Women in Production and Marketing of Medicinal Plants for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in a Model Village of Sri Lanka

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Naula lies in the Kumaragala mountain range in the central province of Sri Lanka and has an area of 16,331 ha. Agro-climatologically, the area belongs to Low Country Dry Zone 1 and Low Country Intermediate Zone, which is an area for conservation of medicinal plants. The rural community in Naula is a male-dominated society. The population has 52.4% females; the female literacy rate is 90.6%, and the female labour force participation 35.7%; female migrant employees (as housemaids) are 55.9% and contribute 50% to the GDP. Paddy, vegetables, onions, and other subsidiary food crops are also grown. In this study, we investigate the impact of a recently developed policy on organic agriculture and utilization of organically produced medicinal plants on rural livelihoods and bringing harmony between conservation and development goals. Primary data were collected from 361 growers from 11 grama niladari divisions, with approximately 35 individuals randomly selected from each division. The results showed a population of 63% males and 37% females, with an education level of 66% below ordinary level and 27% with only ordinary level, and 91% growing medicinal plants as a part time job. In general, gender participation showed men with land ownership and women responsible for cultivation and access and control over medicinal plant genetic resources. Men and women share equal responsibility in harvesting and women were engaged in tasks such as drying, grading, and bulking. Training acquired on conservation and sustainable use was 82% and female participation in training was very significant. The observed important points for successful implementation of a women's programme were motivation to enter into business, availability and strength of social network, management capability including time management, delegation of responsibilities, extent of diversification, positive family involvement and support, and certain personality traits including a positive attitude. The key approaches in involving women were organizing women groups, explanations and frequent meetings, help to overcome problems of providing a supplementary income in a practical manner, and explaining improvements in nutritional status.