

# Income-Earning Activities for Women from Fishing Communities in Sri Lanka



INCOME-EARNING ACTIVITIES FOR WOMEN  
FROM FISHING COMMUNITIES IN SRI LANKA

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This report describes two pilot activities in Sri Lanka meant to explore income-earning opportunities for women from fishing communities. The activities relate to coir production in Ulhitiyawa, and sewing and tailoring in Mirissa.

The report has been written up essentially as a case study of the two pilot activities, especially of the process of planning and implementation; It is not a complete record of the activities.

The report concludes that the pilot activities have, on the whole, yielded promising results. However, lack of management skills among women from fishing communities remains a major lacuna.

The report, and the pilot activities it describes, have been organized by the small-scale fisheries project of the Bay of Bengal Programme (BOBP), in cooperation with several agencies: the Sri Lanka Mahila Samiti, a voluntary organization; the Women's Bureau of the Ministry of Plan Implementation; and the Welfare Division of the Ministry of Fisheries.

The small-scale fisheries project of the Bay of Bengal Programme began in 1979. It is funded by SIDA (Swedish International Development Authority) and executed by the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), and covers five countries bordering the Bay of Bengal — Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Its main goals are to develop, demonstrate and promote appropriate technologies and methodologies to improve the conditions of small-scale fisherfolk and to boost supplies of fish from the small-scale sector in member countries.

The project was originally conceived primarily as technological in character, But with encouragement from SIDA, the funding agency, and from the project's advisory committee which is constituted of member-countries, family-oriented extension activities with a special emphasis on women were taken up by the project. The work described in this report was the first of such activities.

This report is a working document and has not been officially cleared by the Government concerned or the FAO.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1980, the Women's Bureau in Sri Lanka requested BOBP for help in formulating an action programme to promote the skills of fisherwomen and thereby improve their social and economic conditions.

With the concurrence of the Ministry of Fisheries (MINFISH), BOBP's cooperating agency in Sri Lanka, it was agreed to sponsor a survey with the understanding that BOBP would also support suitable follow-up activities. This eventually led to the establishment of three pilot centres in different coastal villages for coir production, tailoring and lace making. The location of the villages is shown in Appendix 1, and the sequence of events of planning and implementation is given in Appendix 2.

The question might arise: Why did the BOBP venture into small rural industries instead of promoting fishery-related skills? Reason : the survey indicated that only 8% of the women were engaged in activities related to small-scale fisheries, and fisheries officers felt that promoting women's skills in fisheries might not lead to better living conditions. It was believed that activities like fish trading and processing (drying), in which a few women engaged, did not offer scope for expansion or improvement. A thorough study, however, was not conducted to confirm this.

The project was aimed at the lowest income group in fishing communities. Women belonging to this group were most concerned about opportunities to earn money or increase incomes.

On the basis of survey results and subsequent discussions at a workshop in which different agencies were represented, it was concluded that women from fishing communities could best improve their living conditions by engaging in economic activities such as coir making, garment manufacture and handicrafts.

The project, therefore, encouraged women to learn skills that fall within the range of typical female activities and offered little chance for change in the social roles of women. The incomes earned through these activities, however, though lower than those of their husbands, were high enough for them to start participating in financial decision-making in the family.

Project identification and planning were crucial. Various institutions such as the FAO's "Human Resources, Institutions and Agrarian Reform Division" (ESH) ; the FAO, Colombo; the BOBP; the Women's Bureau of Sri Lanka; the Ministry of Fisheries; the Ministry of Rural Industrial Development; and the Lanka Mahila Samiti (a voluntary rural women's organization), were involved in the process. This, and the fact that the subject matter and project approach were new to BOBP and the national institutions, made the identification and planning slow and cumbersome. The lessons that were learned by the participating institutions and their representatives will, it is hoped, be remembered if similar projects are taken up in the future.

The prime concern in preparing this report has been to share the experiences gained. The report, therefore, includes a detailed presentation of the process of the preparation and implementation of the project.

## 2. PROJECT IDENTIFICATION

The following needed to be assessed before proposing a project to promote skills and improve the living conditions of women:

- The extent to which women are involved in fisheries-related activities such as marketing, handling, processing ;
- The involvement of women in other economic activities:
- The scope for expanding and promoting women's participation and improving their skills in fisheries and other economic activities.

The Women's Bureau of the Ministry of Plan Implementation, Sri Lanka, in consultation with fishery institutions, suggested that the role of women and the scope for changing it be assessed by means of a qualitative study in eight selected villages. The selection was not done randomly and, as a result, the data obtained are not representative of women in fishing communities of Sri Lanka. The Women's Bureau decided to select the study villages by definite criteria, the main one being that they should all be coastal fishing villages; as the Women's Bureau had already selected villages for other foreign-funded women schemes, it picked some of them which fulfilled this criterion. Unfortunately, the question whether or not women participated actively in fishery activities was not a major criterion, possibly because the planners knew little about regional differences in women's participation in fishery activities.

The study found that only 8% of the women interviewed engaged in fisheries activities such as fish trade, fish handling and processing, net-mending and repairing or backwater fishing. The study further revealed that the extent of women's participation in these activities varied according to the economic development of the region, level of technology applied, existing infrastructure and cultural/religious backgrounds, as well as topographical conditions.

**In** the north-western coastal villages, women were found to have a role in fish handling, processing and marketing, whereas in the south-western villages, with their well developed infrastructure (roads, harbours, ice plants, larger motorized craft) women-barring a few who were the sole earners in the family — rarely engaged in any fishery-related activities.

Changes in fisheries technology, such as net-making machines, imported machine-made nets, modern forms of fish handling and marketing (mechanized and motorized transport), seem to have induced a withdrawal of women from fishery-related activities.

In parts of the western coastal zone where the topographical conditions are favourable for growing coconut trees close to the sea, and where lagoons and small bays which enable the fabrication of superior coir fibre are present, women engage in coir production. Consequently, the project dealt with coastal communities characterized by a mixed economy, unlike those in other parts of the country. This fact had to be considered in planning a project to promote women's skills. Women from fishing or coastal communities were not necessarily fisherwomen, though the men in these villages engaged almost exclusively in fishing.

Unfortunately, the study report limited itself to the task of a general description of women's social and economic conditions and gave insufficient information on the exact nature of the work performed by women in fisheries and other rural sectors. This information, however, was required for proposing an action project to enhance women's skills for the betterment of living conditions in fishing communities.

The Welfare Division of the Ministry of Fisheries, Sri Lanka, and BOBP decided to arrange a workshop, with participants experienced in the technical aspects of fisheries and small rural industries. The workshop was meant to ascertain the nature of work performed by women in

fishing communities and to obtain views on how to improve women's skills. The following ministries and institutions attended the workshop.

- Ministry of Rural Industrial Development/Department of Small Industries;
- Industrial Development Board ;
- Ceylon Tobacco Company ;
- Lanka Mahila Samiti (voluntary rural women's organization) ;
- Social and Economic Development Centre (SEDEC, a non-governmental, foreign-funded, organization) ;
- Women's Bureau ;
- Welfare Division of the Ministry of Fisheries; and
- BOBP.

There was no representative from the technical and extension divisions of the Ministry of Fisheries (MINFISH) -perhaps a reflection of the priority given to this project relative to technology (fishing gear, craft) development projects.

The workshop concluded that very few women engaged in fisheries activities, and that the scope for promoting employment and developing the skills of women in the small-scale fisheries sector was limited. It was not considered essential and worthwhile to go into a technical and economic feasibility study of improved small-scale fish handling, processing and marketing.

Furthermore, it was concluded that the small-scale rural industrial sector, in which women from coastal villages were already engaged-mainly on a home industry basis-would provide scope for promoting women's skills and employment to improve the living conditions of coastal communities. The Department of Small Industries suggested the identification of appropriate small industries in villages selected by the Women's Bureau.

This suggestion was taken up by the workshop participants. The MINFISH/Welfare Division, with whom the responsibility for project planning and implementation rested, requested the Ministry of Rural Industrial Development to provide expertise for identifying appropriate small industries by studying the availability of local resources and markets for products.

The Women's Bureau's role in the project preparation ended with the workshop and with a report of the survey of eight selected villages. The Bureau did not agree to any further involvement unless the overall project coordination, including the administration of project funds, was handled by it. This, however, was not agreed to by MINFISH, BOBP's cooperating ministry.

As MINFISH did not have sufficient experience with the project approach, or the means to promote women's skills and employment, the Lanka Mahila Samiti was requested to assist MINFISH in implementing the project.

BOBP agreed to provide funds for three pilot activities in different villages, upon which MINFISH selected Uthitiyawa, north of Colombo, and Mirissa and Kudawella, south of Matara. Two months after the workshop, the Ministry of Rural Industrial Development informed MINFISH that the following small industries were found to be appropriate:

- coir fibre processing for Uthitiyawa;
- tailoring and natural fibre (wetakeiya) processing for Mirissa;
- pillow lace ("beeralu") fabrication for Kudawella.

The proposal was to set up three technical training centres to train 30 women at each centre. At this stage of project planning, the idea was that after the 6-month training period the women would utilize their skills to find self-employment, which was being promoted by the Women's Bureau.

Project planners and implementors learnt during the progress of the project, however, that development of women's skills was one thing and starting self-employment was another; the latter was something that the trained women could not handle themselves. Consequently the initial objective (mere development of skills among women to enable them earn an income), had to be interpreted in a broader sense. This meant assisting women in using their newly acquired skills by identifying markets for their products and demonstrating methods by which they could organize themselves to earn more money for their products; and also by improving their access to production assets wherever possible.

The Lanka Mahila Samiti took over the implementation of the Kudawella and Mirissa projects (Appendix 3). while MINFISH decided to implement the Ulhitiyawa project (Appendix 4) by itself in cooperation with deputed staff from the Department of Small-Scale Industries.

The Kudawella lace centre is not described in this report since it is similar in almost all respects (target, group, organization and impact) to the Mirissa centre.

### **3. THE ULHITIYAWA COIR CENTRE**

#### **3.1 Location of the centre and socio-economic background of women**

Ulhitiyawa is a fishing village on the west coast of Sri Lanka situated 52 km north of Colombo near Wennapuwa in the Fisheries Minister's electorate.

The village is geographically separated into the traditional part along the seashore (privately built houses and a few huts) and the new part a little off the shore, with brick houses built by the Ministry of Fisheries for 38 lower-income group families. These families were provided the houses on a credit basis with a small plot of garden land in 1980.

A network of public services such as bus connections, a post office, bank, schools, health services, various commercial facilities and a fisheries extension office are within easy reach (within 2 km). Most men and women of Ulhitiyawa, except those in the age group of 50 and above, are literate. Secondary education among women here is rare.

These factors tend to give Ulhitiyawa an appearance of modernity. There are, however, a number of families- mainly those who live in the housing scheme settlement-whose income is too low for them to benefit from all the modern infrastructure. These families receive food items on a subsidy basis and are officially categorized as falling below the poverty line.

These families live on the income earned from sea fishing. Women can contribute little to family incomes through the fish trade as the trade is entirely in the hands of males. Fishermen generally fish throughout the year. Most families do not own fishing craft and gear of their own, but work for "mudalalis" on a share basis. Men migrate for a couple of months to the east coast of Sri Lanka where they put up temporary settlements. In many cases, women join their husbands to give them company and ensure that the money earned is not wasted by them but managed in such a way that the children and grandparents at home receive a regular share for their necessities. During the temporary migration, women occasionally dry small quantities of fish, as the marketing system in the east coast is not as commercialized as on the west coast.

Apart from this seasonal fish drying in the migrant settlements, women do not find any opportunity in fisheries. A few women from Ulhitiyawa are occasionally employed in coir product fabrication (combing of fibre) in small, private commercial enterprises in nearby interior villages where they work for more than 13 hours a day and even in night shifts.

In Ulhitiyawa itself, including the traditional part of the village, the coir industry is not common — not even on an individual small-scale basis.

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1 Fish merchants or money-lenders, who often own several motorized fishing craft.



### 3.2 The beginning of the coir centre

The MINFISH/Welfare Division asked the District Fisheries Extension Office (DFEO), and the Fisheries Inspector (FI) who works under the DFEO, to organize a meeting with women from Ulhityawa to discuss possibilities of starting a project to improve women's skills which would lead to better living conditions for the families. The officers, assisted by the local Kantha Samithi\* leader, invited all women in the village to the meeting. It was attended by more than 100 women from different economic and social backgrounds. A technical officer from the Department of Small Industries was also present. Officers from the MINFISH/Welfare Division led the discussion and invited women to give their ideas on what could be undertaken to improve their skills and living conditions. Women, mainly the young and educated ones, stood up and firmly expressed their interest in learning tailoring and getting assistance in finding jobs as preschool teachers. Other women started private discussions among themselves, upon which the discussion leaders urged them to speak up and address all participants. After some hesitancy, a few middle-aged women explained that many of them badly needed to augment family income, but not all could become teachers and tailors. They asked the officers for ideas on how women could find ways to earn incomes while at the same time taking care of small children.

The technical officer from the Department of Small Industries explained to the participants that the coir sector would have scope for generating incomes and that it would be possible to give assistance to women in entering this industry. A number of women expressed interest in engaging in coir production. Some of them, however, left the meeting saying that they were not interested in coir-making and would rather stay at home and wait for better opportunities. Coir rope-making, like fish drying and vending, has traditionally been associated with poverty and it lacks any social and economic status. Generally only the poorest women do this work and are exploited by traders who control the markets for raw material and semi-finished and finished products.

The discussion leaders then explained that the project would aim only at women who were really in need of more family income and that training in skills, leading to better incomes and working conditions, would be geared to their needs.

The general meeting was followed by meetings with individual women from the housing scheme part of the village. In these discussions, women could express their views more freely, and it was found that the majority of these poorer women were interested in coir product manufacture.

The technical officer suggested that women could start coir rope fabrication and as none of them was skilled in this technique (which is rather simple), he further suggested that MINFISH should arrange for a 6-month training course.

Finally about 30 women from the housing scheme area of Ulhityawa showed interest in a coir project. With the lead given by an enthusiastic local leader, the women formed themselves into a society that would take up matters concerning project planning and preparation. All the women at that stage understood the project objective, but only one or two of them took the initiative to get in touch with the local fisheries extension officer who was the focal point in organizing the project.

The female leader got the women together for another meeting in which the need for a common building, coir looms and raw material was articulated. The women also expressed the need, during the training period, for a small fee to meet their day-to-day expenses. They also pointed out that a day-care centre was necessary for their children during the training period.

These ideas were put forward to the fisheries extension officer who, together with the Department of Small-Scale Industries, arranged for project preparation after a rough techno-economic feasibility analysis. With financial support from BOBP, the following requirements were met:

- repairs to building provided by the MINFISH;
- coir looms purchased from the Department of Small Industries for training purposes;
- training material (fibre) and training fees for 30 women for a period of 6 months;

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\* Women's organization of the United National Party of Sri Lanka.

- salary of a female trainer, deputed from the Department of Small Industries;
- travel allowances to MINFISH, Colombo for the project officer (Inspector of Fisheries) to ensure regular contact with the project supervisor (Welfare Division Officer) ;
- day-care centre for children and the salary of the teacher.

The project preparation took a fairly long time and was by no means always smooth. It took almost one year to finalise the project planning and preparation, mainly due to slow progress in the implementing institution and a lack of commitment among persons concerned with project supervision. Frequent transfer of officers in charge of the project in the implementing agency (MINFISH/Welfare Division) retarded the project further. For example, it took seven months to complete minor building repairs and order coir looms for the training centre from the workshop of the Department of Small Industries whose officers were directly involved in project identification and planning.

### **3.3 The training period**

In August 1982, 30 women from the Ulhitiyawa housing scheme area started a 6-month training course in coir rope fabrication. A female trainer was recruited with some difficulty. She was in charge of technical training and also responsible for attendance, book-keeping and accounts of raw material stock and fabricated ropes. She assisted the fisheries inspector- who was appointed as project officer — in paying training fees to the women and discussed technical problems with them. The project officer, posted at the fisheries office 2 km away, was a newly recruited young man. In spite of repeated discussions about the importance of a female project officer, the MINFISH could not provide one, since there are no women in the fisheries field service. All technical training, extension activities and welfare schemes had been geared exclusively towards men from fishing families.

The 30 women who participated in the 6-month training course received a stipend of Rs. 5<sup>1</sup> per day and the training was conducted from Monday to Friday, following the government working hours. Attendance during training was regular. No fee was paid if a woman was absent. This practice was initially opposed by the women, but after discussion among themselves and with the project officer they understood the need for this regulation.

Progress in learning was initially slow; the trainer was not strict enough and, no one really worried about the quality of the product since the training fee was paid anyhow. It took nearly three months for this to be noticed and reported to the project officer. A meeting was then held with the trainees; it was agreed to speed up the training process and produce better coir ropes by introducing stricter quality control. It was further decided to sell the good quality products produced during training and build up a fund for the trained women.

The drop-out rate of trainees during the course was about 20%, and the main reasons were fixed training hours, household duties and child-care. The day-care centre could take in a maximum of only two children per working woman. Many families, however, had six children or more.

### **3.4 Organising a production centre**

Towards the end of the training course, women began discussing among themselves about the future role of the centre. None of them owned a coir loom, and none of them individually would have access to raw material. The marketing of the coir ropes would be another problem. Two main proposals were made. One proposal was to buy the coir looms on credit. In that case production, material and marketing would have to be arranged for individually. This, it was concluded, would be extremely difficult and would reduce their profit margin since the private traders would use their strong role to control raw material supply and marketing. Women had learned that when a trader supplies raw fibre to the rope makers, the latter is obliged to sell the ropes to the same trader. The producers did not pay cash when buying raw fibre but the trader

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<sup>1</sup> One US dollar was equivalent to about Rs. 20 in 1982.

deducted fibre cost from the market price of the ropes, thus controlling it. The lowest possible price was paid to the individual producers; further, traders were known to indulge in malpractices in weighing and grading the ropes, since the producers had no control.

The second proposal was to turn the existing training centre into a cooperative coir production centre and handle the purchase of raw material and marketing cooperatively. The project officer explained to the women that such a cooperative organization would require their active participation in management control. They were offered training in book-keeping and accounting organized by **the** Cooperative Development Department. Women could not discern the need for this training, nor accept responsibility at that stage. They wanted to leave management matters entirely to the project officer. It was decided not to force them into such training but have them gradually participate in day-to-day management by explaining quality control, production, output and marketing to them and by putting forth the formal training idea again, once the need for more involvement in management control was felt by the women themselves. The production centre was started early March 1983 after all the initial organizational arrangements had been made. Women laid down their own working conditions; in particular, they decided on the working hours 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. The key for the building was kept by one of the workers; the store room key was retained by the project officer.

The women had received a working capital grant from BOBP to purchase raw fibre in bulk from a cooperative mill. They requested a weekly salary, and since the products were best sold in bulk about once a month, the salaries had to be paid from the working capital. Initially the women demanded subsidies from MINFISH and BOBP as they were used to receiving a training fee. This led to heated discussions between the women and the project officer. Some stayed away from work and protested. After realising that the centre was not an extension of any political party and that management support was provided by the project officer not because he wanted **it** but because the women producers requested it, the latter realised that they had to stop demanding subsidies.

At this stage, the women became active and suggested changes in management procedures. They decided that the project officer would explore the private market for sale of their products, as they felt that the price offered by the marketing cooperative was too low, and they had to wait for weeks before the payment was made. Private traders and merchants were contacted; for a short period the ropes were sold to a private merchant for a fairly good price and large quantities could be offered. But the demand for coir ropes dropped suddenly as a result of political disturbances in the country.

At this stage, the producers started discussing product diversification. Several women who had earlier been working as labourers in private coir combing enterprises, suggested exploring the market for combed raw fibre which they could manufacture without any additional training. After contacting various traders, merchants and government market outlets, the project officer identified a nearby public enterprise run by the Department of Small industries: it offered a good price for a large supply of combed and bundled brown raw fibre. What the women could get for this product was almost 30% more than for coir ropes at that time.

Some additional equipment was required, and BOBP provided a small fund for this. Ten women began making the new product while the others decided to continue with rope making and utilize the waste raw material which was now available at a cheaper rate. This resulted in comparable net returns for rope makers and coir fibre combers.

### **3.5 Impact of the coir centre**

Though women producers made valuable suggestions regarding production and working conditions, active participation by them in management responsibility and control is ruled out at present. Moreover, no woman is prepared to take up any responsibility without reward. And poor women need financial rewards rather than social prestige. None of the women producers was sufficiently well off to take over some kind of active leadership role in the coir makers' group. It was noticed that even if the women's income dropped as a result of poor performance on the part of government officers, they did not dare criticize the officers. Rather than push the officers, they kept silent in the hope that things would somehow improve.

The coir centre is far from being self-dependent with regard to management. An effort has to be made in future to encourage women to participate more actively in management control.

The centre has, however, had a significant impact on the improvement of women's working conditions. Jobless women have an income-earning opportunity for the first time. Those who earlier travelled several kilometers to reach their working place and often worked in night shifts, **now** have the chance to work near their homes. They decide their working hours themselves. And there is a day-care centre where mothers can keep their little children. Result: better living conditions for children, a better position in the family where so far the husband has been the only income-earner and decision-maker.

The income women can earn through coir product-fabrication is certainly not higher than that from other small rural industries. They earn on an average Rs. 1.70 per hour and work about 5 hours per day, which means that their daily income is about Rs. 10. But they could earn more if they worked faster and longer than 6 hours, as is common in the private sector. The women may not, however, want to do this as it will mean neglect of their main duties-household work and child care.

It also has to be borne in mind that in industrial sectors, such as textile production -a purely women's sector which employs only young unmarried women-the income per hour, after deduction for time and money spent on travelling to the work place, is only slightly higher than that of coir workers.

	Modern textile industry	Small-scale coir industry : Ulhityawa
Income per woman per month (Rs.)	600	240
Hours of work per day	7.5	6
Hours of work per month	165	144
Hours of travel per day	4	—
Hours of travel per month	88	—
Travel fare per day (Rs.)	6.80	—
Travel fare per month (Rs.)	150	—
Actual income per hour	1.72	1.66

What women earn from coir fabrication is rather low compared to what fishermen with even a minimum of production assets earn. But there's little else the women can do in their village to earn money. Under fairly favourable working conditions, they contribute substantially to family income. Sometimes woman's incomes make the male members selfish and irresponsible: they spend a greater part of their own income on themselves.

### 3.6 Replicability

The replicability of the project will depend on government policy. If there is no further mechanization of the coir sector, small-scale village industries will probably have a future. More advanced and capital-intensive technology in the coir industry will hit village industries and women's jobs.

Replicability will also depend on how much organizational support is provided to such small production centres. The Ulhityawa centre is far from being economically self-dependent. The building has been provided free of cost by the government and so are the production assets and the project officer's services. It is debatable whether the centre will ever be in a position to meet the maintenance costs of the building and the salary of the project officer.

Training centres at  
Ulhitiya, Mirissa and Kudawella



*At Ulhitiyawa. Women make coir ropes (above), and comb fibre (left). Below: Coir-makers with project officer. Combed fibre and coir ropes are in the background.*





*Coir makers at Ulhitiyawa gather for a meeting (above). Right: Loading of coir ropes for transport to customer. Below: Ulhitiyawa housing scheme.*





At the tailoring centre in Mirissa. Instructor with trainee (above). Trainees examine their work (below). Left: Beralu lace-making at the training centre in Kudawella.



On the other hand, it may be asked why women coir producers should pay for technical and managerial assistance when fishermen get extension services free of cost from the government. It may even be asked why a building for coir producers should not be subsidized when the government subsidizes up to 90% of the investment cost of fishing boats.

For future projects of this type it may be worth considering whether the concerned technical ministry, rather than the Welfare Division of the Ministry of Fisheries, should be made responsible for administration and implementation. Promoting women's skills to improve their incomes and living conditions is not a matter of welfare. If taken seriously and planned adequately, it is a development measure concerning fishing communities.

#### 4. THE MIRISSA TAILORING CENTRE

##### 4.1 Location of the project and socio-economic background of women

Mirissa-South is a fishing village on the south-west coast of Sri Lanka in Matara district, 8 km north of Matara town. The village has some 550 families : distribution of the means of production and incomes is somewhat unequal. According to a study carried out in 1978\* the community can be classified by income into the following groups :

Families (%)	Monthly income (Rs.)
10%	1000
22%	600-1 000
41%	300- 600
27%	300

The project was aimed at women from families in the lowest income group, whose male members do not own any motorized craft or large orus, the traditional outrigger canoe. Some of these families own a small oru and gillnets, others own labour shares in beach seines and work on motorized craft. Some men earn incomes from small-scale fish trade and work as labourers for big fish merchants.

Female family members do not engage in fishing activities but some add to the family income through self-employment in pillow lace making, coir rope making and "cadjan" production (palm tree leaves made into mats for hut construction). Most women are literate, with up to 5 years of schooling. A fourth of the Mirissa population has 10 years and more of schooling (data by gender is not available). Many young women are looking for earning opportunities, and even those from relatively poor families express interest in activities other than the traditional coir rope making in their backyards or "cadjan" production. Work expectations among young women have changed because of education and an absolute increase in family incomes from fishing with motorized craft. The attempt made by the Ministry of Fisheries and the Women's Bureau in 1982 to promote Maldivian fish production had only a limited success — not only because of planning failures, but also because of the low status accorded by young women to fish handling, processing and marketing activities.

##### 4.2 Project preparation -the beginning of the tailoring centre

The Lanka Mahila Samiti (LMS), a countrywide rural women's organization with a district organiser in Matara town, took over the project preparation and implementation.

\*M. W. Amasin de Silva, The incidence of poverty in Mirissa South, Marga Institute, Colombo, 1978.



Mirissa did not have an established samiti (women's society). Therefore, the LMS organiser had to first establish contact with women. She met them in small groups and discussed their socio-economic condition. She informed them about the LMS movement and the training support it could give its members. The need for women to activate self-help and mutual assistance **was** stressed.

The women explained that they possessed a few skills such as pillow lace making, mat weaving and coir rope-making, but some of them could diversify into other fields. Since there was a fairly good demand for garments in their village and no professional tailor, it was proposed that training be provided in tailoring.

The LMS organiser responded positively to the women's proposal. She was optimistic about a local market for garments. It was agreed to arrange for a basic 6 month training in tailoring and sewing.

The women were encouraged by the organiser to form a samiti and elect a committee that would take care of the selection of women for the first training course. Five committee members—three young women and two middle-aged married women with leadership potential—were elected by about 60 samiti members.

### **4.3 The training phase**

The Mahila Samiti committee called a meeting to discuss the arrangements for training. First a building was required. The district organiser informed the women that funds were available to purchase a second-hand building, to hire a tailoring teacher and to buy sewing machines and training materials.

The women wanted a training fee to be paid to them since some who already earned a small income from lace-making would have no time to attend to this and would consequently be in need of a substitute income while attending the training. Most women, however, were interested in a training fee because others under training in similar projects were being paid.

For example the Women's Bureau, which conducted various programmes for self-employment, paid the trainees a fee that often exceeded the actual income women could earn after completing the training.

It was agreed that a training fee would be paid to each woman for a period of six months. Twenty women would be trained initially. The committee selected the trainees. To ensure that economically better-off women did not dominate the list of applicants, a low training fee of Rs. 5 per day was fixed. As a result, women from higher income level families did not show much interest.

Together with the district organiser, the committee identified a building in the village, got it renovated, and requested the LMS headquarters to arrange for the purchase of the building. The LMS headquarters became the legal owner of the Mirissa Samiti building, and training equipment such as sewing machines, furniture, blackboard and tailoring materials were arranged for by them.

The trainer was to be appointed by the organiser. Hiring a good trainer proved to be rather difficult since a village like Mirissa could not attract a professional and well-experienced trainer. Inevitably, a person from Matara town with rather limited skills and teaching experience had to be hired. The LMS did not succeed in finding a more qualified person in the area or in Colombo who was willing to adjust to the environment and train women from a fishing village.

The training got started and the 20 women participated very regularly. The trainer found it rather difficult in the beginning to teach poor village women without any basic skills. After the initial difficulties were sorted out, fairly good progress was made by the trainees. However, after four months, the trainer stopped working: her parents fixed her marriage and the husband-to-be opposed her continuing with the job, a rather common phenomenon among rural middle class families. A new trainer who also, unfortunately, had little experience but was willing to work and living in Mirissa, was appointed. Being herself a young woman from a poor agricultural labourer's family, she had no adjustment problems. But she found acceptance from the trainees

difficult initially. Through the encouragement and moral support provided by the LMS district organiser, the new trainer built up self-confidence and held her ground.

The result of the training was satisfactory, given the various constraints. In the opinion of the trainees, the training was effective; they were able to produce simple garments on their own. Most of them, however, still required assistance in turning out products of good quality.

#### **4.4 The post-training phase**

Towards the end of the training phase, women began to discuss the organisation of production. The training centre was equipped with four sewing machines, material, cutting tables and facilities to prepare patterns. Some women favoured the idea of obtaining these machines second-hand on credit and setting up tailoring centres on their own. At the same time, they saw the disadvantages of a small home without electric light, with little space for cutting patterns and uncertainty about enough work orders to repay the loan for the sewing machine. Moreover there would be competition among the 20 women for four second-hand machines, and it was felt that this would create misunderstanding among them and their families. It was agreed to keep the machines at the centre, enabling everyone to make use of them, against a small hire charge for maintenance costs of the machines and the building.

Someone was needed to look after the centre and manage it. The district organiser strongly felt that this responsibility should not be left to the samiti committee; it would not be able to prevent some women taking the machines home over the weekend without any responsibility for damage and repairs. The organiser decided that a woman from outside the village who commanded sufficient respect and authority should look after the centre's management. The trained women did not oppose the idea; they suggested that their trainer should be given the job. This would also enable them get assistance in turning out their first products. The manager was employed and her salary provided by BOBP for one year. By then, it was expected that the centre would earn sufficient profit to meet the salary expenses.

##### *4.4.1 Taking up and executing orders*

Some working capital was provided to the centre to buy materials in large quantities and pay regular salaries to the producers based on piece rates,

The district organiser and the manager, however, suggested that it would be financially less risky for the centre to take up and execute orders. Order work implies that the customers buy their own material, specify the patterns and pay the tailor labour charges. Consequently no capital is required by the tailor and she gets paid as soon as the job is done. Orders had to be organized and this was done individually by the women. They showed their neighbours, friends and relatives what they had turned out during the training and managed to get some orders.

However, these orders did not utilize the centre's full capacity. Insufficient promotion was one reason. The tailoring centre should have been publicised more by the tailors and the samiti committee. Women could have paid house to house visits showing samples of their garments. Many families in Mirissa were not even aware of the existence of the tailoring centre. These included the well-off who got their garments tailored in town. Another reason for lack of orders seemed to be a boycott — by families whose female members were not selected for the training.

There were even incidents of young men trying to damage the centre's property- they could not accept the fact that women were given an opportunity to earn income, particularly when the women belonged to a political power group not accepted by them. The district organiser had to arrange for protection from one of the male political village leaders. These difficulties certainly discouraged the women; they requested the manager to help find more customers for their garments.

The manager herself was not sufficiently trained to carry out a manager's duties-such as arrangements for work orders, purchase of raw materials and time and quality control. She approached the district organiser for help. The latter, instead of giving advice, tried to take over too many responsibilities and thereby made the producers and the manager far too dependent on her. Through her voluntary work and active political role, she had very good contacts with

business people in the area and managed to get a bulk work order from a garment shopkeeper in Matara. The material was purchased by her (a job she could have delegated to the manager). The women started production, which would have taken two months to complete if every one had worked on it regularly. The quality of production was very satisfactory, but it took more than twice the scheduled time to complete the order.

Reasons : Since customers offered no advance for the work, only payment for completed jobs, and since the women got no regular wages, they tried to maintain the inflow of cash by accepting small job orders. Such jobs delayed execution of the bulk order. Its customer delayed his own payment, and placed no further orders.

New customers had to be identified and again the district organiser took over the responsibility for it. She organized an exhibition in Matara town to display the garments turned out by the Mirissa Samiti tailors. All district samitis were also invited to exhibit handicrafts products turned out by their members. Each samiti was given space on the exhibition grounds to set up a stall. An award was announced for the stall with the highest sales profit; this was won by the Mirissa tailors. The exhibition also generated some work orders, mainly from customers in Matara and Colombo.

The tailors once again faced the same difficulties as before; orders undertaken could not be executed in time as village orders were given priority — they meant ready cash. Jobs were sometimes not made according to the ordered pattern, and the customer rejected the product. This strengthened the district organiser's contention that salaries should not be paid from the working capital but only after sale of the product. Management skills were found lacking, so was strict quality control. The district organiser was then advised to send the manager and two committee members for a training course in management. She was also advised to encourage the tailors to promote their products in the village by a small campaign arranged through the samiti committee.

These suggestions, however, were not picked up, though organizational and financial assistance was offered. A reason may have been inadequate understanding of the fact that managerial skills were essential for the person in charge of the tailoring centre. Another reason may have been the paternalistic approach of the district organiser and the fear that she may lose her role as leader. The social welfare approach -“we must help the poor girls to earn an income “- seemed to have prevented development of skills for self-management of production and marketing. The strong commitment of the district organiser generated good results temporarily. Enabling **the** manager and samiti committee to develop skills and participate more in the management of the centre could have led to better results.

#### **4.5 Impact of the tailoring centre**

Compared to many other development projects, the project's financial input was low. The major part of the expense was for the purchase of the samiti building. The costs of project management and organization were extremely low, as were the costs of training and seed money.

The training benefited women from lower income families only to some extent. Three trained women bought a sewing machine on credit and started tailoring work on a part-time basis. They now execute orders for village customers and supplement their husbands' incomes with their own.

The vast majority of the trained women did not want to take the risk of investing in a sewing machine for self-employment, since they feared financial loss. These tailors rely on the successful running of the centre, mainly through work orders. Their incomes have been rather unsatisfactory, because of lack of managerial skills. They do not, however, express much dissatisfaction about the lack of work orders. They seem to live with what they are receiving; they are not motivated enough to improve their managerial skills and involve themselves actively in finding customers and, more importantly, in completing their orders on time with adequate quality control.

Women tailors still have to learn that if they go into cooperative production rather than self-employment, their production and marketing have to be well planned, managed and controlled. They have not sufficiently understood this- neither has the manager herself.

It will, therefore, be crucial to the future of the tailors that the Lanka Mahila Samiti headquarters at Colombo takes up the matter of management skill training. This is particularly important for the replicability of this project. Once developed among young women, management skills are transferable and have a multiplier effect. This training should not be confined to classrooms; practical exposure is essential. The LMS headquarters should begin developing these skills in women from projects already running, like Mirissa, to base the training on practical day-to-day difficulties that are faced by producers.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

From a critical review of the pilot centres, one may conclude that all concerned institutions have benefited. They have gained experiences that will help future planning and implementation of activities that will ultimately improve living conditions of Sri Lankan fishing communities.

A crucial lesson learnt was that the emphasis should not be on technical skill training. Reason : Most women who are compelled by economic need to contribute to family incomes, already possess some technical skills that usually cannot be upgraded because of lack of economically viable technologies. This is true of the coir industry as well as of the fishing industry (fish processing).

Unless a new and economically viable manufacturing technique in coir processing, fish processing, lace making etc. is developed, formal training for women is redundant. Most traditional skills are best learned informally-i.e. passed on to daughters by mothers. This has been observed in the coir processing project, as well as in the lace-making project.

As for tailoring however, most mothers do not possess tailoring skills. This is because in earlier days garment-making did not require as much time or skill as it does now, with fashions changing from simply stitched lungis to fancy dresses, skirts and trousers. Thus there was a case for formal training in tailoring skills when the project started-particularly because a market for ready-made garments existed then. However the problem that cropped up was that skilled trainers could not be attracted by a village job and consequently the trainer recruited was herself insufficiently skilled. And when it comes to putting the training to use, setting up a commercial tailoring centre in the village to supply garments to the nearby rural market requires competence or experience in organization and sales management. Reason: the village-based centre has to compete with all the city-based tailoring centres and factories that have sprouted up over the past few years. Such competence or experience is not available around the village. Considering such difficulties, it may be more advisable in future to send village women to Colombo for tailoring training, and assist them in finding employment there.

As an alternative, one could start a project that facilitates income generation in village-based or home-based activities like coir processing. This means assisting women to gain access to production assets (coir looms, "combs", coir crushers etc.), to natural resources (water pits to soak the coconut husks) or to raw materials from government controlled fibre mills. Provided this is the major aim of a project, a training component can then be built into the project as required.

## 6. POST SCRIPT

One and a half years after BOBP handed over the pilot activities to the Ministry of Fisheries and the Lanka Mahila Samiti, the pilot centres were visited to assess the status.

The *Ulhitiyawa centre* was still functioning well and had even improved in many ways. The number of women working in the centre had increased, earnings had risen, women had become more self-reliant in management matters, and more women had sent their children to the day-care centre. This development resulted from three basic factors :

- Market demand for combed raw coir fibre has grown rather than reduced; and in some other districts, production (and transport of products) has gone down.
- More women have been forced into regular work, as male family members cannot engage in migrant fishing because of the political situation in the country.
- The Welfare Division/MINFISH has realized the positive impact of the pilot project and provided the managerial support that was initially lacking. This has eventually led to greater self-reliance.

The *Mirissa centre* proved to be at an extremely difficult stage. With a few exceptions, the trained tailoring women have received no orders for months. The centre and its equipment have therefore been rarely used.

Factors responsible for this negative development:

- Lower demand for locally tailored garments, because imported and factory-made garments have entered the market. Technical and managerial skills to overcome the competition are absent.
- The almost entire withdrawal of management and coordination support from the Lanka Mahila Samiti because of its own regulations, also because it lacks the capacity to run a tailoring production centre.