

INFORMATION NEEDS OF WOMEN IN SMALL-SCALE BUSINESSES IN TANZANIA: A CASE STUDY OF DAR ES SALAAM REGION

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Abstract

This paper examines information needs, information seeking behavior of small scale business women in Tanzania and sources of information they use, problems encountered in accessing information and training needs. The study was carried out in Kinondoni District, Dar es Salaam Region. The findings revealed that lack of access to information is one among several problems small scale women entrepreneurs face when trying to develop their businesses. It revealed that although women need access to information on business skills, business opportunities, market and technology, such information is inaccessible to them.

Introduction

Small-scale businesses or enterprises which may consist of micro, small and medium sized enterprises, are often seen as important driving force for economic development and industrialization in Africa (Mead and Liedholm, 1998). They can contribute to employment creation, poverty alleviation and economic development.

Information is one of the world's most important resources. It is considered to be a resource due to the fact that it contributes to the satisfaction of needs and desires, although, in some aspects it differs from other resources such as minerals, land and capital. Cleveland (1982) points out three characteristics of information: He states that information is expandable, it grows and is not scarce.

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Information is an important ingredient for human's life cycle such that there would be no life in modern society without information. Information is an essential commodity with economic and social value for human beings to effectively perform their daily duties. It is vital for the proper functioning of any democratic society, and a crucial tool in a productive economy. Information is an effective government tool and a central part of the growth and well being of an individual (Michael, 1999).

Information is always needed to solve problems and make decisions for the future actions. What people accomplish in organizations depends largely upon the information they possess. All organizations need to be able to obtain specific information to meet a wide range of business needs. These needs are largely driven either by the desire for growth and advancement or by the rapidly changing social, political and economic environments in society. What is true today is often outdated tomorrow and a good market today is not likely to be the same next year. To promote economic independence and quality of existence, timely and accurate information is crucial. (Haenel and Cook, 1995).

One cannot have knowledge unless he/she gets information. Information equips a person with power to choose and act in an informed manner (Koontz and Weinrich, 1994). Women like men, need information in all aspects of business activities so as to enable them to identify suitable products, equipment and materials, and suitable suppliers. They also need timely access to information on product standards and the country's industrial requirements and materials specifications. This information can be very valuable to women if it is obtained from relevant sources and in the form that it can reliably support decision-making so as to achieve economic and political empowerment.

Success in any business organization, whether small or large depends upon the effectiveness with which important functional areas such as production, marketing, finance and personnel are integrated through regular provision of adequate information. An efficient information system can make a significant contribution towards the achievement of women's business goals.

Women's small businesses tend to produce products that satisfy the needs of poor people compared to large enterprises, which use sophisticated technology. Furthermore, small-scale entrepreneurs enable citizens, who may later start other businesses, to acquire skills on the job, but all these require access to the right information on business management.

Information needs of women in the small business sector have received very little attention. There are very few studies that focus on information needs of small business enterprises in general and particularly for African women entrepreneurs. Given the lack of understanding of the information needs of small-scale women entrepreneurs and of the problems they face (in seeking and using information in small businesses), it is difficult to identify an appropriate information service for this target group. This paper, therefore, intends to contribute towards an understanding of:

- Information needs and information seeking behaviour of small-scale business women involved in tailoring and food vending.
- Problems and constraints that women face in accessing existing information resources and how these constraints can be resolved through appropriate information delivery systems.
- Sources of information used by women in small-scale businesses.
- Training needs in business information search skills critical to the development of viable businesses.

2. Methodology

The study was carried out in Kinondoni District, Dar es Salaam Region and involved various women groups engaged in small businesses, and institutions that support small scale business women such as Promotion of Rural Initiative and Development Enterprises (PRIDE – Tanzania) and The Foundation for International Community Assistance (FINCA – Tanzania).

Multi-stage sampling technique was used to select districts. This is a probability type of sampling for selecting

geographical location (Tripath, 1999). The researcher first identified all the districts of Dar es Salaam Region, which included Temeke, Ilala and Kinondoni. Out of these, Kinondoni was purposively selected as area of study. Purposive sampling indicates selection by design, that is, by choice, and not by chance. According to Tripath, purposive sampling is very simple to draw a sample and it is more representative of typical conditions than random sampling if the sample is small.

The second stage involved the selection of the wards in Kinondoni district to be evolved in the study. Four wards: Ubungo, Mwananyamala, Mlalakuwa and Mbezi, were selected randomly from the District list obtained from the District office in Kinondoni. The third stage involved purposive selection of women in small-scale businesses groups. The main selection criteria were (i) type of business owned by women (ii) type of activity (iii) business with less than 20 employees and (iv) business operating within the region in Kinondoni District.

The total sample size was 50 people: 10 respondents were selected from each ward. This first category consisted of women engaged in manufacturing (tailoring) and food vending. The second category consisted of 10 officials from institutions that provide support for women in small-scale businesses.

3. Findings and discussion

An analysis of the information needs of women in selected small-scale businesses was important in determining the information needs, information seeking behaviour and appropriate information delivery system for women in small-scale businesses.

3.1 Information needs and information seeking behaviour of women in small-scale businesses

Women are the Third World's powerhouse and yet the poorest. They produce a staggering 60% of all food, run 70% of the small-scale businesses and make up a third of the official labour force, in addition to taking care of families and

homes (<http://www.caa.org.au/publications/iid/TWW/>). Yet their status rarely reflects this enormous and vital contribution. By any measure of income, education, health, ownership, legal rights or political power, women get a raw deal.

In this study open-ended questions were used to identify the information needs of women in small-scale businesses. The respondents were directly asked to state the kind of information they needed.

As indicated in Table 1, a majority of women 19 (47.5%) said they needed business skills and opportunities. 9 (22.5%) indicated the need for news in general, 4 (10%) said information on markets and 2 (5%) said they needed information on science and technology.

Table 1: Kind of Information Needed

Total Sample	Category	Frequency	Percentage
N=40	Science and Technology	2	5.0
	Business (skills and opportunities)	19	47.5
	Markets	4	10.0
	News in general	9	22.5
	Missing	6	15.0
	TOTAL	40	100.0

Source: Field data 2002

The findings imply that women in small-scale businesses have a wide range of information needs which are not met. In order to ensure women's access to information, providers must understand user information needs.

3.2 Training needs

The study also sought to find out perceptions of women with regard to information and training they needed in order to operate their small-scale businesses profitably. A majority of

women, that is about 42.5% indicated that they needed training in business management skills, techniques and planning, 10% said that they needed training on how to start a new businesses and make higher profit, 7.5% said they needed marketing skills, 7.5% said they needed training on quality control (food hygiene and cleanliness), whereas the other 5% said they needed information on where to get loans so as to finance their businesses.

3.3 Educational level of the respondents

The findings revealed that 24 (57.5%) of the women involved in small-scale businesses women have primary level education. 10 (25%) had secondary education and 7 (17.5%) had vocational education. The low level of education contributes to the marginalization of women in terms of economic power and competitive power in the labour market. Low level of education also contributes to poor planning and management of business transactions. Since education facilitates access to information, it is clear from this study that women in small-scale businesses involved in selling cooked food and tailoring are disadvantaged compared to large businesses.

Table 2: Educational Level

Total Sample	Category	Frequency	Percentage
N=40	Primary Education	24	57.5
	Secondary Education	10	25.0
	Vocational Education	7	17.5
	Others	-	-
	TOTAL	40	100.0

Source: Field data 2002

3.4 Information Systems

Regular meetings, seminars, workshops and training are important communication and dissemination channels for transmitting information, education and for the training of workers.

The findings show that 18 (45%) respondents were of the opinion that regular meetings were appropriate information system to satisfy their information needs, 12 (30%) indicated that training was appropriate while 7 (17.5%) indicated seminars and workshops and, 3 (7.5%) did not provide any answer to this question. This implies that regular meetings, seminars/workshops and training are important means for transmitting information, education and training of workers. If strategically used, they are important means for fostering appropriate changes in business development.

3.5 Development of the business

Small-scale businesses create employment opportunities for people and subsequently contribute to the development of the country. According to these findings 23 (57.5%) of the respondents indicated that the development of small-scale businesses was average, 16 (40%) respondents rated the development to be good, whereas only 1 (2.5%) rated it very good. This implies that the existing conditions as reported by a majority of respondents, do not facilitate development of small scale businesses. Some, either fail, or if they survive have insignificant development and or profit. The focus therefore, should be on ensuring that these small scale businesses are well developed so as to provide employment for women who lack other opportunities.

3.6 Problems

The study has identified that women in small-scale businesses in Tanzania face a number of problems such as lack of finance, high production costs and lack of business skills, technology, markets, and access to relevant information. As shown in Table 3, 19 (47.5%) respondents mentioned lack of finance to be their main problem, followed by 11 (27.5%) who indicated access to relevant information,

and 7 (17.5%) who said markets. Production costs as a problem was only mentioned by 3 (7.5%). The last response was an open ended category where respondents were given a chance to state any other problem. 20 (50%) of the respondents mentioned time as a major factor which hinders women from accessing modern information. 13 (32.5%) indicated price, 5 (12.5%) mentioned English language as being a problem. However, women suggested a number of alternative solutions to the problems. They explained that various institutions such as FINCA and PRIDE helped them through the provision of loans and information on the development of businesses. They also solved their problems through family and friends and collective efforts at work.

Table 3: Problems

Total Sample	Category	Frequency	Percentage
N=40	Finance	19	47.5
	Access to information	11	27.5
	Markets	7	17.5
	Production costs	3	7.5
	TOTAL	40	100.0

Source: Field data 2002

3.7 Institutions

PRIDE - Tanzania and FINCA - Tanzania are the facilitating institutions that provide support to women in small-scale businesses to overcome their internal constraints, like the entrepreneurs low education level and external constraints, like access to market information.

The findings indicated that services to the small-scale businesses included the provision of information on how to expand businesses, training in business skills, advice, financial and technological support and market linkages and networks. The institutions suggested that:

- Information provides women with knowledge on how to expand their businesses, how to save money and handle their businesses, and how to manage businesses,

accounting skills and how to calculate profit, how to improve quality of their products and how to market the products,

- Through information women are made aware of technical skills, financial information, legal information (women need to know their legal rights), sources of raw materials and marketing techniques,
- Information is also useful to women because women need to be informed of different types of businesses in order avoid all women engaging in one type of business. Women need to diversify their businesses so that they can expand their knowledge and skills.

4. CONCLUSION

From the study, it is generally agreed that information is very vital at any level be it at individual, organizational, national or international level. This is so even for small-scale businesses, where information is always needed to solve problems and make decisions affecting the future. What people accomplish in any organization depends largely upon the information they possess. A higher degree of self-reliance, faster technological transfer, and the use of information generated locally should be emphasized.

This study has found that women in small-scale businesses have a wide range of information needs and that they suffer from lack of relevant information. The study revealed also that women did not know how information could support their businesses.

The study also identified a number of problems faced by women in their small-scale businesses including problems relating to finance, access to relevant information, market, production costs, time, price and language. For example, women explained that they did not have enough time to search for information and they could not afford to buy radios and televisions and that they did not understand the English language used in books and newspapers.

Therefore, in order for the small-scale businesses to develop there is a need to understand first, the information needs of

women in general, and of their small-scale businesses in particular in order to be able to provide them with appropriate information services and support.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have contributed to a better understanding of the information needs of women in small-scale businesses in Tanzania, more studies therefore should seek to investigate information provision to women and the factors that affect growth of women's businesses.

Seminars/workshops and training are also important information and communication channels and source of information for small scale business women. Therefore the Government and Non-Governmental Organizations should set aside funds to help women in small-scale businesses to attend seminars or workshops so that they can acquire skills and information. Seminars and workshops can also be used to inform women about new developments and changes taking place within the business environment.

5.1 To Small-scale business owners;

- They should build a habit of searching for information which will help in the development of their businesses,
- They should plan their businesses and follow the plan as a guiding map towards success,
- They should prepare long term plans and focus on growth trends, identifying arising opportunities and overcome threat as they arise,
- They should undergo training to learn business management techniques,
- They should join forces through groups, cooperatives, and partnership to reinforce their capital, and
- They should inculcate a culture of record keeping to enable advisors to offer better advices based on facts.

5.2 To Institutions such as PRIDE and FINCA;

- Identify information needs of women in small-scale business and provide them with the appropriate kind of information that they need,
- Set up information support service for women in small-scale businesses,
- Employ management of information systems in handling loan portfolio for faster decision, information processing and for monitoring repayment and control of loan portfolio,
- Identify and select good projects and provide them with adequate finance, and
- Establish a financing policy for small-scale businesses that encourages sound management, commits adequate resources and track implementation efficiently.

5.3 To the Government; the government should

- set up information support service for women in small-scale businesses,
- provide training to small-scale businesses through vocational and special tailored programs to prepare small-scale business owners do serious business, and
- ensure that tax regulations and assessments do not overburden the small-scale businesses.

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