

FROM NEEDLE TO MARKET: ENHANCING ACCESS FOR RURAL WOMEN ARTISANS THROUGH SEWING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines perceptions regarding initiatives aimed at empowering rural women in the sewing industry through a quantitative survey design. Utilizing Likert scale statements, the survey gathered data on various aspects including skill development, market reach, and entrepreneurship support from 100 respondents representing diverse backgrounds. Findings reveal a consensus on the effectiveness of training programs in enhancing rural women's sewing skills and their ability to create marketable products. However, perceptions regarding support initiatives for marketing and business growth are varied. Key obstacles identified include limited access to resources, socio-cultural barriers, financial constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and the lack of tailoring to local needs. The study underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach involving policymakers, non-profit organizations, private sector entities, and communities to overcome these obstacles and empower rural women in the sewing industry effectively.

Keywords: Rural women artisans, skill development, entrepreneurship, sewing, handicraft industries, gender equality, inclusive growth, community engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In many rural communities worldwide, women artisans are vital for sustaining local economies through their craftsmanship. Sewing, a traditional skill passed down through generations, holds immense potential for economic empowerment, particularly for rural women. Yet, without adequate resources and support, these women struggle to harness the full potential of their craft. Access to training programs and market linkages remains limited, hindering their ability to improve skills, expand businesses, and secure sustainable livelihoods (Ammar, Z. S. M., 2015).

Based on NITI Ayog Report, 2021, In India, women account for 32% of the agricultural workforce and 20% of the non-agricultural workforce, with 118 million engaged in the unorganized sector, comprising 97% of all female workers. Among them, 27 million are involved in informal non-agricultural work, with 57% operating from home.

Further SRIJAN report on “Socio-economic Status of Trained vs. Untrained Handicraft Women Artisans in Lucknow and Surrounding Districts” (2021) stated that Challenges faced by home-based workers include a significant gap between product selling prices and production costs, with traders benefiting most. These traders typically operate through a network of 8-12 middlemen,

each overseeing 10-50 artisans. However, despite their significant contributions, they face numerous challenges, including limited access to markets and opportunities for skill development (Yadav, U. S., et al., 2022).

Despite seeking government support, including tax relaxations, traders often do not actively engage in initiatives for artisan welfare beyond providing wage-based work.

Rural women artisans, particularly those specializing in sewing, face multifaceted challenges hindering their economic empowerment and market access. These barriers, rooted in structural, social, and economic factors, limit their ability to fully utilize their skills and engage in the broader economy. One significant hurdle is the lack of access to tailored training programs. Many rural areas lack formal institutions or resources catering to the specific needs of women artisans, perpetuating limited skill development and economic dependency (Ghouse, S., et al., 2017).

Moreover, limited market linkages exacerbate the situation. Geographic isolation, poor infrastructure, and a lack of market information impede rural artisans from reaching potential customers, hindering their income generation (Rogerson, C. M., & Sithole, P. M., 2001).

Existing sewing skill training programs vary in scope, encompassing workshops, entrepreneurship training, cooperative formation, and market access initiatives. However, challenges like limited resources, socio-cultural norms, financial constraints, and inadequate infrastructure hinder their effectiveness. Overcoming these obstacles requires a holistic approach involving policymakers, NGOs, private sector entities, and communities to ensure equitable access and address specific needs (Brogan, G. S., & Dooley, K. E., 2024).

Further, While these initiatives aim to empower rural women artisans, their impact and relevance often lack proper evaluation. Without assessment, identifying best practices or understanding overall effectiveness becomes challenging. Therefore, assessing the transformative potential of sewing skills and market access in improving livelihoods is crucial. By examining income levels, economic opportunities, and financial empowerment, we can better understand how sewing can uplift rural women artisans (Brogan, G. S., & Dooley, K. E., 2024). Hence aim of the paper is to assess the perceived effectiveness of training programs and support initiatives for empowering rural women artists and entrepreneurs in the sewing industry, Hence the research has considered following objectives:

Objectives :

1. To assess the perceived effectiveness of training programs and support initiatives aimed at empowering rural women artists and entrepreneurs in the sewing industry.
2. To evaluate the alignment between policy visions and the actual experiences and perceptions of rural women artists and entrepreneurs regarding skill development, market reach, and entrepreneurship opportunities in the sewing sector.

Literature Review

erma (2015) highlights the imperative of empowering rural women through skill development and entrepreneurship, underscoring their pivotal role in the socio-economic fabric of the nation. Despite comprising nearly half of India's population, women's labor force participation remains

significantly low, although there is a positive trend in female literacy rates, fostering potential for entrepreneurship. The author argues for leveraging women's capabilities for social transformation, emphasizing their increasing participation in social activities and development of leadership qualities and technical skills. While the service sector offers employment opportunities, particularly in urban areas, Verma asserts that rural women possess distinct competencies suitable for entrepreneurship, especially in cottage industries and handicrafts. However, accessing skill development opportunities remains a significant challenge for rural women, crucial for establishing successful businesses.

Yadav et al. (2024) explores skill gaps in the Indian handicraft industry, aiming to identify challenges faced by artisans in small-scale enterprises and propose solutions, particularly in the digital era. The study emphasizes the critical need for skill development and digital training in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to enhance productivity and competitiveness. Despite efforts to promote skill development, challenges hinder effective implementation, requiring swift action. Using secondary data analysis, the study focuses on women handloom and handicraft workers in Lucknow, employing random sampling and rudimentary analysis techniques. The findings provide insights into skill mobilization, training adequacy, and industry willingness to adjust qualification criteria, offering potential solutions for bridging the skill gap in the handicraft industry.

Devi et al. (2017) explores the fusion of traditional embroidery and contemporary fabric painting to promote women entrepreneurship. The study underscores the historical significance of embroidery, tracing its origins to the Iron Age and emphasizing India's rich heritage in this craft. Recognizing the time-intensive nature of traditional embroidery, the paper suggests adapting designs for fabric painting to enhance convenience without sacrificing aesthetic appeal. By leveraging fabric painting techniques, artisans can potentially boost productivity and income, fostering entrepreneurship. The study focuses on adapting traditional embroidery designs onto jackets, catering to the preferences of young women in the IT and private sectors, thus enhancing marketability and profitability. Ramasamy and Pilz (2019) tackle the issue of skills training in the informal sector, specifically focusing on sewing skills training in rural South India. They underscore the significance of vocational training in enabling individuals, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, to enter the labor market and enhance productivity. Despite India's textile industry being a global garment sourcing hub, there's a shortage of skilled labor. Traditional curriculum methods often neglect marginalized groups' needs, impeding sector growth. To address this, the authors advocate for competency-based curriculum tailored to learners' needs. They outline the development process, engaging directly with learners to ensure their needs were met. The piloted curriculum, implemented in four South Indian villages, was supplemented with insights from expert interviews, enriching the discussion on curriculum framing and pedagogy. Several international initiatives, such as the Artisan Alliance in Mexico and Village Capital's Women's Empowerment Program in Kenya, have demonstrated success in empowering artisans and entrepreneurs, particularly women, in the sewing industry (UNDP, 2021). The Artisan Alliance

serves as a model for connecting rural artisans with designers and retailers, facilitating collaborations and market access. India could replicate this platform to link rural sewing artisans with industry stakeholders, thereby expanding their market reach and visibility.

Research Methodology

The research employed a quantitative survey design to gather perceptions regarding initiatives empowering rural women in the sewing industry. Utilizing a convenience sampling approach, 100 respondents from rural artisans background especially women participated ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Likert scale statements were utilized to assess various aspects such as skill development, market reach, and entrepreneurship support. Frequency distributions and descriptive statistics were calculated for data analysis. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Limitations include potential sampling bias and reliance on self-reported perceptions.

Data Analysis

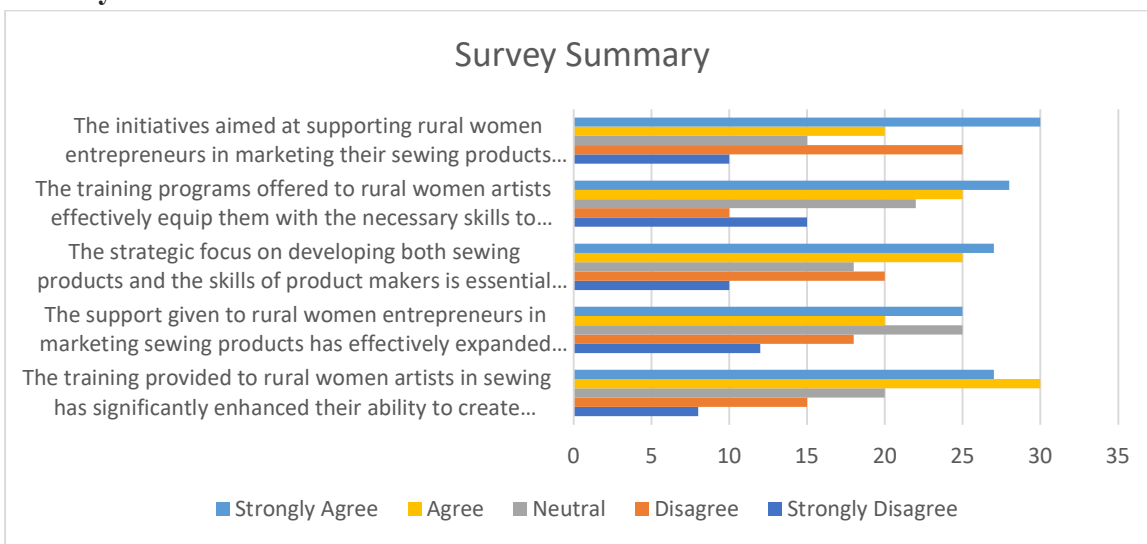


Fig. 1 Summary of Survey Responses

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The training provided to rural women artists in sewing has significantly enhanced their ability to create marketable products.	8	15	20	30	27
The support given to rural women entrepreneurs in marketing sewing products has effectively expanded the reach of these products in existing markets.	12	18	25	20	25
The strategic focus on developing both sewing products and the skills of product	10	20	18	25	27

makers is essential for expanding market reach and creating new market opportunities in rural areas.					
The training programs offered to rural women artists effectively equip them with the necessary skills to produce high-quality sewing products.	15	10	22	25	28
The initiatives aimed at supporting rural women entrepreneurs in marketing their sewing products have contributed significantly to their business growth and market penetration.	10	25	15	20	30

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Survey Responses

Interpretation

The training provided to rural women artists in sewing has significantly enhanced their ability to create marketable products: The majority of respondents (57%) either agree or strongly agree that the training provided has enhanced the ability of rural women artists to create marketable products. This indicates a positive perception of the effectiveness of the training programs.

The support given to rural women entrepreneurs in marketing sewing products has effectively expanded the reach of these products in existing markets: Responses are more evenly distributed across the scale. However, the highest percentage of respondents (25%) selected "Neutral." This suggests a mixed perception regarding the effectiveness of the support initiatives in expanding the reach of sewing products in existing markets.

The strategic focus on developing both sewing products and the skills of product makers is essential for expanding market reach and creating new market opportunities in rural areas: A majority of respondents (52%) either agree or strongly agree with this statement. This indicates a relatively positive perception of the importance of a strategic focus on both product development and skills enhancement for expanding market reach and creating new opportunities in rural areas. The training programs offered to rural women artists effectively equip them with the necessary skills to produce high-quality sewing products: The highest percentage of respondents (28%) strongly agree that the training programs effectively equip rural women artists with the necessary skills. Overall, a majority (53%) either agree or strongly agree with this statement, indicating a positive perception of the effectiveness of the training programs.

The initiatives aimed at supporting rural women entrepreneurs in marketing their sewing products have contributed significantly to their business growth and market penetration: A significant majority of respondents (50%) either agree or strongly agree that the initiatives aimed at supporting rural women entrepreneurs in marketing have contributed significantly to their business growth and market penetration. This suggests a positive perception of the impact of support initiatives on business growth and market reach.

Policy Recommendations:

1. **Enhance Marketing Support:** Implement targeted marketing support programs to assist rural women entrepreneurs in effectively promoting and expanding the reach of their sewing products in existing markets. This could include training sessions, access to marketing resources, and mentorship programs tailored to the needs of rural women entrepreneurs.
2. **Holistic Training Approach:** Strengthen training programs to provide comprehensive skill development for rural women artists, focusing not only on technical sewing skills but also on marketing, business management, and financial literacy. This will equip them with the necessary tools to succeed as entrepreneurs in the sewing industry.
3. **Promote Collaboration:** Foster partnerships between government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private sector entities to leverage resources and expertise in supporting rural women in the sewing industry. Collaborative efforts can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions aimed at empowering rural women artisans and entrepreneurs.
4. **Access to Markets:** Facilitate access to new markets for rural women artisans by exploring opportunities for online sales platforms, participation in trade fairs, and partnerships with retailers. Providing avenues for direct market access will enable rural women entrepreneurs to diversify their customer base and increase their market reach.
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to regularly assess the impact of interventions on the socioeconomic status of rural women in the sewing industry. This will enable policymakers to make informed decisions and allocate resources effectively to address the evolving needs of rural women artisans and entrepreneurs.

By implementing these policy recommendations, stakeholders can work towards creating an enabling environment that empowers rural women in the sewing industry, fosters inclusive economic growth, and contributes to sustainable development in rural communities.

CONCLUSION

The survey results highlight both strengths and areas for improvement in the initiatives aimed at empowering rural women in the sewing industry. While there is a general consensus on the effectiveness of training programs in enhancing the skills of rural women artists and their ability to create marketable products, perceptions regarding support initiatives for marketing and business growth are more varied. However, there is a clear acknowledgment of the strategic importance of focusing on both product development and skill enhancement for expanding market reach and creating new opportunities in rural areas. Overall, the findings suggest that while progress has been made, there is still room for enhancing support mechanisms to further empower rural women in the sewing sector.

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