



Women Empowerment: Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Development Goals

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Women Empowerment:

Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Development Goals

Abstract

The empowerment of women in rural areas through employment route via skill development requires engagement of various actors who facilitate smooth flow of resources and knowledge required for the purpose. This study explores how issues such as gender stereotyping create challenging situations for those promoting empowerment of rural women via inclusion, although engaging women in employment space can improve their status and help them live better quality of life. Based on expert insights, this study recommends application of national system of innovation for empowering women in rural areas, as this has been a challenging task because collaboration between actors engaged in delivery of knowledge as training to women as the member of the civil society has not been successful for various reasons.

Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19 disrupted lives of women in both urban and rural areas equally by making them economically distressed, isolating them and heightened their engagement into care-giving activities at home, thereby, resulting in reduced earning capability of women. The situation also resulted in increased cases of domestic violence with a larger divide between men and women. During the post-pandemic times, when women in urban areas went back to their jobs for being financially independent, situation of women in rural areas continued to be worst because of closure of many small-scale businesses that were engaging or employing rural women in contractual jobs. Hence, the situation of rural women continued to be distressed post-COVID. This raised concerns amongst policy makers about healthcare and safety of women.

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3 27 Therefore, during the recovery period, after the pandemic, women empowerment
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5 28 programmes designed by policy makers again focused training them, but this time was
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8 29 to acquire digital skills as the number of jobs for people with IT skills increased.
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10 30 Including women in the broad framework of society by engaging them through
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12 31 technology is in line with the agenda of United Nations Commission established in
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14 32 1946 as an intergovernmental body that promotes gender equality through
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16 33 empowerment of women. The commission has been identifying various priority themes
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18 34 as focus areas, year on year, while monitoring, reviewing and guiding the agenda of
19
20 35 Sustainable Development Goal no. 5 i.e. to achieve gender equality by empowering all
21
22 36 women and girls by supporting women to come into the mainstream commercial
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24 37 activities. For this purpose, the commission defined empowerment as a
25
26 38 multidimensional process that fosters social power useful for enabling both men or
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28 39 women to gain control over their lives by focusing on issues they consider to be
29
30 40 important. Policy makers have been pushing empowerment of women by addressing
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32 41 equality, while systems and processes remain under-resourced. Lack of resources in
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34 42 rural areas is delaying the achievement of SDG5 in many countries.
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40 43 Today, over 80 per cent of the global impoverished population resides in rural
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42 44 regions and every individual living in these areas suffers from some kind of inequality
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44 45 (Lipton, 1980). Alarming, women constitute 70 per cent of this impoverished
45
46 46 demographic and they suffer from gender discrimination in times when equality is a
47
48 47 fundamental human right (Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2022). The condition of social infrastructure
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50 48 in rural areas creates unique challenges particularly for women in their pursuit of
51
52 49 economic and social empowerment (Duflo, 2012). Role of enterprises in empowering
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54 50 women underscores the pressing need for solutions targeted towards the problem with
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56 51 appropriate interventions and right policies (Onditi and Odera, 2018).
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3 52 Empowerment of women with equality requires companies to adopt best
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5 53 approaches with robust policies and practices monitored regularly for progress.
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7 54 Enterprises have intentionally committed to gender equality by making it a strategic
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9 55 priority intertwined within their business processes to avoid unconscious biases on
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11 56 linguistics, traditions, and traditional values (Rad *et al.*, 2012; Choudhary *et al.*, 2019;
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13 57 Bardhan, 1985). Various research studies have also emphasised that empowering
14
15 58 women from indigenous and grassroot communities is possible with skills that make
16
17 59 them financially independent and reduce gender vulnerability and inequality (Torri and
18
19 60 Martinez, 2011; Gressel *et al.*, 2020). Although reports from various institutions offer
20
21 61 success stories (Biswas and Banu, 2023), real-life situations contradict a smooth
22
23 62 correlation between acquisition of remunerative skill and financial independence with
24
25 63 higher income that can reduce poverty penalty. Furthermore, the role of enterprises in
26
27 64 empowering women in rural areas has not been considered by either academics or
28
29 65 practitioners because focus has mainly been restricted to engaging women in the
30
31 66 boardroom (McCarthy, 2017).

32
33 67 The success cases of initiatives of the government are very few and findings
34
35 68 reported by researchers working in this area of research are mixed (Butt and Victor,
36
37 69 2014; Hasin *et al.*, 2018; Babu and Sahay, 2018). Simultaneously, managers are
38
39 70 confused about implementation SDGs into their business environment and struggling
40
41 71 to find benefits of their participation in SDGs. While the corporate sector can be the
42
43 72 change maker by putting these SDGs into their everyday work as best practices,
44
45 73 literature discusses women entrepreneurship as a solution (Khan *et al.*, 2017;
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47 74 Ademokun and Ajayi, 2012). Authors such as Novak and Adamskyana (2017)
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49 75 explained how companies can contribute to achievement of gender equality and
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51 76 women empowerment goals with initiatives such as increasing proportions of women
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3 77 in managerial roles and manoeuvring corporate policies towards women
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5 78 empowerment. Other scholars such as Sabbaghi (2024) also mentioned that financial
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7 79 sector can push women empowerment by increasing share of women owned
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9 80 businesses in their allocation of funds allocation as loans to businesses, As regards
10
11 81 women in rural areas, findings of the research conducted by Sabbaghi (2024)
12
13 82 indicates the importance of corporate focus towards educational programmes for
14
15 83 women combined with access to financial services and support as they may not be
16
17 84 aware of the opportunities available for them. There is little work done from a job
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19 85 creation perspective.
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24 86 Recent theoretical work on women empowerment suggests that remunerative
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26 87 skills are vital for the growth of women (Ahmad *et al.*, 2016; Shetty and Hans, 2019).
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28 88 Theorists like Shetty and Hans (2019) have acknowledged that skill-based education
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30 89 for financial independence combined with involvement of women in decision making
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32 90 can liberate them by easing their mobility with capability to make decisions
33
34 91 respectively. Education activates capabilities and resources to mobilise opportunities
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36 92 that together can improve capability of women to make decisions and enhance their
37
38 93 position in their family and social space (Martin *et al.*, 2013; Bovaird, 2007). Women
39
40 94 feel empowered when they make decisions based on their awareness about the
41
42 95 opportunities available to them and their rights (Kabeer, 1999). As per OECD,
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44 96 National System of Innovation brings actors who can empower women together, to
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46 97 create a flow of resources offered by private enterprises and knowledge offered by
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48 98 universities using a framework designed by public bodies for innovative delivery of
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50 99 information and knowledge as skill-based education.
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56 100 Skill based education can generate value when decent and suitable jobs that
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58 101 require skill-based remuneration are available (Chambers *et al.*, 1998). To secure
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3 102 well-paying skill-based jobs combined with confidence of decision making can
4
5 103 increase self-esteem and enable women to feel empowered (Kabeer, 2005). The
6
7 104 studies conducted by Mengstie (2022) and Khursheed (2022) provided insights into
8
9 105 how microfinance institutions supported by government are vital in empowering rural
10
11 106 women, but lack of industry and commercial setups in such areas create a gap and do
12
13 107 not give an opportunity to local women for recognition of the value skill development
14
15 108 can offer (Malecki, 2003).

19 109 Therefore, motivating women in this context to learn remunerative skills will
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21 110 remain a challenge despite the push from the government through various social
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23 111 development programmes. This gap impedes the progress required for women to feel
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25 112 empowered and for achievement of gender equality. Various policy reports have
26
27 113 emphasised that achievement of goals related to women empowerment are very
28
29 114 important as gender equality matters across all SDGs with its roots into poverty,
30
31 115 hunger, prosperity and inclusivity. Lack of academic studies about alignment of skill
32
33 116 development with job creation for empowering women, reflects on the limited
34
35 117 understanding on the boundary conditions of the context.

40 118 Aim of this paper is to explore these gaps by reviewing the information
41
42 119 available in various formats to explain how firms can contribute to the achievement of
43
44 120 the 5th SDG of women empowerment through skill development and job creation
45
46 121 programmes. To find answers to the questions raised by this paper, authors first draw
47
48 122 upon the theory of exclusion and inclusion to explore how to facilitate empowerment
49
50 123 for women. Luhmannian theory refers to strategic exclusion and inclusion of humans
51
52 124 as a part of the social system for communication, helped us build on our concept of
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54 125 women empowerment (Luhmann, 1988). Another theory that guides our research is
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56 126 theory of empowerment which states that empowerment can be achieved by adopting
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3 127 an approach to focus on factors that may facilitate and prevent those that may hinder
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5 128 growth (Joseph, 2020; Swift and Levine, 1987), which states that therefore, outlined
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7 129 our research design around inclusion of women that would lead to empowerment of
8
9 130 women. Finally, our study expands the scope of Luhmannian theory by considering
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11 131 how in the contemporary post-pandemic context of unemployment of women in rural
12
13 132 areas can be addressed via transfer of information, knowledge and employability
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15 133 skills through communications. Simultaneously, we also broaden the employability of
16
17 134 theory of empowerment in the context of women in vulnerable situations, by enabling
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19 135 them to gain economically and financially while securing a role of a participant in
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21 136 decision making process, combined with better quality of life.
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28 138 **Literature Review**

29
30 139 Empowerment encompasses acquisition of power that allows an individual to exercise
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32 140 personal freedom and make choices that enrich their lives and enhance their well-
33
34 141 being (Sen and Batliwala, 2000). Enrichment entails evolution of women about their
35
36 142 perceptions of self beyond economic independence as a process that transforms them
37
38 143 through education (Sridevi, 2005). Women receive limited access to opportunities that
39
40 144 will enrich their lives with personal financial independence required to feel
41
42 145 empowered (Mosedale, 2005; Malhotra and Mather, 1997). Empowerment of women
43
44 146 is a global challenge because of the discrimination they often encounter especially in
45
46 147 developing countries (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Scholars like Sharma and Das
47
48 148 (2021) explained empowerment as a process that links economic empowerment of
49
50 149 women with their personal financial independence and extended it to social
51
52 150 empowerment that enables women to focus on enriching lives of their own and others.
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54 151 Despite contributing significantly to the needs for development of their family,
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3 152 community, and economy in various ways, women are left out from access to
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5 153 opportunities of creating financial independence for themselves through decent
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7 154 remunerative jobs that require specific kinds of skills (Shiradkar *et al.*, 2023).
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11 12 156 *Skills Development for Women Empowerment*

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14 157 For addressing social issues such as empowerment of women in rural areas,
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16 158 governments appoint agencies to create an environment that is conducive for women
17
18 159 to learn remunerative skills in an organised format of a certified training. Skills
19
20 160 development is defined as the abilities obtained across all educational and training
21
22 161 levels, taking place in formal, non-formal, and workplace contexts (Sharaunga, 2019).
23
24 162 Therefore, skills development does not pertain directly to the curriculum or the origin
25
26 163 of the educational or training program, but rather to the functional capability gained
27
28 164 from such skills, courses, and initiatives (Sharaunga, 2019). Skill development
29
30 165 improves productivity of an individual that results in better wages (Barrett and
31
32 166 O'Connell, 2001), providing stable employment prospects and opportunities for re-
33
34 167 employment (Bassanini, 2006), and increasing internal flexibility and external
35
36 168 mobility for employees (Groot and De Brink, 2000). The advantages of skill-based
37
38 169 training have been reported extensively by the academic literature, particularly within
39
40 170 the context of developed nations. However, women in these countries do not consider
41
42 171 taking up full time employment due to social and cultural reasons (Khan *et al.*, 2017).
43
44 172 Rural women frequently face challenging situations where their abilities and talents to
45
46 173 uplift themselves, their families, and their communities are often undervalued due to
47
48 174 societal challenges such as gender bias, caste bias and class bias. Examples of the
49
50 175 literature on challenges faced by women in remote rural areas are given in Table 1.
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52 176 Despite their crucial contributions to communities, they typically earn lower incomes
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3 177 from both agricultural and non-agricultural endeavours (Abrar ul Haq *et al.*, 2019;
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5 178 Faxon, 2020).

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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15 182 Shroff (2019) contends that skill development enhances empowerment by
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17 183 highlighting that creation of jobs in remote areas following skill development is
18
19 184 important. Using lens of theory of empowerment, job creation activities can be linked
20
21 185 with improved local infrastructure and mobility within the network of various actors
22
23 186 like policy makers, education providers and corporations'. Research scholars who
24
25 187 have studied the engagement of different actors in empowerment programmes on a
26
27 188 day-to-day basis explain how they empower by getting engaged in commercial
28
29 189 activities that focus on improving wealth via performance (Helmsing, 2003).
30
31 190 Structuring such a network requires policy makers in the institutional sector to
32
33 191 monitor both the corporate and the education sector, while the education sector
34
35 192 supports the policy makers by helping them meet their targets and by engaging with
36
37 193 corporations to identify skills to be developed requirements and operationalisation of
38
39 194 solutions (Thornton, 2002). Importantly, collaboration between policy makers,
40
41 195 education sector and corporations can together create a conduit for smooth flow of
42
43 196 information through interactions between them. Creation of a social network of
44
45 197 interconnectedness by linking these three can innovatively facilitate fulfilment of
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47 198 requirements regarding empowerment of women through skill development.
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56 200 *Strategic Partnerships for Women Empowerment*

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58 201 Application of National System of Innovation for empowerment of women in remote
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202 areas based on arguments that are embedded in Luhmannian theory of communication
203 for transfer of information and knowledge helps us understand the engagement of
204 enterprises who can provide infrastructure required to implement and execute policy
205 frameworks developed by policy makers. Many studies have indicated that
206 encouraging local companies to operate in remote areas is challenging and it is easier
207 to push development of such areas by inspiring multinational firms to make greenfield
208 investments with protective employment policies and consciousness towards serving
209 the stakeholders in resource constrained rural areas (Dunning and Fortanier, 2007;
210 Gupta, 2017; Wei *et al.*, 2015). It has not been easy for policy makers to encourage
211 greenfield investments by multinationals and increase productive employment in rural
212 areas because their geographies do not offer a market attractive enough for
213 multinationals to consider investment in development of infrastructure (Roberto,
214 2004; Amendolagine *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, many governments have taken
215 initiatives to push for greenfield investments by applying theory of empowerment to
216 generate employment intensive investments by promoting cooperative formation by
217 women or imparting skills that can promote entrepreneurship amongst these women
218 (Petridou and Glaveli, 2008; Koneru, 2017).

220 *Entrepreneurship for Women Empowerment*

221 Studies such as Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013) explored the relationship between
222 entrepreneurship and empowerment using qualitative data from 43 migrant
223 Palestinian women who operated home based businesses in Jordan to explain
224 entrepreneurship as a socio-political activity that empowers marginalised and
225 subordinated women via their cottage or small-scale enterprises. This study reflected
226 on how traditionally women who are positioned as subordinates, utilise their own

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3 227 enterprises to bring in a change in their society's attitude towards women. Similarly,
4
5 228 Cole (2007) also reflected on the potential for entrepreneurship to enable
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8 229 empowerment at both individual and community level in the context of small-scale
9
10 230 enterprises operating in the tourism industry using ethnographic approach to
11
12 231 understand factors affecting entrepreneurial development. Author focuses on cultural
13
14 232 barriers and external factors such as understanding, confidence and education as
15
16 233 community level barriers with capital accumulation with human and financial capital
17
18 234 as problems related to entrepreneurship. Various other studies like Hazarika and
19
20 235 Goswami (2018) analysed what encourages tribal women to set up a small-scale
21
22 236 enterprise using data collected from two tribes located in different areas. Findings of
23
24
25 237 Hazarika and Goswami (2018) revealed the role of knowledge spillover about
26
27 238 traditional businesses in encouraging women to take up entrepreneurship and how it
28
29 239 leads to women empowerment. Other scholars such as Debnath *et al.* (2020) studied
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31 240 achievement of sustainable development with economic empowerment by women
32
33 241 through entrepreneurship in rural Bangladesh with a focus on skills that impact
34
35 242 entrepreneurial decisions made by women who lack knowledge about requirements of
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37 243 entrepreneurship such as knowledge proficiency, expertise, network of relationships,
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39 244 associations, information, and bargaining power.
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246 *Leadership for Women Empowerment*

247 Various scholars such as De Nmark (1993) and Keller and Dansereau (1995) studied
248 women leadership and empowerment as superior-subordinate dyad to explain that
249 ability of a leader to empower subordinates differs based on the status of the leader
250 based on assumption that higher status of the leader leads to higher level of
251 empowerment. De Nmark (1993) conducted interviews of 25 women recognised as

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3 252 leaders in the United States and found that confidence of the leader on their personal
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5 253 abilities enabled their subordinates to become successful in their initiatives. Based on
6
7 254 these interviews De Nmark (1993) explained how leadership by women as a sum of a
8
9 255 leader's competent self is, combined with creative aggression and woman power.
10
11 256 Author implied a strong sense of self with ability to analyse possibilities and spirit to
12
13 257 address obstacles as a competent self. The creative aggression referred to by De
14
15 258 Nmark (1993) constituted the ability to take initiatives, lead others and speak out.
16
17 259 Interestingly the author refers to woman power as a combination of masculine and
18
19 260 feminine qualities that nurtures based on both strength and force. Author has
20
21 261 explained how participants reflected on these as “ability to get things done” and
22
23 262 reflected on women leadership based on these qualities as their capability to change
24
25 263 the society. The notion of empowerment was also studied by De Nmark (1993), using
26
27 264 theory of empowerment based on leadership developed by Cantor and Bernay (1992)
28
29 265 with dimensions like being loved, feeling special, freedom to choose, being
30
31 266 courageous, ability to take risks, ability to lead others, ability to speak out and being a
32
33 267 dreamer. Good leaders empower subordinates. Women leaders initially face
34
35 268 challenges in attaining legitimacy, but over a period after they have strengthened their
36
37 269 capabilities within their context, gathered knowledge about opportunities, understood
38
39 270 resources available with a control over them with understanding of their rights and
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41 271 level of authority, they are able to empower other women. The design of internships
42
43 272 created by women entrepreneurs promotes ambitious, motivated, conscious, and
44
45 273 adventurous characteristics in subordinates who are ready to accept and address new
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47 274 challenges through hard work and patience by educating themselves and learning new
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49 275 skills. Unfortunately lack of access to resources for education, training and skill
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51 276 development in rural areas, deprives women from progressing in life and feeling
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8 279 **Methodology**
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10 280 This paper investigates indicators of women empowerment in the context of rural
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12 281 areas of developing markets, wherein, women have very limited access to
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14 282 opportunities and lead their lives under tremendous social pressure. For this purpose,
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16 283 this paper draws upon the context from the lens of a social enterprise to examine how
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18 284 this issue can be addressed by first identifying the gap in the current literature
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20 285 combined with evidence of current practices reported by the United Nations, World
21
22 286 Bank and agriculture and rural development wing of the European Union. For this
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24 287 purpose, we first reviewed the academic literature followed by a review of market and
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26 288 policy literature available in the public domain that helped us conduct a gap analysis.
27
28 289 The findings from the gap analysis helped us ascertain the positioning of the social
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30 290 problem we were focusing upon. The gap identified provided us a ground and reason
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32 291 that guided us to adopt a qualitative research method for the next phase of our
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34 292 research. Using these two lenses, we pushed our research by diving into expert
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36 293 insights gathered through qualitative interviews.
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42 294 Subject experts were contacted using purposive and emergent sampling
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44 295 strategy. Those who agreed to be interviewed were approached for a suitable time
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46 296 and venue. The selection of subject experts was based on the experience of those who
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48 297 had experience of working as artisans in the rural area and had lost their contractual
49
50 298 jobs due to closure of small businesses during COVID-19. The main challenges faced
51
52 299 by these women was lack of access to jobs they were doing before pandemic and their
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54 300 inability to remotely take up jobs in the new technology driven job market. During the
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56 301 period when interviews of the first batch were being conducted, a second set of
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3 302 subject experts from the list created as a pool of potential respondents were invited to
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5 303 participate in research. The sampling process underwent refinement five times
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7 304 because we had to ensure that the participants had experience and a view that is
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9 305 aligned with the aim of our research. The invitation and interview process were
10
11 306 conducted till the updated list of respondents was completed.
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14 307 Qualitative interviews are an indispensable tool for researchers, facilitating the
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16 308 exploration and comprehension of phenomena beyond the reach of direct
17
18 309 measurement or observation (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, the qualitative interview
19
20 310 method can capture the rich, contextually detailed experiences of participants, which
21
22 311 structured surveys and quantitative methods may not adequately provide (Mayoux,
23
24 312 1998; Roodman and Morduch, 2014; Ganle, Afriyie and Segbefia, 2015). For
25
26 313 qualitative research methodology, the snowball sampling method was utilised to
27
28 314 ensure comprehensive coverage of targeted but difficult-to-reach populations and to
29
30 315 enhance efficacy in accessing hidden communities (Noy, 2008). In-depth semi-
31
32 316 structured interviews were conducted with 28 Indian women from rural locales. The
33
34 317 semi structured interview format was adopted to facilitate discovery of themes
35
36 318 important for the new themes to emerge. Questions covered aspects of empowerment
37
38 319 based on inclusion and exclusion with the role of the public sector, corporate sector
39
40 320 and education sector. The determination of the sample size was guided by the concept
41
42 321 of saturation. According to Glaser and Strauss (2017) and Mason (2010), the sample
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44 322 for the present study was deemed adequate when subsequent data collection ceased to
45
46 323 produce novel information, indicating that saturation had been obtained. Respondents
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48 324 in the study were provided with an interview guide designed to inform them about the
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50 325 critical aspects of the research, as well as their rights as participants. Three field
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52 326 workers who had knowledge of Hindi, Rajasthani, and English were appointed to
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3 327 conduct the interviews over a period of 5 months. Each interview lasted for a duration
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5 328 of about 40 minutes to an hour. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the
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8 329 participants.

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10 330 Semi-structured interviews involve multiple steps to analyse the data
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12 331 collected. These steps include entering the interview responses into a computer
13
14 332 system, summarising key points, organising the information, highlighting important
15
16 333 quotes, assigning codes or categories to parts of the text, and determining major
17
18 334 themes that emerge from the participant responses (Alam, 2020). The interview
19
20 335 recordings were transcribed and translated from a mix of Hindi and Rajasthani local
21
22 336 languages into English. The transcriptions were cross-checked with interview field
23
24 337 notes to ensure accuracy. Furthermore, interview participants were given the
25
26 338 opportunity to review the transcriptions and provide feedback, which might include
27
28 339 corrections or clarifications. The transcripts were then updated to incorporate
29
30 340 participants' feedback.

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35 341 Inductive coding during the analysis process highlighted themes specific to
36
37 342 women empowerment. Data coding functions as a bridge between the acquisition and
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39 343 examination of data (Saldaña, 2021). The qualitative data was analysed using NVivo
40
41 344 12.0. The software was helpful for managing the coding process. In the coding
42
43 345 process, the revised transcripts were analysed, and relevant sections were coded with
44
45 346 tags that identify key themes or categories within the data. Lastly, the codes and
46
47 347 categories were further analysed through triangulation of relevant documents and
48
49 348 observation field notes. Data was scanned by the software for frequency and usage of
50
51 349 terms used during the interviews, to map and draw themes as the sentiments of the
52
53 350 respondents. Use of inductive methods for analysing sentiment data led to emergence
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55 351 of themes which were expanded into sub-themes (Table 2).
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Insert Table 2 about here.

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Most of the themes and sub-themes identified during the analysis matched with the literature and reflected on some of the arguments made by previous studies, thereby indicating the grounded understanding of the themes. The figure 1 presents the method followed for collection and adopted for analysis of data by the authors for this study.

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Insert Figure 1 about here.

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This study was carried out in a rural area of India with purposively selected participants. So, the findings of the study should be interpreted in the given context of the village. The researchers were also focused on the relevance of the comments made by the respondents and their credibility. The transcriptions were initially created in local language and later translated to English for consistency in interpretation by at least two researchers who coded and later read each transcript independently. Whenever there was a difference in interpretation between both the researchers, they resolved and concluded after extensive rounds of discussions.

Findings

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3 377 Invariably women discussed the impact of opportunities of employment in the context
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5 378 of agriculture or related settings and less related to commercial setups. Impact of
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7 379 employment on empowerment was therefore relative and individualistic. Progress
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9 380 experienced by women was not measurable against a defined criterion, but on a
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11 381 personal definition of each woman. Every woman took account of their role in the
12
13 382 society and their personal responsibilities towards their family. Furthermore, every
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15 383 participant did not perceive the value that employment would contribute to their lives
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17 384 in any way either individually or cumulatively social, physical, or emotional.
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19 385 Therefore, for presenting our findings, first we describe perceptions of women about
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21 386 overall impact of skill development and their holistic evaluation of the impact of
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23 387 employment opportunities followed by a description of the ways in which they
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25 388 measure and evaluate empowerment. Table 3 presents the finds and implications of
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27 389 this research.
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Insert Table 3 about here.

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43 395 *Barriers to Employability*

45 396 It would not be easy to overestimate the effect of skill development and employment
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47 397 opportunities on women living in rural areas with their families (Van den Broek,
48
49 398 2020). The quotations below illustrate the underlying issues in relation to participants
50
51 399 taking up employment in a commercial setup. A main point raised by almost all the
52
53 400 respondents was in line with previous literature about their ability to engage in the
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55 401 activities beyond what they are involved in, as a negative impact of expansion of the
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3 402 scope or periphery of their activities beyond what they consider as their
4
5 403 responsibilities and what they are fulfilling today (Moser, 1989; Razavi, 2011). One
6
7 404 of the rural local women as respondents was able to express her position about
8
9 405 freedom and participation to opportunities in relation to financial independence as:

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13
14 407 *“My working towards financial independence will create complications in*
15
16 408 *many ways. First, it will increase my current workload because my going out*
17
18 409 *to learn new skills and take up employment will increase my workload as it*
19
20 410 *will not enable me to get rid of my responsibilities at home. I will always be*
21
22 411 *responsible for all the domestic chores and my children. Second, if I start*
23
24 412 *bringing in money, men at home will stop making efforts to bring in the*
25
26 413 *current income and their contribution will disappear. Third, if I go away for*
27
28 414 *employment, my children will not be looked after by anyone”.*
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33 415
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35 416 Most of the interviewees identified profound ways in which taking up
36
37 417 employment after learning new skills would impact their lives (Datta and Sahu, 2021).
38
39 418 Some of the respondents reported the social pressure as one of the main issues they
40
41 419 faced, emphasising that the societal norms had a far-reaching effect on their lives and
42
43 420 activities they take up, thereby, impacting all aspects of their lives (Mo et al. 2022).
44
45 421 Some of the rural local women participants mentioned these in soft words, but some
46
47 422 were highly stirred by this and expressed their perspective in following words:
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51 423
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53 424 *“I do not make choices. These are the prerogatives of my first family and my*
54
55 425 *extended family. My family will not want me to go and learn these kinds of*
56
57 426 *skills that may enable me to bring in remuneration from an employer due to a*
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3 427 *fear that after marriage I might want to go out to earn money or if I might stop*
4
5 428 *caring about my husband or his family after becoming financially*
6
7 429 *independent. The rules are set and the way I must lead my life has already*
8
9 430 *been decided by my first and extended family. None of them will support me if*
10
11 431 *I say I want to go out and take up employment. Neither will they want me to*
12
13 432 *explore what they have not been exposed to”.*
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19 434 *Lack of Access to Opportunities for Employment*

20
21 435 The interconnectedness of government, educators, and companies in driving financial
22
23 436 independence of women was evident in many examples such as a training institute
24
25 437 that was previously delivering skill-based training in the village but did not offer any
26
27 438 information or knowledge about skill-based employment opportunities (Fujimoto and
28
29 439 Uddin, 2021; Spark et al. 2021). One of the rural local women who had experienced
30
31 440 hardship in job search after taking up training from this provider epitomised the
32
33 441 problem from her perspective:
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40 443 *“I waited for ten months to get a job. I applied at many places, but I was not*
41
42 444 *getting a job despite having two certificates as I did not have any work*
43
44 445 *experience. There are no internship opportunities available in my village. We*
45
46 446 *do not have any industry here. To gain experience, I will have to travel every*
47
48 447 *day to the city, for which I do not have any means of travelling. So, I had to*
49
50 448 *stop dreaming of taking up a job and becoming financially independent.”*
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54 449
55
56 450 It was clear that few respondents felt that financial independence is not meant
57
58 451 for them as there are no opportunities and even if opportunities were available, the
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1
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3 452 social structure and social norms in which they live their lives, do not allow or enable
4
5 453 them to become financially independent (Schildkrout, 2023). The other set of
6
7 454 respondents reflected inline with previous research that skill development
8
9 455 opportunities are available to them, but they find it very difficult to take up
10
11 456 employment (Rietveld et al. 2020), and explained it further as getting employed will
12
13 457 mean change of lifestyle and travelling every day and they are not equipped to take up
14
15 458 employment opportunities.

16
17 459 Almost all respondents recognised their observations about the change in the
18
19 460 confidence of women who take or do not take-up employment. One of the
20
21 461 respondents spoke positively about the change and the transition of the rural local
22
23 462 women who become financially independent and feel empowered (Schildkrout,
24
25 463 2023), due to their contribution to decisions being made about their own lives and
26
27 464 participate in issues related to their family as:

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29 465
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31 466 *“Women who are financially independent have a wonderful life. They can*
32
33 467 *decide what they want from their life and what they would like to do with their*
34
35 468 *children. Since I am not earning, I have no authority in my family, and no one*
36
37 469 *asks me or seeks my opinion about any of the family matters. I would like to*
38
39 470 *learn some skills and take up employment in a company so that me and my*
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41 471 *family can live better lives”.*
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51 472
52 473 Based on the interpretations made by these researchers, this study explicitly
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54 474 explains the need for the government, education sector and corporate sector to come
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56 475 together to make women empowerment through skill development programmes a
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58 476 reality. In this study, we have tried to uncover what mattered most to the women who
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3 477 need empowerment and how they view skill development as a tool for empowerment.
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5 478 Findings of our research confirm many of the findings reported by previously
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7 479 published research articles and offer further evidence that strengthens the need for
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9 480 collaboration between government, companies, and educators.
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11 481 Women empowerment and skill development programmes is an agenda of 5th
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13 482 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and the 2030 agenda for sustainable
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15 483 development. Numerous studies that have explored the empowerment of women
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17 484 emphasised on achievement of financial independence by taking up employment
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19 485 opportunities through skill development (e.g., Jabbar and Zaza, 2016; Tawiah and
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21 486 Setlhodi, 2020; Sheshadri, Pradeep and Chandran, 2021). For instance, Thorne (2021)
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23 487 conducted qualitative research with 25 women in Jordan. This study demonstrated
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25 488 that skill development empowers women by enhancing their financial capabilities
26

27 489 with social interaction due to their ability to get employed. Authors report that
28

29 490 financial independence women achieved through improved employment capability
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31 491 also boosted their self-esteem, self-assurance, and overall well-being. Several specific
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33 492 skill training programs have been introduced and executed by social enterprises to
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35 493 assist women in becoming independent and confident.
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37 494 Burney *et al* (2017) and Shiradkar *et al* (2023) explored the impact of
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39 495 sustainable energy programmes, specifically solar energy, on women's empowerment
40

41 496 in South Africa and India. Jie Chen and Chindarkar (2017) examined the 'barefoot
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43 497 mechanics' program in India, which specifically trains women to repair village water
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45 498 hand pumps. As reported by the authors, this program equipped them with non-
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47 499 agricultural skills and opened opportunities for them in the labour market. These
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49 500 studies provide evidence that skill development significantly impacts employment
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51 501 capability and increases financial independence of women. Additionally, these studies
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3 502 validate the potential for rural women to engage in non-agricultural employment,
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5 503 thereby contributing to the family income. Realising financial independence leads to
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7 504 experiencing increased levels of independence, self-confidence, and self-satisfaction,
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10 505 it also equips them with greater authority in making decisions related to household
11
12 506 expenditures, showcasing the profound impact of financial independence on their
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14 507 lives and the well-being of their families (Burney *et al.*, 2017; Jie Chen and
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16
17 508 Chindarkar, 2017; Shiradkar *et al.*, 2023).

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20 21 510 *Role of Social Entrepreneur*

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24 511 The previous literature underscores the transformative power of skill development in
25
26 512 changing the socio-economic dynamics for rural women (Kabeer, 2011). Scholars
27
28 513 have explained how skill development can enhance employment capabilities with
29
30 514 opportunities in the non-agricultural labour market that improves opportunities
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33 515 available to women for generating income and achieving financial independence
34
35 516 (Baiphethi and Jacobs, 2009). While acknowledging women's contribution to
36
37 517 agriculture considering how they carry a disproportionate share of the effort in these
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40 518 settings, equipping them with non-agricultural skill training, there is an opportunity to
41
42 519 diversify their income sources. The required diversification will depend on the
43
44 520 dynamic relationships among various factors, interactions, and boundaries that
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46
47 521 innovatively facilitate the flow of materials, infrastructure, and information. It also
48
49 522 reflects on the roles of different stakeholders engaged in the process of enabling
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51 523 transfer. For this, the role of education will move beyond provider of established
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53 524 knowledge to an innovator as provider of inclusive education by creating specific
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55 525 context-based knowledge through research and responsibly delivering this knowledge
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58 526 through social engagement with or without digital transformation for learning in the
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3 527 modules of teaching or training. This diversification will not only enhance their
4
5 528 economic stability but also can diminish their susceptibility to poverty penalty,
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7 529 ensuring a more resilient and sustainable livelihood with reduction in domestic and
8
9 530 sexual abuse (Sharaunga, 2019). The social entrepreneur managing the skill
10
11 531 development centre for women in the village reflected on the complexity of the
12
13 532 situation in following words:
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16
17 533 *“The skill development programmes in villages focus mainly on training them*
18
19 534 *to work in the informal sector, wherein the condition is not healthy, and the*
20
21 535 *situation is quite miserable because they tend to work on very low wages and*
22
23 536 *there is no job or financial security. Hence, the current format is unable to*
24
25 537 *improve the quality of their lives. To improve the situation, the government*
26
27 538 *should devise policies which encourage companies to employ women from*
28
29 539 *rural areas and enable facilitators like me to be updated on the skills that*
30
31 540 *corporates need, so that we can in turn train these women.”*
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36 541

37 542 **Discussion**

38 543 *Inclusion for Empowerment*

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40 544 This study examined the extent to which societal support received by women
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42 545 encourages them to learn and use new skills for making decisions involving finances
43
44 546 and feel included (Rosener, 2011). The expert interviews conducted with women who
45
46 547 worked for fashion brands before COVID-19 in the state of Rajasthan, India
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48 548 experienced exclusion from the employment structure because those local
49
50 549 entrepreneurs who were engaging them in the jobs, had to close their businesses
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52 550 during COVID period. This impacted the socio-economic status of women in rural
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54 551 India much more than those in urban areas because they could not go back to work. In
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3 552 line with previous research respondents reflected on the need for a supportive societal
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5 553 framework that can foster an environment where women are encouraged to acquire
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7 554 new skills, pursue opportunities, and realise their full potential, thereby facilitating
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9 555 their holistic empowerment. Sheshadri, Pradeep and Chandran (2021) conducted a
10
11 556 qualitative study among 16 women in India to identify the factors that either
12
13 557 encourage or discourage women to register themselves for vocational training
14
15 558 programmes. They pinpointed several barriers that impede women's enrolment in
16
17 559 vocational training. These obstacles include perceived risks associated with the
18
19 560 training, a limited understanding of the benefits and processes of skill training,
20
21 561 challenges arising from population mobility, and constraints related to the time
22
23 562 availability of potential participants. Consequently, Sheshadri, Pradeep, and Chandran
24
25 563 (2021) advocated for increased government intervention and allocation of resources to
26
27 564 bolster the skill development initiatives for women, emphasising the need to address
28
29 565 the identified barriers and ensure their effective participation in vocational training
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31 566 programs.

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37 567 Our investigation revealed that focusing on employability is of utmost
38
39 568 importance for promoting women empowerment in rural areas. To achieve this goal, it
40
41 569 is vital for the government to undertake a thorough assessment to determine the
42
43 570 specific skill training required (Sharaunga, 2019; Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2022). By
44
45 571 understanding their unique needs and challenges, tailored programs can be developed
46
47 572 to ensure effective skill acquisition and empowerment. Indeed, Shan, Liu and Li
48
49 573 (2015) reinforced this viewpoint in their study centred on rural women in China. They
50
51 574 stressed the vital role of the government, as well as other relevant stakeholders such
52
53 575 as NPOs, NGOs and educational institutions, in offering support and dedicating
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55 576 resources to boost skill development programs for these women. Their research
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3 577 underscores the impact of common challenges and requirements, irrespective of
4
5 578 cultural and geographical differences. Concurrently, Jabbar and Zaza (2016)
6
7 579 highlighted the importance of engagement from major global entities like UN Women
8
9 580 in rural women's skill development initiatives. They advocated for these organisations
10
11 581 to work collaboratively with local governments, playing a role in overseeing and
12
13 582 evaluating the effectiveness of skill training programs tailored for these women. Our
14
15 583 respondents also confirmed that such a partnership with engagement of a social
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17 584 entrepreneur can ensure that the women empowerment programs are well-
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19 585 implemented, impactful, and aligned with the exclusive needs and contexts.
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26 587 *National System of Innovation for Inclusion and Empowerment*

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28 588 Even though our findings confirm the role of various actors in empowering women in
29
30 589 rural areas, the case of women working as artisans for fashion brands in remote areas
31
32 590 of Rajasthan reflect on the ability of a structured approach when coordinated by a
33
34 591 social entrepreneur who can support women in their local environment to remove
35
36 592 barriers they face to take up employment or lack of access to opportunities available
37
38 593 to them, by bringing in resources required from corporates. Simultaneously, the
39
40 594 findings explain that engagement of social entrepreneur with policy makers and
41
42 595 enterprises can create flow of information and knowledge to innovatively increase
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44 596 contributions made by local enterprises towards creation of jobs for women.
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49 597 Literature reflects on the National System of Innovation as a framework that
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51 598 facilitates smooth flow of information between a network of stakeholders for
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53 599 innovatively finding solutions to social issues. Technology assisted flow of
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55 600 information amongst stakeholders for empowerment of women can bring right people
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57 601 together and foster a system of collaboration that can shape the education system and
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3 602 labour markets with support of regulatory policies (Mok, 2005; Chatterton and
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5 603 Goddard, 2000). The Triple Helix Model of Innovation draws upon the National
6
7 604 System of Innovation to explain how interactions between different actors who
8
9 605 independently create or activate policy frameworks can come together to foster
10
11 606 development (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1995). The creation and activation of
12
13 607 developmental initiatives when supported by enterprises create opportunities of
14
15 608 employment for people who have acquired skills through decentralised training and
16
17 609 education offered by the education sector (Liu and White, 2001; Watkins *et al.*, 2015).
18
19 610 The conceptualised model explains how corporations can innovatively mobilise jobs
20
21 611 in cooperation with universities. Simultaneously, it reflects on the role of interaction
22
23 612 between government and education apart from interaction between industry and
24
25 613 government with interactions between education and industry. These initiatives
26
27 614 mobilise social development that ultimately led to reduction in domestic violence and
28
29 615 sexual abuse through women empowerment.
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35 616 While a lot has been written about women empowerment and challenges of
36
37 617 women in rural areas (Ahmed, 2016; Mishra, 2014; Moyo *et al.*, 2012), there is
38
39 618 limited attention from academics who have investigated the process of women
40
41 619 empowerment using the lens of the National System of Innovation. Some of the
42
43 620 previous studies related to women empowerment have discussed promoting inclusion
44
45 621 of the impoverished by reducing inequality and promoting gender equality (Grown *et*
46
47 622 *al.*, 2005; Chant, 2016; Subramanian, 2003; Luhmann, 1982). Quite a few theoretical
48
49 623 perspectives on women empowerment emerge from the available body of knowledge
50
51 624 about women empowerment (Table 1) and the key concept in most of these studies
52
53 625 has been financial independence of women to be developed via opportunities of
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55 626 employment offered by the corporate sector to those with certified skills and
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3 627 identified level of education.
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5 628 In this study, we have focused on the need for collaborative efforts from
6
7 629 government, education, and corporations in empowering women. The qualitative
8
9 630 approach to further investigation of exploration was sought to identify what mattered
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11 631 to women the most for their empowerment and how they perceived their
12
13 632 employability as a driver of their inclusion in the labour market and how it
14
15 633 encouraged them to take up leadership or entrepreneurial approach. Considering
16
17 634 reflections gathered from insights from experts combined backed up with previous
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19 635 research studies on various other factors, a conceptual framework is presented as
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22 636 Figure 2.
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31 Insert Figure 2 about here.
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36
37 642 This study has implications and recommends that there is a need for
38
39 643 collaborative effort from all stakeholders to create a context wherein women feel
40
41 644 empowered. Our study draws attention to many facets of societal issues alongside
42
43 645 operational issues in implementation of policies and programmes designed by the
44
45 646 government for social development. Attention to these different types of facets by
46
47 647 academic research community and practitioner community in government, education,
48
49 648 and corporate sector together, should result in better understanding and greater impact
50
51 649 on women empowerment. The initiatives of the government for empowerment of
52
53 650 women in rural areas have failed because of the lack of opportunities and facilities. A
54
55 651 focus on development by promoting employment attracting skills will secure jobs for
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3 652 women. The entry of women in these areas into the job market will have revolutionise
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5 653 the quality of their lives and bring prosperity with improved infrastructure and
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7 654 financial capabilities of residents to act like consumers in urban areas, Availability of
8
9 655 larger number of productive citizens will have the ability to pull many of them out of
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11 656 poverty and reduce cases of sexual harassment.
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14 657 The findings of this research also suggest that stakeholders need to consider
15
16 658 the need for greater family and societal support to enhance rural women's
17
18 659 employability and empowerment. More training and policy initiatives could be
19
20 660 conducted and extended to families and societies in rural areas to address barriers for
21
22 661 women and reshape societal perceptions to achieve their employability and
23
24 662 empowerment. Moreover, support for rural women should not only focus on helping
25
26 663 them develop working skills or providing financial support but should also offer
27
28 664 relevant work or internship opportunities to further engage them and provide
29
30 665 necessary facilities to reduce their costs. This requires collaboration among related
31
32 666 stakeholders, especially the government, educators, and industry.
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37 667 The academic evidence of the efficacy and importance of skill development
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39 668 and financial support for women's employability and empowerment in rural areas
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41 669 provided by this research is in line with previous research (e.g., Thorne, 2021; Chen
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43 670 and Chindarkar, 2017; Sheshadri, Pradeep, and Chandran, 2021). Our research
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45 671 enriches the theory by investigating and providing a novel framework based on the
46
47 672 National System of Innovation. We gained more insights from women in rural areas
48
49 673 to identify what mattered most to them for their empowerment and how they
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51 674 perceived their employability as a driver of their inclusion in the labour market and
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53 675 how it encouraged them to take up leadership or entrepreneurial roles. This
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55 676 comprehensive framework includes considerations of related stakeholders and cultural
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3 677 and societal challenges for rural women to achieve empowerment in both spiritual and
4
5 678 economic independence.
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9
10 680 **Conclusion**

11
12 681 This research provides crucial insights into the challenges and opportunities related to
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14 682 women's employability and empowerment, especially in rural areas and emphasises
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16 683 on the significant impact of family obligations and societal norms as major barriers to
17
18 684 women's employability, highlighting the need for greater familial and societal support
19
20 685 needed to address these challenges. Our findings also stress the importance of
21
22 686 providing women with access to opportunities for empowerment through support in
23
24 687 skill development, the provisioning of necessary facilities, and a reshaping of societal
25
26 688 perceptions, all crucial for enhancing employability and ensuring comprehensive
27
28 689 empowerment (Obayelu and Chime, 2020).
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33 690 The study further identifies the critical role of industry, government, and
34
35 691 academia in aligning skill development with labour market needs, particularly tailored
36
37 692 to the unique circumstances of women under investigation. This collaborative
38
39 693 approach is vital for improving the efficiency, manageability, and applicability of
40
41 694 initiatives aimed at enhancing rural women's skills. Despite the obvious importance of
42
43 695 this tripartite engagement, there remains a significant research gap in evaluating these
44
45 696 sectors' contributions to underscoring the need for more thorough investigations to
46
47 697 optimise this collaboration (Tiwari and Malati, 2023). In conclusion, this research
48
49 698 offers both managerial and theoretical contributions.
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53 699 *Managerial Contribution:* Findings of this study provide actionable strategies for
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55 700 managers of enterprises who engage with women in rural areas to contribute to
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57 701 empowerment of women by getting engaged in skill development programmes of
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3 702 women coordinated by social entrepreneurs. The discussion about role of enterprises
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5 703 in this study also reflects on the contribution they can make to the attainment of
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7 704 objectives related to sustainable development goals related to inclusion of women in
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9 705 the commercial space. Offering knowledge required by women to get ready for
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11 706 available jobs and resources required by social entrepreneur as infrastructure to
12
13 707 successfully and smoothly run skill development programmes can add incremental
14
15 708 value to role played by an enterprise or a company to the empowerment of women in
16
17 709 rural areas.

18
19 710 *Theoretical Contribution:* The findings of this research expand the boundary of our
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21 711 understanding about mechanism required to empower women and contributes to the
22
23 712 academic discussions by situating women's empowerment within the interplay of
24
25 713 societal norms, economic opportunities, and collaborative innovation systems. These
26
27 714 insights deepen the understanding and applicability of our findings in both practical
28
29 715 settings and scholarly debates, emphasising the ongoing need for research and cross-
30
31 716 sector engagement.

32
33 717 *Future Research:* Since the findings of our research lack support evidential support
34
35 718 offered by quantitative methods, future studies should try to hypothesize and
36
37 719 empirically test the propositions being made by the conceptualisation offered by this
38
39 720 research. Empirical testing of the framework proposed will also strengthen the
40
41 721 current model of public-private partnership and bring in the social entrepreneurs or
42
43 722 social enterprises as important actors who not only can coordinate, but can also work
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45 723 as quality assurance and quality control auditors.

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48 725 References

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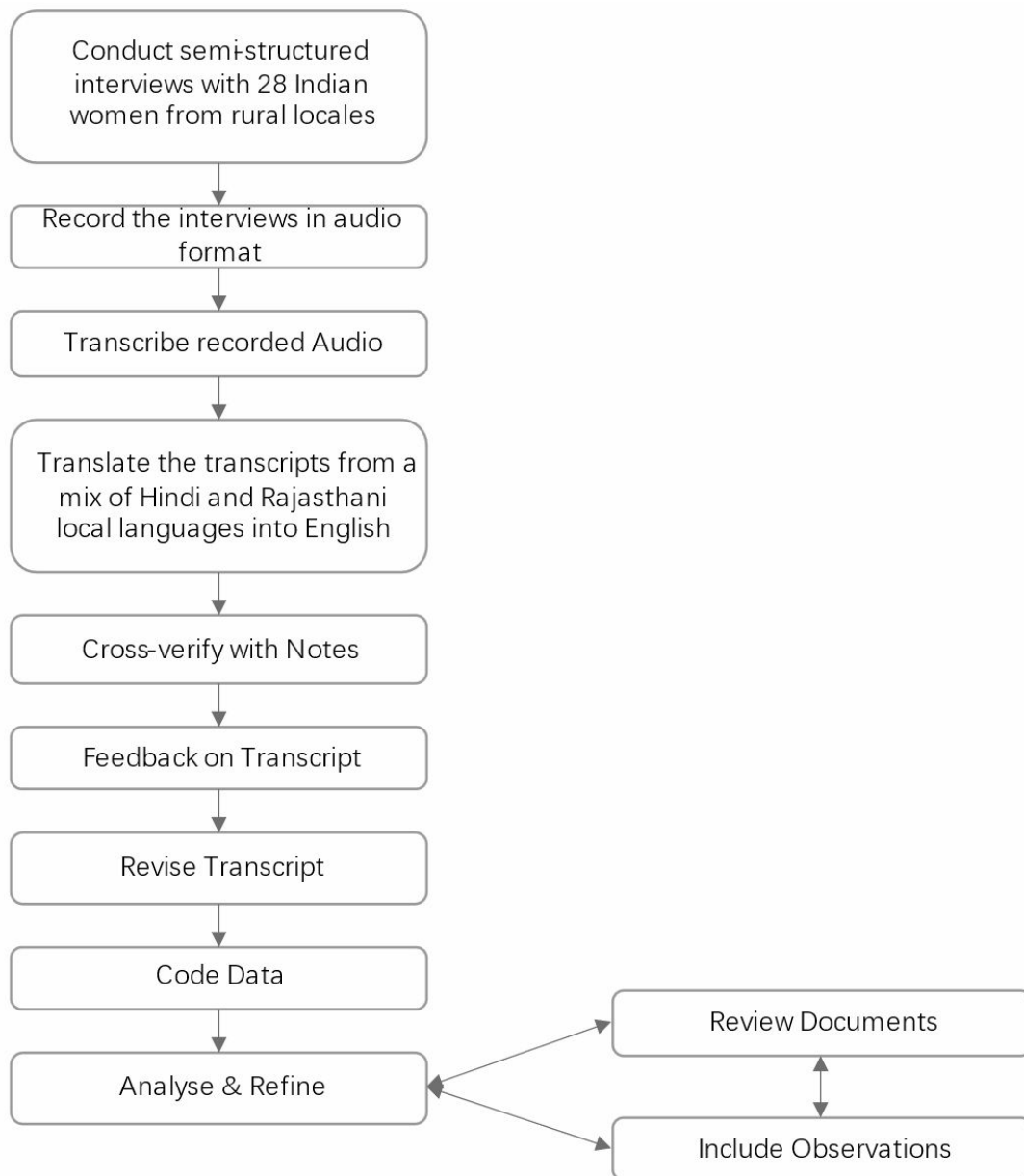
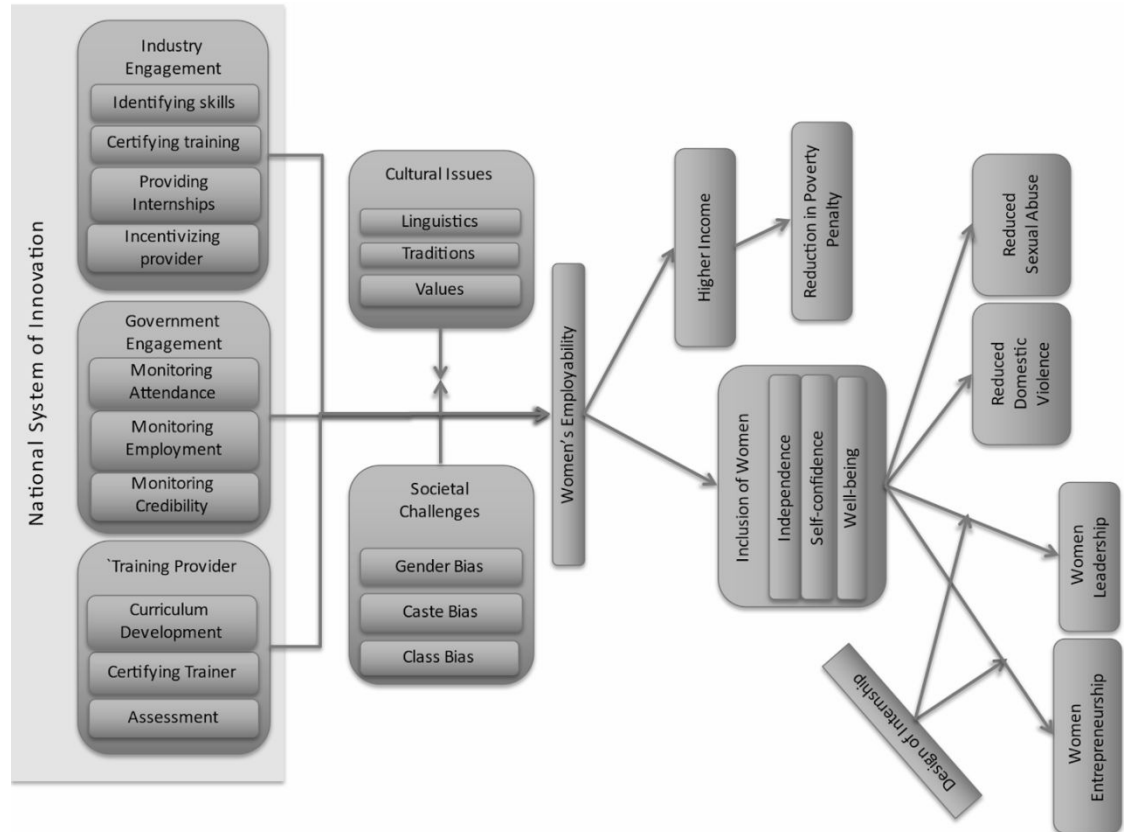


Figure 1. Data Collection and Analysis Process

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Figure 2. Empowering Rural Women

Market Research

967 Table 1. A Summary of Selected Studies on inclusion of rural women through skill development

Study of analysis	Research sample and context	Method	Theory underpinning	Major findings
Thorne (2021)	25 women in Jordan	Semi-structured interview	Capability Approach	Acquiring skills empowers rural women by enhancing their abilities in areas like social interactions (such as communication), securing employment, and fostering independence. This skill enhancement not only boosts their overall well-being but also elevates their self-esteem and self-assurance.
Chen and Chindarkar (2017)	212 women in India	empirical model test	N/A	Women who have received training excel beyond those without training in every aspect of employment and income metrics.
Sheshadri, Pradeep and Chandran (2021)	16 women in India	Semi-structured interview	N/A	Skill development programs in rural areas that are inclusive of both genders provide women with advantages like broader access to education and training, improved job prospects, economic self-sufficiency, and the growth of their communities.
Sharaunga (2019)	300 households in rural South Africa	ordered logit model	sustainable livelihood framework	Skills in business management, agricultural production, and other key resources, including social connections and infrastructure access, played a pivotal role in reducing poverty. However, they were not sufficient to entirely lift households from impoverished conditions. Similarly, households led by older primary women, who derived more income from social benefits and had greater contributions from their husbands, experienced some relief from poverty but still could not completely escape it.
Tawiah and Setlhodi (2020)	N/A	Document analysis	human capital theory	Incorporating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the educational curriculum for rural women can significantly drive their socio-economic advancement.
Shan, Liu and Li (2015)	China	Document analysis literature review	women's empowerment framework & social-relations approach	Vocational education promotes equality for women in terms of well-being, accessibility, awareness, involvement, and authority.

Shiradkar <i>et al.</i> , (2023)	313 women in India	Longitudinal data analysis	N/A	Skill training can improve rural women's self-confidence, decision-making and satisfaction. Women's satisfaction level strongly associates with education, income, and occupation
Jabbar and Zaza (2016)	26 female Syrian refugees in Jordan	Structured interview	N/A	Skill training improves women's self-confidence and self-esteem. Organisations under the UN may conduct regular assessments of the results. Society support is vital for rural women to achieve their well-being.
Ebrahimi <i>et al.</i> , (2022)	162 women in Iran	Questionnaire	Rural women empowerment	Content and educators play more essential roles compared with the learner and environment. Skill training enhances women's financial independence, empowering them economically. It is imperative for the government to extend the required support, such as setting up training programs, to augment women's skills in decision-making, communication, and social interactions.
Burney <i>et al.</i> , (2017)	717 women in West Africa	Questionnaire	N/A	Training related to the programme positively impacts women's empowerment, especially financial independence.

969 Table 2. Summary of Data Analysis

Theme	Sub-Theme
Corporate sector Engagement	Identifying skills Certifying training Providing internships Certifying provider
Public sector Engagement	Monitoring employment Monitoring attendance Monitoring credibility
Education sector Engagement	Curriculum Development Trainer certification Assessment
Women Employability	Higher income Reduction in poverty parity Inclusion of women
Women Inclusion	Independence Freedom of decision making Self confidence Well-being
Women Empowerment	Women entrepreneurship Women leadership Reduced domestic violence Reduced sexual abuse

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Qualitative Market Research

972 Table 3. Table of Findings and Implication

No.	Description of Findings	Implication
1	Barriers to Women's Employability	Family obligations and societal norms often hinder women's employability. Enhanced support from both family and society is crucial to overcome these barriers.
2	Access to Opportunities for Women's Empowerment	Supports in skill development, opportunities, facilities, and societal perceptions are necessary to foster women's employability and empowerment.
3	Collaborations for Women's Empowerment	Providing non-agricultural skill training diversifies women's income sources, reducing their susceptibility to poverty. Collaborations among stakeholders promote inclusive, context-based knowledge creation and delivery.
4	National Innovation System for Women's Empowerment	Developed a comprehensive research framework that includes government, educators, and industry to address cultural and societal challenges and achieve women's empowerment.

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Qualitative Market Research

3rd Review Comments on 6/13/2024

Reviewer: 1

Recommendation: Minor Revision

Additional Questions:

1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: The topic of the paper is good and relevant to the special issue. But **there is no reference to the post-pandemic era.**

Thank you for your feedback. We have added the context of post-pandemic in the initial part of the introduction section. For details, please refer to first 12 lines in the first paragraph of the introduction section (Lines 17-29).

2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: The literature review has improved. but **there is no justification for why the National System of Innovation is being adopted as a theoretical lens.**

Thank you for your feedback. Please refer to second paragraph in the introduction section wherein we have included the justification for the theoretical lens of National System of Innovation (Lines 30-42).

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: **What are the criteria for the subject experts? It says that the sampling process went through refinement 5 times. Why?**

Thank you for notifying us of this gap in the sentence formation. We have completed the sentence as "The sampling process underwent refinement five times because we had to ensure that the participants had experience and a view that is aligned with the aim of our research" (Lines 303-306).

4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: **The quotes have not been identified to specific respondents as claimed in the table of responses to reviewers.**

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3 The findings and discussion are now integrated into one section. However, **there is**
4 **inconsistency in using the literature review to discuss the findings or using the data to**
5 **present findings.** For example, **in section 4.1 there is no reference to the literature review at**
6 **all.** **In section 4.3. there is only one direct quote being used to support arguments.** For
7 sections 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6, **no evidence from the findings is included.** Some parts of the
8 discussion **read like a literature review instead of a discussion of findings (e.g. sections 4.4**
9 **and 4.5).** **Separating the findings and discussion would have improved the quality of the**
10 **Findings and Discussion section.**

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14 **Some of the discussion sections should be moved to the conclusions**

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16 *Thank you for your observations. We have updated the discussion and findings section with*
17 *relevant literature in subsections of section entitled findings, which was earlier numbered as*
18 *section 4 with sub-sections 4.1 and so on. Furthermore, as suggested, we have separated the*
19 *sections earlier numbered as 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6 now as discussion section. The three subsections of*
20 *findings sections each have 2 quotations and the last one has one quotation. The discussion*
21 *section has been improved with more discussion around the findings.*

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26 5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any
27 implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory
28 and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in
29 teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What
30 is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these
31 implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: **Managerial**
32 **implications should be put in a separate section.**

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35 *Thank you for your feedback. The managerial implications have been put in a separate section*
36 *after the conclusion (Line 699).*

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40 6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the
41 technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has
42 attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon
43 use, acronyms, etc.: **Communication has improved.**

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46 *Thank you for your encouraging feedback.*

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49 **Page 4 line 47, Remove “.” Between growth and (Joseph, 2020...)**

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Qualitative Market Research

Reviewer: 2

Recommendation: Minor Revision

Comments:

Overall, your study was well conducted and used some rigorous methods. I have only few comments for further improvement of your study.

In your introduction, you could clarify the contributions of your study to the theory further; in this section could elaborate how the study contributes or builds on Luhmannian theory or the theory of empowerment.

Thank you for your feedback. We have added few lines to explain how our research expands the scope of Luhmannian theory and theory of empowerment in the context of empowerment of women in the rural areas via skill development and employment opportunities (Lines 130-133).

In your literature review, you could provide more elaboration of the Luhmannian theory. Also it would be better if you could provide an exclusive focus on the chosen theories rather than referring to some wider theories such as Triple Helix model or you could provide a clearer link between the wider theories referred and the underlying theories of the study.

Thank you for your feedback. The linkages and embeddedness of Luhmannian theory and theory of empowerment has been explained in the second paragraph of third section entitled "skill development for women empowerment (Line 156)" and fourth section of literature review entitled "strategic partnerships for women empowerment (Line 200)"

In the research method, you could provide more elaboration of your recruitment process

Thank you for your feedback. The recruitment process of respondents and criteria used to recruit them has been explained in the methodology section. Please refer to second paragraph of the methodology section for details (Lines 294-306).

Additional Questions:

1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: Overall, this is an interesting study focusing on an important research phenomenon by aiming to understand how firms can contribute to the achievement of the SDG associated with women empowerment through skill development and job creation programmes. In general, this

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3 was a well conducted study and contains new and significant information which is needed for
4 publishing. Still, I would be giving a few recommendations for further improvement of the study.
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8 2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the
9 relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any
10 significant work ignored?: Yes, the literature review was appropriately conducted, however, I
11 will have a few minor comments for improvement
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15 3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or
16 other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been
17 well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: The methodology was rigorous
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22 4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions
23 adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: Yes, they were well presented
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27 5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any
28 implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory
29 and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in
30 teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What
31 is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these
32 implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: Yes implications were
33 sound and clear
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38 6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the
39 technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has
40 attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon
41 use, acronyms, etc.: Yes, clear communication of information was evident
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