

ROLE OF INDIAN WOMEN AS SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURS: A PATH TO INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful tool for addressing socio-economic challenges in India, with women playing a crucial role in this movement. Indian women social entrepreneurs are driving transformative change by creating sustainable businesses that prioritize social impact alongside financial viability. This paper examines the contributions of Indian women in social entrepreneurship, highlighting successful case studies such as **Chetna Sinha** (Mann Deshi Bank), **Ela Bhatt** (SEWA), and **Saalumarada Thimmakka** (Afforestation Activism). Despite their impact, women entrepreneurs face barriers such as gender biases, financial constraints, and lack of institutional support. This research provides a review of government policies, challenges, and strategies for enhancing women's participation in social entrepreneurship. The study concludes that empowering women as social entrepreneurs is critical for inclusive development, promoting economic growth, and addressing key social issues in India.

Introduction: Social entrepreneurship refers to the practice of creating business models that address social and environmental challenges while maintaining financial sustainability. In India, where economic disparities and social inequalities persist, women have taken the lead in pioneering social enterprises that uplift marginalized communities. Women social entrepreneurs blend business acumen with a commitment to social good, creating innovative solutions in areas such as education, healthcare, environmental conservation, and financial inclusion.

This paper explores the role of Indian women in social entrepreneurship, the challenges they face, and the policies that support their growth. Case studies of notable women social entrepreneurs illustrate their impact, and a critical review of literature provides insights into the evolving landscape of social entrepreneurship in India.

Review of Literature:

1. Social Entrepreneurship in India

Several studies highlight the significance of social entrepreneurship in India's development. According to Bornstein & Davis (2010), social entrepreneurship is a key driver of systemic change, particularly in emerging economies. Prahalad (2004) emphasizes the role of entrepreneurs in addressing the needs of the bottom-of-the-pyramid population through innovative business models.

2. Women as Social Entrepreneurs

Research by Datta & Gailey (2012) suggests that women-led social enterprises are more likely to focus on community-based issues such as education, health, and economic empowerment. UN Women (2021), reports that increasing women's participation in entrepreneurship could add \$700 billion to India's GDP by 2025.

3. Challenges Faced by Women Social Entrepreneurs

Studies by Kabeer (2016) and NITI Aayog (2022) highlight that, women entrepreneurs in India face systemic challenges such as limited access to credit, gender discrimination, and socio-cultural barriers. Additionally, Goyal & Yadav (2019) found that women social entrepreneurs often struggle with scaling their ventures due to limited networks and institutional support.

Role of Indian Women in Social Entrepreneurship

Indian women have pioneered social enterprises in various sectors, impacting millions of lives. Their initiatives often focus on community well-being, financial inclusion, and environmental sustainability.

1. Financial Inclusion and Microfinance

Case Study: Chetna Sinha – Mann Deshi Bank

Chetna Sinha founded Mann Deshi Bank in Maharashtra to provide financial services to rural women entrepreneurs. The bank has empowered over 500,000 women by offering micro-loans, financial literacy programs, and business mentorship.

2. Women’s Rights and Economic Empowerment

Case Study: Ela Bhatt – SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s Association)

Ela Bhatt founded SEWA to organize women workers in the informal sector, ensuring their rights to fair wages, healthcare, and financial independence. SEWA now has over 1.5 million members across India.

3. Healthcare and Sanitation

Case Study: Arunachalam Muruganantham’s Initiative Led by Women Entrepreneurs

Though Arunachalam Muruganantham invented low-cost sanitary pad machines, women-led micro-enterprises have taken the initiative forward, providing menstrual hygiene solutions in rural India and breaking taboos around menstruation.

4. Environmental Conservation and Sustainability

Case Study: Saalumarada Thimmakka – Afforestation Activism

An illiterate woman from Karnataka, Saalumarada Thimmakka planted over 8,000 trees along highways, earning national recognition. Her work in afforestation and environmental sustainability has inspired many eco-entrepreneurs.

Challenges Faced by Women Social Entrepreneurs in India:

1. Gender Bias and Societal Norms

Women entrepreneurs often struggle with societal expectations that prioritize family responsibilities over business leadership. Many investors hesitate to fund women-led ventures due to gender biases.

2. Limited Access to Finance

According to NITI Aayog (2022), women entrepreneurs receive only **27% of total credit disbursed to businesses** in India, limiting their ability to scale their enterprises.

3. Lack of Mentorship and Networks

Unlike men, women often lack strong professional networks that can provide mentorship and business expansion opportunities.

4. Policy and Regulatory Barriers

Although India has policies supporting women entrepreneurs (Stand-Up India Scheme, MUDRA Yojana), implementation gaps and bureaucratic hurdles make it difficult for women to benefit fully.

Government and Policy Initiatives Supporting Women Social Entrepreneurs:

- 1. MUDRA Yojana** – Provides collateral-free microfinance loans to women entrepreneurs.
- 2. Stand-Up India Scheme** – Offers financial support to women-led enterprises.
- 3. Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP)** – A NITI Aayog initiative that connects women entrepreneurs with funding, mentorship, and business development resources.

4. **Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)** – Encourages women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to start social enterprises.

5. **Mission Shakti** – Strengthens financial and social empowerment programs for women.

Strategies to Enhance Women’s Role in Social Entrepreneurship:

1. **Increasing Access to Finance** – Expanding microfinance and venture capital investments for women-led social enterprises.

2. **Strengthening Skill Development Programs** – Providing entrepreneurship training for women in rural and urban areas.

3. **Enhancing Market Linkages** – Connecting women entrepreneurs with e-commerce platforms to expand their reach.

4. **Encouraging Gender-Inclusive Policies** – Implementing regulatory reforms that promote equal opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

5. **Promoting Social Innovation Hubs** – Establishing incubators that support women-led social enterprises with mentorship and funding.

Conclusion: Women social entrepreneurs are driving inclusive and sustainable development in India. Through financial inclusion, environmental conservation, healthcare, and economic empowerment initiatives, they are addressing critical social challenges. However, significant barriers such as gender biases, financial constraints, and lack of institutional support must be addressed. Strengthening government policies, financial access, and mentorship programs can enhance women's participation in social entrepreneurship, fostering a more equitable and prosperous India.

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