



Factors Affecting the Development and Strengthening of Rural Women Enterprises in Iran

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Abstract

Given the importance of women's participation and taking advantage of their ability, it is essential that a systematic and strategic plan should be organized in this area. Undoubtedly, planning for the development of the specific associations of rural women can be an effective step to increase their participation in various scenes, and it can also help improve the status and rights of women. The main objective of this study was to explore factors affecting the development and strengthening of rural women's enterprises. A mixed method was used in this study. Data gathering tools were both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Target samples were both 25 rural development experts and 92 rural women in the Hamadan County. The results showed that the following items are essential for the development and strengthening rural women's enterprises: applying legal and financial support; family support; management support, and education and cultural support. In addition, the following strategies are required: culture building; women's empowerment programs, continued implementation of consulting and training programs, and encouraging the introduction of the women's enterprises. The results of factor analysis showed that economic, sociocultural, and education and extension factors can determine approximately 60 percent of factors affecting the development and strengthening of rural women's enterprises.

Keywords:
*mixed method research;
rural development; rural
women enterprises; agri-
cultural economy*

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INTRODUCTION

The change from the present system to a sustainable system could be accomplished by the participation of all individuals. Hence, the role of the women, which constitute half of the population of the country, must be taken into account (Veysi & Badsar, 2005). Identifying and trying to use the whole human capacity in rural communities is central to achieving sustainable rural development goals. This approach shows the importance of identifying the role of rural women recognizing their status as half of the rural population, and highlighting the necessity for utilizing their capabilities.

Certainly, rural women could be a viable force for change, and employment boost is a potential source for the growth of the rural economy (Movahedi & Yaghoubi-Farani, 2012). The situation of rural women and their activities in Iran indicate that despite women's significant role in economic, social, and cultural activities, their employment is not in a desirable situation (Fallah-Jelodar et al., 2007). Rural women have taken lots of social and economic indoor roles as well as outdoor ones. However, unfortunately, their actual position and value have not been determined. They have been excluded from rural development plans, and they have been only restricted to babysitting, feeding, and so on. These issues have caused the planner and programmers to neglect rural women's particular potential (Mansourabadi & Karami, 2006). Therefore, women should try to find ways to develop their thoughts and attitudes. To do this, they can strengthen their ability and competence by making the best use of the active participation in different courses by which they can improve their status in the society. The promotion of women's position in the society depends on capturing the opportunities as well as fair and equal circumstances for women. One of the most essential roots of poverty and penury among women is illiteracy and the lack of knowledge about social, economic, and even hygienic status. To be educated and to utilize educational facilities provide an opportunity for women to promote their family and society by recognizing their biological and social status.

According to recent statistics provided by UNESCO, the higher the women's educational level, the healthier the individuals (UNESCO, 2004). If women's effective role in production was ignored, the economic development of any society would encounter some dilemma, because women's involvement in financial management of families have deeply affected the family economy, and above it, the society economy.

Women make important contributions to the agricultural and rural economies of all regions of the world. Yet, the exact contribution both in terms of magnitude and of its nature is often difficult to assess and shows a high degree of variation across countries and regions. Two types of data can contribute to measuring the contribution of women in the agricultural labor force: statistics on the share of women in an economically active population in agriculture and time use surveys, which document the time spent by men and women in different activities. Data on the economically active population in agriculture are available for many countries and provide the most comprehensive measure of the participation of women in agriculture. In this measure, an individual is reported as being in the agricultural labor force if he or she reports that agriculture is his or her main economic activity. Notwithstanding, these data may underestimate female participation in agriculture for reasons discussed below, and caution is advised in interpreting changes over time, as improvements in data collection may be responsible for some of the observed changes.

Figure 1 reports weighted averages for the share of women in the agricultural labor force (or her being economically active in agriculture) in five major regions of the world. According to these data, women comprise just over 40 percent of the agricultural labor force in the developing world, a figure that has risen slightly since 1980 and ranges from about 20 percent in the Americas to almost 50 percent in Africa. Even considering these data as lower bounds for the participation of women in the agricultural labor force, they do not support estimates above 60 percent except for a few countries (Team & Doss, 2011).

It must be noted that the female share of the agricultural labour force is calculated as the total number of women economically active in agriculture divided by the total population economically active in agriculture. Regional averages are weighted by population. Iranian rural women have been traditionally performing some activities such as transplanting vegetables, weeding beet and cotton, pounding and grinding grains, sifting crops, well-setting bestial affairs, and drying meat for the cold season utilization (Shahbazi, 2003). Although rural women are occupied with house-keeping, husbandry, growing children, and also agricultural activities, their socioeconomic dignity does not match their endeavor and activity; and finally, the life of rural woman in our country portrays a hard-working, sufficient, patient and strong picture (Alayirahmani, 1996).

Dorzinia and Amiri (2004) believe that in rural sustainable development, coordinating the activities would be effective when they are compatible with nature, and not when they are against it. The rural areas in underdeveloped (third-world) countries have a prominent role in the development of a country by allocating a large portion of Gross National Products (GNP), providing occupation, meeting food needs, and providing habitat for a large part of population, as one of the most effective approach for a strong and sustainable development of these areas has been to make use of partnership and competence of all individuals, especially the rural people, so as to develop the rural areas in all dimensions.

The World Bank (2005) considers the rural society's participation as an essential part in accomplishing the rural development priorities in order to make the best use of the present sources in rural areas. Warren-Smith and Jackson (2004) underline the importance of rural social participation as both a big step in establishing democracy between social organizations and the creation of self-aiding sense among the rural people. The commitment and persistence of these local enterprises forced the government to delegate some of its heavy responsibilities to these local organizations as the government believes in their capability and the effectiveness of these

NGOs and their position. The NGOs define the human participation in the society by the use of their intermediate role between the individuals and the government (Gholfi, 2005).

Stenseke (2009) mentions the rural participation as an approach to the formation of rural enterprises whose duty is to support the cultural values of an area regarding the individuals' participation and also the success of enterprises in rural areas. There are two points that must be taken into consideration: First, individuals should be encouraged to participate, as they have a key role in rural area development; second, some opportunities should be provided for the rural demands, because the creation of human enterprises can be considered as a bridge to connect the rural needs to responsible people (Coelho & Favareto, 2008).

Women in developing countries currently play a crucial role in meeting the food and nutrition needs of their families through all three pillars of food security—food production, economic access to food, and nutrition security- but they do so with inadequate resources. If the constraints confronting women farmers were removed and women were granted access to the resources available to male farmers, they could make significant contributions to eradicate the food insecurity faced by millions of people. To allow women to fulfill their potential in generating food security, national governments and international organizations must take policy steps to involve women in all aspects of the food chain—research, production, marketing, value adding and preparation. Furthermore, it is important to build on the nutrition knowledge women already have and increase their understanding of the requirements of the human body of various age groups in the wake of a disease such as HIV/AIDS. If there is no food in the house in the first place, one cannot talk about nutrition. Women are always the ones who seem to be nurturing at the family level and make it their responsibility to provide their families with food of the right quantity and quality. Inspired by these assumption, the main objective of this study was to explore factors affecting the development and strengthening of rural women's enterprises.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study capitalized on a mixed methods research design (qualitative - quantitative research) in which the required data to measure the questionnaire items were collected using interview probes within a case study framework. The selection of the items was based on the criteria of familiarity with the participants and the rural development specialists of universities and Jihad Agriculture Organization of Hamadan, Iran.

The research study used a qualitative method, which was carried out by the case study approach. Two major criteria were considered in the selection of the participants: familiarity with the topic and experience. All participants were academic experts on rural development issues. The number of respondents was 25 experts. Experience (Polkinghorne, 1989) and familiarity with the phenomenon (Wretz & Zuuren, 1987) are considered the most important criteria in qualitative researches. Analysis of the qualitative data obtained through interviews was conducted using content analysis. To this end, first, the data were written; then, the topics and subjects were coded individually in the form of concepts; next, they were summarized, and finally, they were reported in the form of common topics and subjects. Given that an adequate number of individuals participated in the study, the common topics and subjects can be expressed by the frequency and percentage. Therefore, in this study, the common topics and subjects based on different themes were reported using both frequency and percentage. The data were collected by semi-structured interviews. When analyzing data, an exploratory factor analysis was employed to obtain the key factors. Factor analysis is known as the queen of analytical methods due to its power utility, elegance, and its proximity to the core purpose of the study. The main purpose of factor analysis is the identification of infrastructure or underlying variables. In any event, there is no possibility of using them. The data with the necessary competence should be used for factor analysis. KMO and Bartlett's test coefficient are used for this purpose.

The data collection method was carried out by utilizing semi-structured interviews. This

type of interview, first, based on the conceptual background of the subject, defines some main points as research questions, and then, interview questions guide is clarified. Data collection and face-to face interviews with individuals were carried out after clarification of interview questions guide. At the beginning, the number of the participants was not clear; however, as soon as the interview started, the method of Snowball Sampling was used, and the rest of the important samples were clarified; and the process of data collection continued until the theoretical saturation of the samples. It was believed that, when 25 people were interviewed, the theoretical saturation could be obtained and the interview process could be concluded accordingly.

The specialists have confirmed the accuracy or face validity of the items in the questionnaire. The reliability index of the research tool was examined by making the best use of SPSS software and Cronbach's alpha test. Regarding utilization of standardized questionnaire, the reliability coefficient of the questionnaire turned out to be 0.86, indicating the ideal situation of the questionnaire for data analysis. The population of the study was all rural women in the Hamadan County among whom 92 were selected using simple random sampling in two stages and their comments were studied.

RESULTS

Demographic status of the interviewees

Experts and professionals were in the 32-49 age range. The mean age of the participants was 38 years. Forty percent of the participants were female, 60 percent were male, and their average job experience was 8 years. Fifty-one percent of the interviewees had bachelor's degrees, 36 percent had master's degrees, and 13% had Ph.D. degree.

The roles and functions of rural women's organizations

As for the roles and functions of rural women's organizations, rural development experts were interviewed and their responses were collected. Overall, during the analysis, various opinions were collected and the following common cate-

gories were presented in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, the roles and functions of rural women’s development association can be used and divided into economic, social, individual, family, law, training and education, and managerial functions.

Support, resources, and necessary conditions for the implementation of rural women’s organizations

The interviewees were asked to express their opinions openly about the necessary support for the setting up of rural women’s organizations. As can be seen in Table 2, respondents believe that legal and financial, family, managers, education, and cultural support are the most important

ones which are required to set up the women’s organizations.

Solutions and strategies for strengthening and developing rural women’s organizations

Respondents were asked to express their opinions about the solutions and strategies to facilitate the development of rural women’s organizations. After collecting the responses, different categories were encoded by content analysis and then common issues were classified according to Table 3.

Obstacles to the development of rural women's organizations

About the roles and functions of rural women’s organizations, rural development experts were

Table 1
The Roles and Functions of Rural Women's Organizations

Priority	Common issues	Frequency	Percentage of each factor separately	Percentage of each of the factors associated with other factors
1	Economic functions (business development, increased revenue)	22	88	18.2
2	Social functioning (employment, strengthening women's participation and social relations)	21	84	17.4
3	Individual performance (increased self-confidence, motivation and creativity of the individual)	19	76	15.7
4	Family function (family health, mental and physical health, the elimination of discrimination)	17	68	14
5	Law function (meet the rights of women, financial rules)	16	64	13.2
6	The function of education and skills (familiarity with business skills, knowledge and up-dated information)	14	56	11.6
7	Management function (increased power of decision-making and planning)	12	48	9.9

Table 2
Support, Resources and Necessary Conditions for the Implementation of Rural Women’s Organizations

Priority	Common issues	Frequency	Percentage of each factor separately	Percentage of each of the factors associated with other factors
1	Legal and financial support (credit) Family support	24	96	23.8
2	Management support and planning organizations	22	88	21.8
3	(proper place, right time, meeting the requirements)	21	84	20.8
4	Support of the trainings and skills	18	72	17.8
5	Protection of culture and media	16	64	15.8

Table 3
Solutions and Strategies for Strengthening and Developing Rural Women's Organizations

Priority	Common issues	Frequency	Percentage of each factor separately	Percentage of each of the factors associated with other factors
1	Culture-building and appropriate circumstances (At the individual, family, social and economic level)	23	92	30.3
2	Women's empowerment programs (political, managerial, and administrative plan)	21	84	27.6
3	Continued implementation of training programs and consulting (introducing organizations, orientations, and notifications)	18	72	23.7
4	Encouraging and introducing successful organizations	14	56	18.4

Table 4
Obstacles to the Development of Rural Women's Organizations

Priority	Common issues	Frequency	Percentage of each factor separately	Percentage of each of the factors associated with other factors
1	Cultural barriers (false beliefs in rural areas, lack of freedom)	23	92	30.3
2	Barriers to individual and family (Lack of confidence, physical abilities, not allowing families to work)	21	84	27.6
3	Economic barriers (Lack of access to credit and banking facilities, lack of financial independence for women)	18	72	23.7
4	Social barriers (Rejection of the community, having multiple responsibilities)	14	56	18.4

Table 5
Distribution of Respondents in Terms of Personal Characteristics

		Frequency	Percent
Age (years)	Up to 25	28	30.4
	From 25 to 40	42	45.6
	More than 40	22	24
Marital status	Married	78	84.7
	Single	14	15.3
Level of Education	Illiterate	11	11.9
	Elementary and secondary	42	45.6
	High school and diploma	33	35.9
	Academic education	6	6.5

interviewed and their responses were collected. Overall, during the analysis, various opinions were collected and the common categories were presented in Table 4. According to the results, cultural, individual and family, economic, social barriers were identified as the most important obstacles to the development of women's organizations.

Quantitative analysis of factors influencing the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations

The average age of study rural women was 38 years. Eighty-four percent of the participants were married and the rest were single. Distribution of respondents in terms of personal characteristics is presented in Table 5.

Table 6
 Prioritizing the Factors Influencing the Development and Strengthening of Rural Women's Organizations

Priority	Indicator	Mean	SD
1	Ease of access to capital and financial resources	4.52	0.611
2	Receiving and providing initial investment	4.51	0.791
3	Low-interest loans or grants to organizations	4.46	0.712
4	Loans for women's organizations	4.38	0.618
5	Women's familiarity with the organization's goals and how to set up them	4.35	0.824
6	Government financial support of rural women	4.21	0.598
7	Strengthening relationships with organizations related to rural women	3.75	0.614
8	Tax rebate	3.62	0.758
9	Creating a family atmosphere for working women	3.55	1.21
10	Using the experiences of successful organizations	3.52	0.813
11	Guaranteed purchase of products by the government	3.51	0.671
12	Availability of capital (possessing capital)	3.51	1.14
13	Training women to produce high-quality products	3.50	0.980
14	Holding training courses	3.48	0.975
15	Lifelong training women about modern methods of management	3.44	1.25
16	Changing men's attitudes towards women	3.28	0.852
17	Meeting channels and sources of information	3.25	1.21
18	Development of transport in rural areas	3.22	0.612
19	Women's education to empower programs	3.17	1.31
20	Having an appropriate place for organizations	3.12	1.35
21	Increasing the level of communication and intimacy between the women of the village	2.98	1.36
22	Increasing women's participation in the village	2.95	0.818
23	Government support of NGOs	2.94	0.714
24	Increasing motivation for women enterprises	2.90	1.14
25	Increasing the confidence of rural women to establish enterprises	2.85	1.22
	Total average	3.55	

Notes: Very low (1) Low (2), medium (3), high (4), very high (5)
 SD: Standard deviation

To investigate the factors affecting the development of rural women's organizations, 25 questions from the literature review and qualitative results of the survey were used. Based on the descriptive results of the study, these factors were prioritized in terms of mean and standard deviation.

As shown in Table 6, the most important factors influencing the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations on the basis of rural women's opinion are the ease of access to capital and financial resources, receiving and providing initial investment, low-interest

loans or grants to organizations, loans for women's organizations, women's familiarity with the organization's goals and how to set up them, as well as government financial support of rural women, respectively.

Factor analysis of the mechanisms influencing the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations

If the KMO value is higher than 5.0, it can be safely used for the factor analysis. In the present study, this ratio equals 0.714, which is an acceptable figure and Bartlett's test is significant

Table 7
 Number of Extracting Factors with Eigenvalues, Variance Percentage, and Cumulative Percentage

Number	Factor name	Eigenvalues	Variance percentage	Cumulative percentage
1	Economic	12.14	22.28	22.28
2	Social and cultural	10.72	20.15	42.43
3	Education and extension	9.36	17.11	59.54

Table 8
Variables Related to the Factors Obtained from Rotating Matrix

Priority	Factor Name	Variables	Load factor
The first	Economic factor	Government financial support of rural women	0.621
		Ease of access to capital and financial resources	0.588
		Guarantee to purchase products produced by the government	0.611
		Tax rebate	
		Availability of capital (possessing capital)	0.564
The second	Social and cultural factors	Low-interest loans or grants to organizations	0.512
		Increasing the participation of women in the village	0.521
		Strengthen relationships with organizations related to rural women	0.666
		Creating a family atmosphere for working women	0.612
		Increasing the level of communication and intimacy between the women of the village	0.521
The third	Education and Extension Factor	Increasing the confidence of rural women to establish enterprises	0.518
		Changing the attitude of men towards women	0.555
		Training women to produce high-quality products	0.523
		Using the experiences of successful organizations	0.611
		Holding training courses	0.621
		Continuing education of women regarding modern methods of management	0.582
		Women familiarity with the organization's goals and how to set up them	0.624
		0.512	

at the 99% level. After ensuring proper data for factor analysis, varimax rotation was used to achieve a significant factor. Extracted factors are stated in Table 7. These factors can determine 59.54% of the total variance related to effective mechanisms for the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations. In simple terms, these three factors can realize 59.54% of factors affecting the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations. In Table 8, variables related to all extracted factors (three aforementioned factors) were shown, and the magnitude of each variable was calculated after loading the factors during a varimax rotation process.

CONCLUSION

There were five main purposes in conducting this research: to identify the roles and functions of rural women's organizations, to explore solutions and strategies for strengthening and developing rural women's organizations, to identify the resources and necessary conditions for the implementation of rural women's organizations, to determine obstacles to the development of rural women's organizations, and to explore the

factors influencing the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations.

About the first purpose, the results show that rural women's organizations have various significant and important roles and functions in rural development. The roles and functions explored in this study involved: economic, social, individual, family, law, training and education, and management functions. The results about the second purpose suggest that different strategies such as culture-building and appropriate circumstances, women's empowerment programs, encouraging and introducing successful organizations and continued implementation of training programs, and consulting are required for the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations. About the third purpose, the most important supports and necessary conditions required to set up the women's organizations were: legal and financial, family, managers, education, and cultural supports.

The major constraints for rural women in the creation of these organizations can be noted as follows: cultural barriers, in particular, a ruling philosophy in their thinking style, especially in rural areas, lack of information, and the weakness

of women in education and their illiteracy, economic barriers and the weakness of financial potency, rural women's economic dependence on men, and social barriers. The results of the quantitative analysis also showed that the most factors affecting the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations were: economic, socio-cultural as well as educational and extension factors.

The results of the ranking all factors that reviewed in the descriptive data analysis section revealed that the most important factors influencing the development and strengthening of rural women's organizations are those that have a lower coefficient of variation. The most important factors from the perspectives of rural women are the easy access to capital and financial resources with the variation coefficient of 0.13, loans for women's organizations with the variation coefficient of 0.14, and government financial support of rural women with the variation coefficient of 0.14. The results showed that the first factor, that is, the economic factor, captures 22.28% of the total variance. In this factor, six variables with the factor loadings of greater than 5.0 play a role. The second factor is related to cultural and social factor, which explained 20.15% of the total variance, and it is placed in the second priority. The next factor, which is ranked the third, is education and extension factor that explained 17.11% of the total variance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some suggested areas for future research included the replication of this study across Iran to determine if these findings may be generalized. As shown in the previous section rural women's enterprises have some important roles and function i.e. economic, social, individual, family, law, training and education, and management functions. Therefore, there is a large potential for rural development programs if these women's organization may strengthen and develop.

Given the low number of respondents in the nascent and start up categories, additional research is needed to further identify each group's service needs and delivery priorities and to further compare urban and rural respondents.

Another area of research could be a study focused solely on service delivery mechanisms. A study with such a focus may improve response rates over this combined study and will provide further insight into how women entrepreneurs wish to receive services.

Given the level of rural women interest into an enterprise, more services and supports should be provided by the government to strengthen the rural women enterprises. Although there is much research work to be done in the area of both urban and rural women enterprises, it is hoped that this study has provided some additional insight into women enterprises' support needs.

The rural women's participation is a vital and essential issue in implementation of different developmental and agricultural rural activities, therefore, the rural women's enterprises must be invigorated by the use of supportive, juridical and financial policies. Other supportive plans should consider all rural girls and women's needs in a systemic and comprehensive way, and this empowers them not only to help food security of family but also to implement health care.

It is quite palpable that rural entrepreneurship cannot be developed without proper training. Accordingly, it is necessary to provide training to rural women to enhance their entrepreneurial skill and give a path of success to rural women. Government should draw up a plan so that the Iranian Women Entrepreneurs can work more on empowerment through training and capacity building programs. If our universities and institutions join this resolve with increasing focus on women's business education, the future will see more women entrepreneurs.

Women need encouragement and support from the family members, government, society, male counterparts, and so on, and with the right assistance from varied groups mentioned above, they can join the mainstream of national economy and thereby contribute to the economic development. The government can also support women's enterprises in agriculture through the improvement of policies and strategies, and the development of rural women's capacities.

As the evidence collected in the present study indicates, Iranian women enterprises are growth-

focused, but as one potential method of growth, they need to be organized and planned also new enterprises should be supported. As exporting can offer expanded markets, new customers, and growth, all areas important to Iranian women entrepreneurs, additional research needs to be done for recognizing the women enterprises nature and status.

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