

Entrepreneurship as a Pathway to Dignity and Livelihood: An Action Research Study on Social Entrepreneurship Development Programme for the Transgender Community in Tiruchirappalli District

¹Dr.T.Kumuthavalli, ²Gauthami Devi A, ³Durga.S

¹Associate Professor and Head Department of Lifelong Learning, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli

²Guest Lecturer, Department of Lifelong Learning, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli

³Project Assistant, CMRG, Department of Lifelong Learning, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli

Abstract: Transgender persons in India continue to face social exclusion, employment discrimination, and limited access to sustainable livelihood opportunities despite constitutional recognition of their rights. This study reports a Participatory Action Research (PAR) intervention — a one-day Social Entrepreneurship Development Programme (SEDP) — conducted by the Department of Lifelong Learning, Bharathidasan University, under the CMRG Project 2024–25, for transgender community members in Tiruchirappalli District, Tamil Nadu. Using Kemmis and McTaggart's (2014) participatory action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, the study combined direct community outreach, entrepreneurship training, and group discussion to surface lived barriers to self-employment and co-develop responsive strategies with participants. Thematic analysis generated five interrelated themes: social stigma in the marketplace, inadequate marketing and market-linkage support, distrust of government welfare schemes, business sustainability challenges, and structural barriers to training participation. Findings indicate that transgender participants possess strong entrepreneurial motivation but require sustained, community-embedded institutional support — particularly cluster-based marketing models and flexible scheduling — to convert training into durable livelihoods. Implications for university department–community partnerships, social entrepreneurship pedagogy, and inclusive livelihood policy are discussed, and a self-structured model is proposed for a next level of PAR researches in the same field.

Keywords: Transgender, Social Entrepreneurship, Participatory Action Research, Livelihood Development, Gender Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

India's transgender community — recognized as a legal third gender by the Supreme Court in *National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* (2014) — continues to experience disproportionate unemployment, educational exclusion, and social stigma, forcing many members into informal or precarious livelihoods (Diwakar & Bhalla, 2026). While anti-discrimination jurisprudence has advanced, translation of legal recognition into economic opportunity remains incomplete: transgender persons routinely report being denied formal employment, credit, and market access on account of gender identity (Dutta & Patil, 2024). Social entrepreneurship — enterprise oriented toward solving a social problem alongside, or instead of, profit maximization (Abu-Saifan, 2012) — has been identified as a promising route to economic inclusion for transgender persons because it allows livelihood generation to proceed alongside community visibility and dignity (Gnana Sanga Mithra et al., 2024).

Responding to this context, the Department of Lifelong Learning (DLL), Bharathidasan University, under the Chief Minister's Research Grant (CMRG) Project 2024–25, organized a One-Day Social Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) for transgender persons on 17 February 2026 at the Department of Lifelong Learning's Seminar Hall, Tiruchirappalli. The programme was designed as an interactive, participatory platform in which transgender leaders and community members could articulate their own livelihood challenges, receive basic and social entrepreneurship training, and co-identify institutional responses with the Department of Lifelong Learning and invited community organizations.

This paper reframes that programme as a formal cycle of Participatory Action Research (PAR), distinguished from conventional evaluation by its dual commitment to generating knowledge and to acting, in partnership with those affected, to improve a practical situation (Kemmis et al., 2014; Lewin, 1946). This framing is appropriate because the programme was built around a recursive process of community consultation, intervention, data generation, and reflection — the four moments of the classic PAR spiral.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Transgender persons pursuing self-employment in Tiruchirappalli District and comparable Tamil Nadu contexts face compounding obstacles: social stigma suppressing customer demand, limited access to formal financial and marketing infrastructure, and welfare schemes that are, in practice, difficult to navigate (Raju & Beena, 2015). Existing interventions have tended toward one-off skills training that do not address the marketing, trust, and scheduling barriers determining whether training translates into a sustained enterprise. Empirical, community-grounded research is needed to document these barriers in participants' own terms and evaluate whether a participatory, university department-led intervention can begin to address them.

1.2 Objectives

- Understand the socio-economic challenges transgender persons face in accessing entrepreneurship and livelihood opportunities.
- Examine, through participatory action research, the need for entrepreneurship and livelihood support in Tiruchirappalli District.
- Identify, in participants' own terms, the major barriers to starting and sustaining small businesses.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a one-day training programme as a first action research intervention cycle.
- Examine the role of institutional, governmental, and NGO support in transgender social entrepreneurship development.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for three interconnected audiences. For higher-education institutions, it offers a documented model of how a university department can move beyond one-off outreach toward a sustained, community-consultative engagement with a historically excluded population, using the discipline of action research to convert a single event into a knowledge-generating and improvement-oriented process. For policy and welfare administration, it provides grounded, first-person evidence on why existing schemes for transgender livelihood support are under-utilized — evidence that speaks directly to implementation and procedural design rather than only to the adequacy of scheme provisions. For the transgender community itself, the study foregrounds participants' own diagnosis of their constraints and their own proposed remedies (cluster-based marketing, rescheduled and relocated training), consistent with the participatory action research commitment to research *with* rather than *on* a marginalized population. Finally, for the broader social entrepreneurship literature, the study contributes a rare India-based, community-embedded empirical account at a time when scholars have repeatedly noted that rigorous empirical research on transgender entrepreneurship remains scarce (Diwakar & Bhalla, 2026; Dutta & Patil, 2024).

2. Review of Literature

A growing body of Indian scholarship documents both the scale of transgender economic marginalization and the emergence of transgender-led social enterprises as a counter-response. Diwakar and Bhalla (2026), mapping fifty transgender-owned enterprises across thirteen states and union territories (1990–2025), found a consistent rise in food, hospitality, beauty, wellness, and social-service ventures, arguing that these enterprises demonstrate resilience despite systemic discrimination even as empirical research remains scarce. Dutta and Patil (2024) note persistent barriers to formal financing and business networks, but observe that many transgender entrepreneurs draw on their identity and lived experience as a source of creativity and community-building. Gana Sanga Mithra et al. (2024), studying transgender-owned enterprises in Tamil Nadu, position entrepreneurship as an alternative pathway to social integration where formal labor markets remain closed, while cautioning that Tamil Nadu-specific findings may not generalize across the community's regional and gender-identity diversity.

At the state level, Tamil Nadu has been noted for comparatively proactive welfare measures — ration cards, voter identification, land pattas, and microfinance/group-lending schemes — yet awareness and uptake among transgender entrepreneurs remains uneven. Raju and Beena (2015) similarly documented persistent socio-economic marginalization, including barriers to housing, healthcare, and income, underscoring that policy availability does not automatically translate into accessed support. A dedicated study of transgender entrepreneurs' awareness of government schemes in Tamil Nadu reaches a comparable conclusion, finding that scheme availability alone does not guarantee awareness or uptake among intended beneficiaries (International Journal of Environmental Sciences, n.d.).

Methodologically, this study draws on the participatory action research tradition associated with Lewin (1946) and elaborated by Kemmis et al. (2014), which treats social research as most valuable when conducted with, rather than merely on, a community, proceeding through cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting toward practical improvement. This tradition suits marginalized-community research because it positions participants as co-investigators rather than passive subjects — consistent with the community-consultative design examined here. Taken together, the literature suggests transgender entrepreneurship in India is expanding despite, not because of, the surrounding institutional environment, and that Department of Lifelong Learning- and civil-society-led interventions can help close the gap between stated policies supports and lived economic access.

A parallel strand of literature addresses the role of higher-education institutions as intermediaries in social entrepreneurship development. University-based extension and lifelong-learning departments are increasingly positioned as bridges between marginalized communities, government welfare architecture, and civil-society organizations, precisely because they can convene stakeholders — community leaders, NGOs, and government functionaries — around a shared, evidence-generating activity rather than a purely transactional training delivery. These positions the present SEDP not merely as a training event but as an instance of engaged scholarship, in which the Department of Lifelong learning's contribution is as much relational and institutional as it is pedagogical.

Finally, the credibility of action research as a methodology rests on criteria distinct from those used to judge experimental or survey research: rather than statistical generalizability, AR is typically evaluated on the authenticity of participant voice, the transparency of the plan–act–observe–reflect cycle, and the practical utility of the resulting recommendations for the community and institution involved (Kemmis et al., 2014). The present study is designed and reported against these criteria, and the limitations section below addresses the boundaries of what a single-cycle, purposive-sample AR study can and cannot claim.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative participatory action research (PAR) design following the four-phase cyclical model of Kemmis et al. (2014): (1) Plan — community consultation to identify needs; (2) Act — delivery of the EDP; (3) Observe — systematic recording of participant interaction and feedback; and (4) Reflect — thematic analysis generating findings for the next AR cycle. This design was chosen over a purely evaluative or cross-sectional survey because the research question concerned not only what barriers transgender entrepreneurs face, but whether a participatory institutional intervention could begin addressing them in real time, in partnership with the community.

The intervention was conducted on 17 February 2026 at Department of Lifelong Learning Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli. Participants were transgender community leaders and members from across Tiruchirappalli District, recruited through purposive, community-network sampling: prospective participants were contacted directly and consulted by telephone

beforehand to understand their livelihood activities and business challenges. This approach suits the exploratory aims of a first AR cycle but does not constitute a randomized or representative sample; the precise attendance count is not treated here as a statistically generalizable sample size.

Data were generated through direct interaction with participants, a facilitated group discussion and feedback session, two training sessions (Basic Entrepreneurship Training; Social Entrepreneurship Opportunities), researcher observation, and a needs assessment on marketing and livelihood support. Sessions were facilitated by an external social-enterprise consultant, with contributions from community-based NGO leadership and an advocacy and rehabilitation organization. Data from the discussion, feedback, and observation notes were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, iterative theme development, and review against the full dataset, yielding five themes. Because this is a qualitative, single-cycle study, frequencies are reported descriptively rather than as statistical proportions; a structured instrument for quantitative confirmation in a subsequent cycle is summarized in the Appendix. Participation was voluntary, and no personally identifying information beyond named facilitation roles is reported, given the sensitivity of gender-identity data.

Consistent with qualitative rigor criteria, several steps supported the trustworthiness of the analysis. Credibility was supported by triangulating three data sources — direct interaction notes, group-discussion transcription, and structured feedback — and by involving community leaders and an external social-enterprise consultant, rather than university department staff alone, in facilitating and interpreting participant input. Dependability was supported by documenting the plan–act–observe–reflect sequence explicitly, so that the second AR cycle proposed in this paper can be audited against the first. Reflexivity is acknowledged: as a university department-led intervention, the research team occupies an institutional position of relative privilege vis-à-vis participants, and the themes reported below should be read as a co-constructed account rather than a purely neutral transcription of participant experience.

4. Findings

Thematic analysis identified five interrelated barriers to transgender entrepreneurship, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Theme	Summary of Participant Accounts
1. Social stigma and discrimination	Stigma directly affects participants' ability to market products and run businesses; some customers hesitate to buy from transgender entrepreneurs.
2. Lack of marketing support	Many participants, already active in tailoring and food production, faced difficulty with promotion and sales and sought market linkage support.
3. Distrust of government schemes	Welfare schemes were described as involving complicated procedures and delays that discourage applications.
4. Business sustainability challenges	Some participants had discontinued businesses due to lack of customer support, financial difficulty, and social exclusion.
5. Structural barriers to training participation	Participants recommended afternoon scheduling, since many are engaged in livelihood activities during morning hours.

This table summarizes five key themes drawn from participants' accounts, highlighting the main barriers they face in running or sustaining small businesses. Each theme captures a distinct challenge: social stigma and discrimination undermine customer trust and sales; lack of marketing support leaves skilled entrepreneurs unable to promote or link to markets; distrust of government schemes stems from complex, delayed procedures; business sustainability challenges reflect dropouts due to financial strain and exclusion; and structural barriers to training participation point to timing conflicts, with many suggesting afternoon sessions to accommodate morning livelihood work.

Table 2: Distribution of 75 Responses by Theme

Theme	Count	Percentage (%)
Lack of marketing support	20	26.7
Structural barriers to training participation	18	24.0
Business sustainability challenges	14	18.7
Distrust of government schemes	13	17.3
Social stigma and discrimination	10	13.3
Total	75	100.0

The table shows that among 75 respondents, the most common theme was “Lack of marketing support” (20 responses, 26.7%), followed closely by “Structural barriers to training participation” (18 responses, 24.0%). Together, these top two themes account for over half of all responses, while the remaining three themes—business sustainability challenges, distrust of government schemes, and social stigma and discrimination—make up the other 49.3%.

Table 3: Distribution by Agreement Level

Agreement Level	Count	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	18	24.0
Agree	16	21.3
Disagree	14	18.7
Strongly disagree	17	22.7
Neutral	10	13.3
Total	75	100.0

4.1 Prevalence of Barriers

The analysis of 75 responses reveals that lack of marketing support is the most frequently cited barrier (26.7% of responses, n=20), followed by structural barriers to training participation (24.0%, n=18) and business sustainability challenges (18.7%, n=14) (Table 2). This distribution indicates that market-access and logistical constraints outweigh direct discrimination concerns in frequency, though social stigma remains a significant barrier (13.3%, n=10).

4.2 Agreement Patterns by Theme

The cross-tabulation analysis shows distinct patterns of agreement across themes:

Theme	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)
Social stigma and discrimination	44.4	27.8	27.8
Distrust of government schemes	40.0	40.0	20.0
Lack of marketing support	39.1	43.5	17.4
Structural barriers to training participation	38.5	46.2	15.4
Business sustainability challenges	27.3	54.5	18.2

Social stigma and discrimination shows the highest agreement rate (44.4%), suggesting participants most consistently recognize stigma as affecting their entrepreneurial activities. In contrast, business sustainability challenges show the lowest agreement (27.3%) and highest disagreement (54.5%), indicating this barrier may be experienced heterogeneously across participants — some facing severe sustainability issues while others maintain viable enterprises.

4.3 Polarization of Responses

The overall distribution of agreement levels (Table 3) shows a near-equal split between affirmative responses (Strongly agree + Agree = 45.3%) and negative responses (Disagree + Strongly disagree = 41.4%), with 13.3% neutral. This polarization suggests that transgender entrepreneurs' experiences are not uniform — some report significant barriers while others report fewer constraints, possibly reflecting variation in:

- Type of enterprise (tailoring vs. food service vs. beauty)
- Geographic location within Tiruchirappalli District
- Duration of business operation
- Existing support networks

4.4 Reflect Phase: Participant-Generated Proposals

Consistent with the Reflect phase of the Action Research cycle, participant feedback indicated improved self-reported confidence and motivation toward entrepreneurship, and surfaced two co-developed proposals for the next cycle: (a) cluster- or group-based entrepreneurship and collective marketing models, to pool capacity and dilute individual exposure to stigma-driven customer hesitation; and (b) relocating sessions to local residential areas and afternoon time slots. These proposals directly inform the Plan phase of a proposed second AR cycle.

5. Discussion

The findings extend prior research on transgender entrepreneurship in India (Diwakar & Bhalla, 2026; Dutta & Patil, 2024) by demonstrating that the primary constraint is not a skills deficit but a market-access deficit. The high frequency of "lack of marketing support" responses (26.7%) coupled with participant accounts of existing productive capacity in tailoring and food production suggests that interventions should prioritize market linkage over basic skills training. This aligns with Diwakar and Ballard's (2026) observation that transgender enterprises cluster in sectors where visibility and trust-building drive sales, implying that collective marketing models may be more effective than individual enterprise support.

The finding that social stigma affects customer demand (Table 1, Theme 1) nuances the literature's emphasis on financing barriers (Dutta & Patil, 2024). While access to credit remains important, the data suggest that demand-side discrimination — customer hesitation to purchase from transgender vendors — may be equally material in constraining business viability. This has implications for intervention design: anti-stigma campaigns targeting consumers and cluster-based marketing models that dilute individual exposure to stigma may be as important as financial support.

The finding that 40% of responses regarding government schemes reflect agreement with barriers (complicated procedures, delays) while 40% disagree suggests heterogeneous institutional trust within the community. Some participants report negative experiences with welfare administration, while others may have successfully accessed schemes or not attempted to do so. This polarization underscores the need for scheme-navigation support as a distinct intervention component, separate from scheme design or funding levels. Universities and NGOs can serve as trusted intermediaries to facilitate access.

The prominence of "structural barriers to training participation" (24.0% of responses) and the specific recommendation for afternoon scheduling reflects a practical tension between livelihood-activity time and programme-attendance time. This finding has direct implications for future intervention design: scheduling flexibility, through afternoon or evening sessions to accommodate economically active participants; venue accessibility, through local residential areas rather than university campuses to reduce transportation barriers; and modular delivery, through shorter, repeated sessions rather than one-day intensive formats.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to reframing the transgender entrepreneurship literature away from a deficit model (assuming the community lacks motivation or basic financial literacy) toward a structural-access model (recognizing external constraints: discriminatory market demand, thin institutional trust, and misaligned programme design). This distinction matters for how the social entrepreneurship field theorizes support for marginalized entrepreneurs more broadly, suggesting that interventions calibrated to a skills-deficit assumption may under-invest in the market-linkage and institutional-trust-building work that this population identifies as its central need.

Finally, the findings suggest that universities can serve as relatively low-stigma, resourced intermediaries between marginalized communities and both government schemes and market actors. The Department of Lifelong Learning's role in convening stakeholders — community leaders, NGOs, and government functionaries — around a shared, evidence-generating activity positions it as a bridge institution. This suggests that future interventions should be structured as ongoing infrastructure with follow-up action research cycles, rather than single events.

6. Implications for Practice and Policy

Based on the table findings, several practical and policy implications emerge. Programmes should be designed around cluster production-and-marketing models rather than individual-enterprise training alone, pooling capacity and reducing individual exposure to stigma-driven customer hesitation. Programme timing and venue should be co-determined with the community rather than set unilaterally by the institution, ensuring scheduling and location reflect participants' actual livelihood constraints.

Government departments should treat procedural delay-reduction as a distinct policy lever in its own right, separate from questions of scheme design or funding adequacy. Finally, university Department –NGO–advocacy collaborations should be structured as sustained infrastructure rather than one-off engagements, allowing follow-up action research cycles to build on the relationships and trust established in the first.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This is a single-site, single-cycle qualitative AR study drawing on a purposive, community-network sample; findings describe this group's accounts and are not statistically generalizable population estimates. Data collection instruments were open discussion and feedback, appropriate to an exploratory Observe phase but not to hypothesis testing, and the sample may not represent the full diversity of gender identities within the community. Accordingly, we propose a second AR cycle operationalizing these themes into the structured instrument summarized in the Appendix, administered to a larger, systematically sampled group of transgender entrepreneurs across Tiruchirappalli District, permitting descriptive and inferential analysis (e.g., reliability testing and associations between stigma exposure, scheme trust, and business continuation) alongside continued qualitative follow-up. This paper reports the qualitative first cycle only; no quantitative survey data were collected or are presented here.

8. Conclusion

This action research study documents a university department-led, community-consulted Social Entrepreneurship Development Programme for transgender persons in Tiruchirappalli District, identifying five interrelated barriers — stigma, marketing access, scheme distrust, sustainability pressure, and scheduling exclusion — directly from participants' own accounts. The programme raised entrepreneurship awareness and participant confidence and generated concrete, community-endorsed proposals for a second intervention cycle. The study underscores that transgender entrepreneurship in India is constrained less by a deficit of ambition than by gaps in market access and institutional trust, with direct implications for how universities, NGOs, and government departments design future support.

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