

## SKILL DEVELOPMENT: IMPERATIVE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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### Abstract

In a country like India, where there are approximately 49% female in total population, participation of women in each and every sphere becomes significant. No country can be deemed developed if half of its population is severely disadvantaged in terms of basic need, livelihood options and access to knowledge. Therefore skills development is a key to improving household productivity, employability and income - earning opportunities, especially for women. Learning about business skill as well as life skills can make a big difference for the women folk. Women empowerment refers to the process of gaining and developing one's capacity with a view to participating actively in shaping one's own life and that of community in economic, social and political terms, whereas skill development is the process of identifying your skill gaps, and developing and honing these skills. Both have multiple dimensions that together yield a wide variety of indicators. Women empowerment and skill development are primary need of the hour and are deeply intertwined. They both have emerged as national priority for which number of measures have been taken and are in process for future. In this paper an attempt has been made to explain the significant positive effect of skill development in achieving women empowerment along with the overall development of the whole nation.

“And if one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season, ‘but what you were doing on the fifth of April 1868, or the second of November 1875,’ she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone into the world. Nothing remains of it. No biography or history has a word to say about it.”<sup>1</sup>

These lines from the work *‘A Room of Ones’s Own’* by Virginia Woolfe clearly express confinement of women within the boundaries of four walls and their restriction to household activities in the past. But a silent witness, the oppressed women have now come a long way in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No one can deny the crucial role they play today in our society. There are enough anecdotal evidences of women who have grabbed their destiny into their own hands, expanding the envelope of their achievement. We see their success stories everyday and everywhere at workplace, the arena of sports, entertainment and, of course, the home. Investing in women’s capabilities and empowering them with skills has resulted in their progress which contributed to economic growth as well as overall development.<sup>2</sup> Empowerment of women refers to the process of gaining and developing one’s capacity with a view to participating actively in shaping one’s own life and that of community in economic, social and political terms, whereas skill development is the process of identifying your skill gaps, and developing and honing these skills. With the initiatives of the government the skill development programmes of empowering women has taken the shape of movement, but still there is a long road to be travelled for getting optimal benefits.

Skills development is a key to improving household productivity, employability and income-earning opportunities for women and also for enhancing sustainable development and livelihoods. Skilled human resource at all levels is essential for inclusive growth. The skill development initiatives support the supply of trained workers who are adjustable dynamically to the changing demands of employment and technologies. The 11th five year plan (2007-12) has recognized India’s massive need to skill millions of formal and informal workers in the next ten years. This policy will also promote excellence and will meet the requirements of knowledge economy. In response, the government developed an ambitious scheme “of increasing the proportion of formal and informal skilled workers in its total workforce from a mere 2% now to 50% by 2022, thus creating a 500 million strong resource pool.” Women form a significant proportion of this work force in India. However, Census 2011, data shows that female workforce participation rate (WPR) in India stands at 25.6%, which is almost half of the male WPR at 53.2%. The work participation rate by gender shows that the males’ overall WPR registered an increase in 2001 and 2011, whereas the females’ overall WPR had increased in 1991 and 2001 but remained same in 2011. While north-eastern and hilly states have performed well on female

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<sup>1</sup> V. Ramaswamy, “Gender and the Writings of the South Indian History”, in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.) *Approaches to history: Essay in Indian Historiography*, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 199-224.

<sup>2</sup> R.S. Dalawai, “Changing Status of Women in India”, *Third Concept*, November 2015, p.17.

WPR, with Mizoram having the highest WPR at 61.3%, the situation is worrisome in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, with WPR as low as 9% in the latter.<sup>3</sup>

As per Census 2011, the total number of female workers in India is 149.6 million and female workers in rural and urban areas are 121.8 and 28.0 million respectively. Out of total 149.6 million female workers, 35.9 million females are working as cultivators and another 61.5 million are agricultural labourers. Of the remaining females' workers, 8.5 million are in household Industry and 43.7 million are classified as other workers. With this kind of data it is clearly revealed that more than 90 per cent of women workers are concentrated in the informal sector. Thus it can be said that informal sector in India is the women's sector. However, the condition of women in the informal sector is miserable, most of time they have to work at extremely low wages; and without any job security and social security benefits, apart from this, working conditions also are unsatisfactory.<sup>4</sup>

Statistics showed the overall picture of gender inequality in India is stark and the way out is not to camouflage reality by resolving to tokenism and parading exceptions, but tackling problems head on. It is therefore clear, that there is a dire and urgent need for a paradigm shift to empower women in working sectors. The need is for appropriate and adequate skill development and training which can convert this force into the largest source of skilled manpower. The training may have to incorporate teaching of basic skills such as numeracy, problem solving, communication, learning to learn, team work, and other deeply impacting skill such as behavioural skills, including building self-esteem, self-organizational and negotiating capacity for employment purpose. Besides this, there is a need to make the skill development process accommodating and flexible to encourage women to enroll and actively involved in policies undertaken for their betterment. The aim of skill development, related to women is not just preparing them for jobs, but also improving the performance of women workers by enhancing the quality of work in which they are engaged. It is also urged that for skill development to be more effective, training needs to bend towards developing the kind of skills women already know or in other words, the need is to enhance or adapt traditional skills to aspirational skills. Such interventions by their nature will encourage higher self esteem among women and overall personality development.

Improving participation of women in the workforce would require improvements in access and quality of education, skill development and employment opportunities available to women. With a pressing need to harness the demographic dividend that India enjoys, special focus has been skill development initiatives. The government of India has made several efforts for empowering women with skill development. The National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) was launched by the Government of India with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promote overall development of women. It has the mandate to strengthen the inter-sector convergence; facilitate the process of coordinating all the women's welfare and

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<sup>3</sup> [www.swaniti.in](http://www.swaniti.in)

<sup>4</sup> N. Mittal, "Women Workers In Unorganized Sector: Socio-Economic Perspective", *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research* Vol. I (3), 2012, p.128.

socio-economic development programmes across ministries and departments. One of the key strategies of NMEW is - investment in skill and entrepreneurship development, microcredit, vocational training and Self Help Groups (SHGs) development for economic empowerment of women. The Skill India mission launched by the government aims to skill over 40 crore people by 2022 and enhance their employability by training them in skill sets of their choice. The National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (2015) also envisions skill development as a vehicle for women's empowerment. This policy highlights that in order to improve the productivity of the economy, participation of women in the labour force needs to be improved and proposes to meet the challenge of skill development at scale with speed, standard and sustainability.

With the same objective of benefitting women, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), the nodal agency for all matters pertaining to welfare development and empowerment of women, has evolved several schemes and programmes. These schemes focus on economic empowerment of women through skill development, education, and access to credit and marketing. Few of them to be mentioned are:

Swawlamban Programme, previously known as NORAD/Women's Economic Programme, was launched in 1982-83 with assistance from the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD). NORAD assistance was availed till 1996-97 after which the programme is being run with funds from Government of India. The objectives of the programme are to provide training and skills to women to facilitate them to obtain employment or self-employment on sustained basis. In order to ensure more effective implementation and for better monitoring/evaluation of the scheme, it has been transferred to State governments from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2006 with the approval of Planning Commission. Another important scheme, Support for Training and Employment Programme (STEP) was launched in 1987. It aims to raise the income of rural women by updating their skills in the traditional sectors, such as dairy development, animal husbandry, sericulture, handloom and social forestry. This programme seeks to provide skills and new knowledge to poor women in the traditional sectors. Under this project, women beneficiaries are organized into viable and cohesive groups or cooperatives. Besides this a comprehensive package of services such as health care, elementary education, crèche facility, market linkages etc. are provided access to credit. Amongst the states, Manipur received the maximum funding under this scheme, followed by Madhya Pradesh and Assam. A total of 24,037 women are beneficiaries of the scheme.

Providing training and skills in various vocations to women will facilitate them to obtain employment on sustained basis. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK), established in 1993 worked upon these parameters. It provides micro-credit in a quasi-formal manner to the poor women for generating income, production, skill development and housing activities in order to make them economically independent. RMK mainly channelizes its support through NGOs, Voluntary agencies, State Women Development Corporations, Cooperative societies, State government agencies, Urban Women Cooperative Banks etc. to the women SHGs. It is an innovative mechanism for ensuring credit to poor women. Through access to credit, it aims to raise the capacity of women by enhancing their productivity and economic self-reliance. Similarly Swadhar scheme which was launched in 2001-2002 provided relief and rehabilitate destitute women socially and economically through education, awareness, skill upgradation and personality development. Deen Dayal Upadhyay Kaushalya Vikas Yojana (DDU-KVY)

concentrates on providing skill development to poor women and equipping them for getting employment in different sectors.

Women are usually termed as unskilled, even though very often their work, though low-paid, requires a certain level of technique. Furthermore, many of the skill that women learn are those that are in some way connected to care and reproduction, which are often not regarded as skills at all. Women in forest areas have a skill of recognizing and using herbal plants. However, this skill is not regarded as skill at all, either by the person who is documenting the skills, or even by the women themselves. Similarly, the potential marketability of a particular skill is never recognized. This refers to a woman's skills which currently are not being marketed but which have a good market potential like embroidery or knowledge of herbs.<sup>5</sup>

Skill development cannot be seen in isolation. It has to be an integral process of linking the skill training with education and employment at the same time. Ministry of Labor and Employment has taken a number of initiatives in the field of skill development and employment. For instance, Vocational Training for girls is being conducted by Advanced Training Institutes and Regional Vocational Training Institutes run by the Ministry. Vocational Education and training are essential mechanism of any strategy to improve farm and nonfarm productivity that improves income.<sup>6</sup> Vocational training programme is introduced to enhance livelihood opportunities of women who are at a disadvantageous position and have a scant exposure to technical skills and knowledge. It also implies focus on improvements in access to education and training for girls, including the provision of services, such as transport, hostels, scholarships, and other incentives to encourage women to get enrolled for education and training. One such training programme changed the life of Sanjita Nayak, from the tribal district of Rayagada in Southern Odisha, whose story of development is now a source of inspiration for many women and girls. After being abandoned by her lover turned husband within six months of their marriage and refusal of family to accept her back, she became depressed, attempted suicides many times and even thought of joining the Maoists. Luckily, she got an opportunity to enroll herself into a training programme which was free for youth, which enrolled even school drop outs and offered job relevant training in residential mode. Sanjita chose the Sewing Machine Operators programme. This programme offered by the Government of India gave her a new lease of life. In a short span of forty five days, Sanjita became adept in operating a machine and producing the finished garment in specified time. She was offered a job by Cotton Blossom, a well known export house in Tirupur, Tamil Nadu. This programme not only made her self-reliant but also capable enough to look after her family.<sup>7</sup> Similarly Shantabai, wife of a farmer from Palda (Madhya Pradesh, India) undertook training course with *Srujan*, a partner organization of the ILO's Workers Activities programme (ACTRAV- Norway Workers' Education Programme) on photography skills and decided to make it her profession. The newly acquired skill not only

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<sup>5</sup> S. K. Mishra and P.K. Pandey, *Woman Status and Empowerment in India*, New Century Publication, New Delhi, 2012, pp.95-96.

<sup>6</sup> T. Ahamad, et al., "Women Empowerment through Skills Development & Vocational Education", *Research Gate*, Vol. II (2), June, 2016, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> P. Gianchandani, "Skills for Inclusive Growth : Next Decade of Innovation and Blended Learning", *Yojana*, Vol. LIX, October, 2015, p. 17.

improved her financial status but also made her an inspiration for many women in Palda and the neighbouring villages.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from this, the government is also trying to tap the skills of ambitious females by providing them the required support. Various financial institutions have special schemes for women entrepreneurship development. These include Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (*NABARD*), Cooperative Societies and Regional Rural Banks (RRBs). They provide loan opportunities to rural women entrepreneur for dairying, poultry, beekeeping, food processing and preservation, mushroom cultivation, spices process, potato chips, dalia and other cottage industries. With a view to encourage women in setting up their own ventures, Government launched a Scheme, namely, "Trade Related Entrepreneurship Assistance and Development (TREAD) during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan. Even in the early years of independence schemes like community development programs, Mahila mandals etc. were set up for the growth of women entrepreneurs.

As an outcome of these initiatives, women have been taking increasing interest in recent years in income generating activities, self-employment and entrepreneurship that lead to political representation, social equality, family development, market development, community development and ultimately the development of nation. They have emerged as top business executives, bureaucrats, academicians, social workers and political leaders. The work force is covered with intellectual women like Chanda Kochhar, Indra Nooyi who hold the CEO positions in large companies which were never held by Indian women in the past.

For an increase in the numbers of skilled women in the country, it is necessary to deal with (1) factors that inhibit women from taking up skill training and, if they do, (2) factors that inhibit the employment of skilled women. Women often have different training needs than men, since they are more likely to work as contributing family workers, subsistence farmers, home-based micro entrepreneurs or low-paid seasonal labourers, in addition to handling their domestic work and care responsibilities. While being illiterate may be an issue in providing skill training to most of women, one may have to deal with family issues and social restrictions also in case of providing skill training to women. Basic problems like family conflicts, less legal awareness, low risk taking ability, limited financial capacity, and requirement of entrepreneurial training are still jolting women entrepreneurship. A few of the major challenges, which need to be addressed for building a conducive ecosystem to promote various skills in women are: the lack of publicly or factory provided child care that prevents women from remaining in the labour force, particularly in manufacturing, which requires regular work away from the home; the extra expense that particular employers incur when they employ women and the lack of safety of women travelling in public spaces, particularly at night. Lack of women's safety in public spaces, particularly at night is a serious threat inhibiting women from being skilled workers. The horrific rape-murder of the young woman training to be a pharmacist in Delhi in December 2012, was only an example of the lack of safety in public spaces, even in the capital city. Even in call centres that provide transportation, in the immediate aftermath of the December 2012 rape-murder, the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) reported a sharp fall in women's attendance in call centres in and around Delhi.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/global/>

<sup>9</sup> D. Nathan, "Skill Development of Women: Enabling Factors", *Yojana*, Vol. LIX, October 2015, pp. 65-66.

In spite of the huge task ahead with many challenges in skill development landscape in India at present, it is believed that the Government of India is paying adequate attention on empowering women with skill development through various policies and programmes. It is evident that the difficult task of building a just and fairer nation is possible only with the meaningful partnership between all. To move the chariot of country forward, single wheel surely cannot do wonders and thus each and every member of the society has to be strong and should move ahead jointly.<sup>10</sup> The missions - Skill India and - Make in India shall come to exercise only when all the stakeholders concerned viz. government, training institutions, industry and more importantly, the women work hand-in-hand. Skill development initiative focusing on specific needs and challenges faced by growing entrepreneurs is the key to promote self-employment among the Indian women. Through this journey of women empowerment our nation will achieve its dream as it is rightly said “To empower women is to empower nation”.

### **BIONOTE**

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<sup>10</sup> S. Razi, “Empowered Women, Empowered Nation”, *Yojana*, Vol. LVI, June, 2012, p. 27.