the needs and constraints of both male and female workers.

- Lack of technical support and capital equipment

Most small-scale women entrepreneurs can not afford the cost of equipment.

Direct technical support should be provided to women entrepreneurs through experts and supply of equipment. This is likely to be easier in a mainstream project since within these projects, there are usually more resources than in women-only projects. Usually, in women-only projects, the experts are ordinary trainers who have never had businesses of their own. In the leather projects, most experts own their own business. They know the ins and outs of a business.

Women's lack of exposure is of major concern and can be a constraint. Women are not as mobile as men and hence are less exposed than their male counterparts. Some do not know about work ethics because they have never worked in a formal setting and the subject of work ethics is not covered in ordinary schools.

Study tours should be organized to expose women to the world of business and hence widen their scope.

Partnerships should be forged with the private sector to provide women with on-the-job training (apprenticeship). This is important as it enables women to see how a real enterprise is run and how external factors can affect business. It enables them to see beyond their world. They learn to deal with men as competitors, customers, suppliers, bureaucrats and bankers.

- Lack of machineries, technical and managerial skills

The majority of women in the leather sector can not afford the cost of equipment. They survive by improvising, which, in the end, does not make them competitive

It is recommended that a two-pronged action be taken: first, production floor of these small units should be upgraded through the provision of equipment, and, second, on-the-job training in both technical and management fields should be conducted.

### 3. **Women employees in the leather industry**

Some of the problems which affect women entrepreneurs do affect women operators in the leather industry as well since both are constrained by gender related problems. Nevertheless, there are problems which pertain specifically to women employees. These are summarized below:

- Insufficient mechanisms at all levels in the leather industry to promote the advancement of women

There is highly uneven distribution of sexes within all subsectors in the leather industry. The few women employed in the leather industry are to be found in the lower paid and less skilled jobs.

There are many reasons given by industrialists for not employing women in the various subsectors and for not promoting the few who are employed. Generally, what emerges is that

attribution of specific characteristics attributed to women and men persistently undervalue women as wage earners. Women compete for employment on terms that are set by the wider social relations within our society. The terms are set by wither the economic, social, cultural or political agenda. The political climate continues to favour the concept of the male as the breadwinner and hence men's greater right to employment.

Management attitudes towards women in the leather sector are not conducive to full utilization of female talents. There is plenty of gender blindness in the sector and most employers do not take gender development issues seriously.

The majority of technical schools do not recruit women. This creates problems for women who would like to enter the sector. In addition, women rarely get a chance to attend management courses. In view of this, it is recommended that:

A way of introducing gender sensibility discussions to employers in the leather sector is vital. However, this can not be carried out in a vacuum. Policy makers can not simply agree to take a day or two to attend a workshop on gender awareness. Gender awareness has to be an integral part of the overall assistance programme to the leather sector.

There is a need to set up mechanisms for keeping up-to-date data by relevant bodies on the employment status of women in the leather industry, thus enabling the status of women in the sector to be monitored. In this way, enterprises which fall short of meeting whatever targets, will be put under pressure to do so.

Issues of relevance to women in the leather industry should be identified so as to ensure that they are then into consideration in the leather industry's overall formulation of policies and plans.

Specific training programmes for women should be organized. They should provide both technical know-how and at the same time, cater for women's needs and interests, such as combating lack of assertiveness and confidence common to many female workers.

A directory of women in the leather industry, their activities and the level of training and assistance needed should be compiled.

Follow-up studies on women's training programmes are necessary to obtain factual data when such programmes are successful, and the reasons for their failure when they are not.

Policy makers should be kept informed of the problems and issues specific to women in the leather sector and this should be based on relevant statistics.

- Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels.

There are hardly any women at the managerial and supervisory levels in leather factories. The reasons given for this deficiency are many and varied.

Deliberate efforts need to be taken to train women supervisors and to impart managerial skills to those women who qualify to be managers.

#### **4.0 Concluding remarks**

Much has been done by the leather project to enhance the status of women in the leather industry. Therefore, the impetus to carry forward the agenda for the empowerment of women in the leather industry which has resulted from activities carried out so far should be maintained and sustained by all relevant parties.

Guidelines and strategies which have been discussed in the paper need to be implemented at all levels of production and by all actors involved in the enhancement of the status of women in the leather industry.

The empowerment course and advancement of women should be chartered out properly. In this respect, a plan indicating desired targets for specific time periods should be devised. It is equally essential to set standards and performance indicators that would assist in the evaluation of progress made.