

From Skill Training to Social Mobility: Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in the Clothing and Textile Field

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the transformative role of skill training programs in promoting social mobility and entrepreneurship among women in the clothing and textile fields. The study investigates how targeted vocational training — encompassing stitching, embroidery, fabric design, and business management — enables women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds to establish and sustain micro and small enterprises. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines survey data from 200 women entrepreneurs across semi-urban and rural regions with qualitative case studies, the findings reveal that structured skill training significantly enhances not only technical competence but also self-confidence, financial independence, and social standing. The paper further explores the role of government schemes, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and self-help groups (SHGs) in bridging the gap between training and enterprise formation. The study concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening the ecosystem that supports women's entrepreneurship in the textile and clothing sector.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Skill Training, textile fields, Social Mobility, Vocational Education, Self-Help Groups, Women Empowerment

1. Introduction

Women constitute approximately 48% of India's population, yet their participation in formal economic activity remains disproportionately low. In developing economies, the textile and clothing sector has historically served as a primary point of entry for women into the workforce due to the alignment of traditional domestic skills — such as sewing, embroidery, and weaving — with industry requirements. However, the transition from informal domestic practice to structured entrepreneurship remains a significant challenge for millions of women.

Skill training programs, when thoughtfully designed and effectively implemented, have the potential to act as a powerful lever of social change. They equip women not only with technical expertise but also with confidence, financial literacy, and market awareness — all of which are essential for entrepreneurial success. The clothing and textile fields, being one of the largest employment-generating sectors in India and several developing nations, provides a particularly fertile ground for this transformation.

This paper argues that skill training is not merely a vocational exercise but a gateway to social mobility for women. When combined with institutional support — such as microfinance, mentorship, and government schemes — skill training can enable women to move from being wage workers or homemakers to becoming successful entrepreneurs who contribute meaningfully to household income and community development.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of skill training on women's entrepreneurship in the clothing and textile sector.
2. To analyze the socio-economic changes experienced by women entrepreneurs post-training.
3. To identify the key barriers that hinder women's transition from training to enterprise formation.

4. To evaluate the role of government schemes, NGOs, and SHGs in supporting women entrepreneurs.
5. To offer policy recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of skill training ecosystems.

2. Review of Literature

A substantial body of literature supports the relationship between skill development and women's empowerment. Kabeer (2001) defines women's empowerment as the process by which women acquire the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied. Skill training, in this framework, becomes a crucial enabler of agency and decision-making capacity.

Singh and Bhandari (2014) found that women who underwent tailoring and embroidery training under government-sponsored programs in Rajasthan reported a 40–60% increase in monthly household income within two years of completing training. Their study underscored the importance of post-training support in sustaining entrepreneurial ventures.

Chen (2012) highlights that women in the informal textile sector often face a 'capability trap' — they possess traditional skills but lack the business acumen to formalize their enterprises. This gap, she argues, can be bridged through integrated training programs that combine technical skill development with entrepreneurship education and financial literacy.

Internationally, studies from Bangladesh's garment industry (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004) show that women's participation in the textile workforce significantly improves their bargaining power within households and increases their social mobility over time. Similar patterns have been observed in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and sub-Saharan Africa.

In the Indian context, schemes such as the National Skill Development Mission (NSDM), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) have been studied for their effectiveness in reaching women in rural and semi-urban areas. While these schemes have shown promise, researchers such as Sharma (2018) point out significant implementation gaps, including poor market linkages, inadequate mentorship, and limited access to credit post-training.

This study builds on existing literature by focusing specifically on the clothing and textile sector and by examining not just economic outcomes but also social and psychological dimensions of empowerment following skill training.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative case study analysis. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of both the measurable outcomes and the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in the clothing and textile sector.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

Primary data was collected from 200 women entrepreneurs across four districts in Surat, Gujarat, selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Respondents were women who had undergone formal or semi-formal skill training in clothing, textile, stitching, embroidery, block printing, or fabric dyeing, and had subsequently established a micro or small enterprise in the same domain.

In addition to the survey, 15 in-depth interviews and 5 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with women entrepreneurs, NGO representatives, and government officials involved in skill development programs. Secondary data was sourced from government reports, published academic journals, and industry databases.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to identify patterns and associations between skill training inputs and entrepreneurial outcomes. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes related to empowerment, barriers, and support systems.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Profile of Respondents

The socio-demographic profile of the 200 respondents is presented in Table 1 below. The majority of respondents (68%) were between 25–40 years of age, 72% were married, and 58% had completed education up to the secondary level (Class X). A significant proportion (64%) came from households with a monthly income below ₹10,000 prior to initiating their enterprises.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=200)

Characteristic	Category	Percentage (%)
Age Group	Below 25 years	14%
	25–40 years	68%
	Above 40 years	18%
Education Level	Below Secondary	42%
	Secondary (Class X)	36%
	Higher Secondary & Above	22%
Marital Status	Married	72%
	Unmarried / Widowed / Other	28%
Pre-training Monthly Income	Below ₹10,000	64%
	₹10,000–₹20,000	28%
	Above ₹20,000	8%

Source: Primary Survey Data, 2024

4.2 Impact of Skill Training on Entrepreneurial Outcomes

The data reveals a strong positive relationship between the duration and quality of skill training received and the success of entrepreneurial ventures. Women who had undergone training for more than six months were three times more likely to sustain their enterprise beyond two years compared to those with training of less than three months.

Key entrepreneurial outcomes observed post-training included: increased monthly income (reported by 78% of respondents), improved product quality and diversification (71%), expansion of customer base (65%), and ability to employ other women (42%). These findings are consistent with the literature suggesting that skill training has a multiplier effect on both individual and community-level economic development.

4.3 Social Mobility Indicators

Beyond economic outcomes, the study measured several social mobility indicators including decision-making power within the household, social recognition in the community, and participation in civic and community activities. The findings are striking: 82% of respondents reported an improvement in their ability to make independent financial decisions post-entrepreneurship, while 74% felt greater respect and recognition in their communities.

Women entrepreneurs who had been active for more than three years reported the most significant gains in social standing. Several respondents noted that their status as 'business owners' had changed the way they were perceived by their families and neighbors, reducing instances of gender-based discrimination and increasing their voice in household matters.

4.4 Barriers to Entrepreneurship

Despite the positive outcomes, significant barriers remain. The most frequently cited challenges include: lack of access to formal credit (reported by 69% of respondents), inadequate market linkages (61%), limited mobility due to family responsibilities (58%), poor awareness of government schemes (53%), and lack of digital and business literacy (47%). These barriers point to systemic gaps in the current skill training ecosystem that need to be urgently addressed.

5. Role of Supporting Institutions

5.1 Government Schemes

Government initiatives such as PMKVY, Stand-Up India, and the Mahila Coir Yojana have played a critical role in providing free or subsidized training to women in the textile and clothing sector. However, the study finds that awareness of these schemes remains limited, particularly in rural areas, and that the link between training and subsequent financial support is often weak. Only 34% of respondents who had completed government-sponsored training programs had accessed any form of institutional credit thereafter.

5.2 Role of NGOs and SHGs

Non-governmental organizations and self-help groups emerged as the most effective enablers of women's entrepreneurship in the study. SHGs, in particular, provided not only social capital and emotional support but also access to microcredit and collective marketing platforms. Women who were members of SHGs were significantly more likely to have sustained and grown their enterprises, with 67% reporting business expansion compared to 38% among non-SHG members.

NGOs such as Apparel Training & Design Center have also played a vital role in providing holistic training that goes beyond technical skills to include financial literacy, legal awareness, and digital marketing — areas that are often neglected in government-sponsored programs.

6. Case Studies

Case Study 1: From Domestic Tailor to Enterprise Owner

Twinkle Patel a 32-year-old woman from a semi-urban district of Surat, Gujarat, began her journey as a domestic tailor with no formal training. After enrolling in a six-month stitching and garment design course under a local NGO's women empowerment program, she gained skills in pattern making, quality control, and basic business management. Within 18 months of completing her training, she had established a small tailoring unit employing four other women from her community. Her monthly income grew from approximately ₹3,000 to ₹18,000. Twinkle credits her SHG membership for providing the initial microloan of ₹25,000 that enabled her to purchase sewing machines and raw materials.

Case Study 2: Reviving Traditional Embroidery as a Business

Sunandaben, a 40-year-old artisan from a rural village- Olpad, Surat, had practiced traditional embroidery for years as a domestic activity. Through a government-sponsored Skill India initiative, she received training in product design, quality standards, and e-commerce basics. She now sells embroidered products through an online platform and has a clientele extending beyond her state. Her story illustrates how combining traditional

skills with modern business knowledge can create sustainable entrepreneurial ventures and preserve cultural heritage simultaneously.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that skill training in the clothing and textile fields is a powerful pathway to social mobility for women, particularly those from economically marginalized backgrounds. However, training alone is not sufficient. The transition from skill acquisition to sustainable entrepreneurship requires a supportive ecosystem encompassing access to credit, market linkages, mentorship, and community support.

The study also highlights an important gender dimension: women entrepreneurs in this sector face constraints that are not purely economic but are deeply rooted in social norms, household responsibilities, and mobility restrictions. Policy interventions must therefore be sensitive to these contextual realities and adopt a holistic approach to women's empowerment.

Furthermore, the digital divide poses a growing challenge. As markets increasingly move online, women with limited digital literacy risk being left behind. Integrating digital skills into existing training programs is not optional — it is essential for long-term entrepreneurial sustainability.

8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study demonstrates that skill training in the clothing and textile sector has significant potential to serve as a catalyst for social mobility and entrepreneurship among women. The evidence points to measurable improvements in income, social standing, and agency for women who receive quality training and adequate institutional support.

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Integrate entrepreneurship education and financial literacy into all government-sponsored skill training programs for women.
2. Strengthen credit linkages between skill training programs and microfinance institutions to ensure women can access capital post-training.
3. Promote and expand the Self-Help Group model as a platform for both financial support and market access for women entrepreneurs.
4. Include digital literacy and e-commerce training as mandatory components of textile and clothing skill development programs.
5. Establish dedicated market linkage programs, including exhibitions, buyer-seller meets, and online marketplaces, to help women entrepreneurs access wider markets.
6. Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of skill training outcomes with a specific focus on gender-sensitive indicators of social mobility.

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