

DRIVING INNOVATION FOR TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT: REVIEW ON WOMEN-LED SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP WORK IN INDIA

Aditi Bhupendra Dadhich*
Dr. Shabnam Siddiqui**

ABSTRACT

India's women-led social entrepreneurship functions as a vital catalyst for innovative practices and inclusive growth. The study provides a critical narrative review of women social entrepreneurs who transform conventional solutions for social challenges using innovative and sensitive approaches to specific contexts. This study demonstrates the methods women use to combine technology and grassroots knowledge while engaging communities to solve problems in health education environmental protection and financial inclusion sectors. Through an analysis of academic literature along with policy documents and case studies spanning from 2010 to 2025 this study uncovers both patterns and obstacles and identifies support mechanisms behind women's leadership roles in social innovation. The research shows women entrepreneurs make important social contributions yet they face obstacles including limited access to financial resources, gender discrimination, and inadequate support for business growth. The assessment shows that women-led enterprises require stronger institutional support along with gender-sensitive policies and innovation systems to thrive and endure. The research presents a strategic guide to promote social innovation in India by empowering female leaders.

Keywords: Social Innovation, Grassroots, Social Entrepreneurship, Women's Leadership, Women-Led Enterprises.

Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has become a strong solution for tackling entrenched social, economic, and environmental problems through sustainable business models with social objectives. Social entrepreneurship diverges from traditional business models because it balances earning profits with generating social value that benefits marginalized communities. Social enterprises have responded to the service delivery, infrastructure and livelihood shortfalls faced by developing countries such as India through grassroots innovation and tailored solutions in rural and semi-urban locales. Social entrepreneurship led by women has played a significant role in driving forward rural development and inclusive growth initiatives. Women entrepreneurs use their life experiences and local insights to lead initiatives and they generally channel their profits and social networks back into community development through education and health improvements. Their leadership establishes participatory development models while frequently confronting gender norms that restrict decision-making access. Women make valuable contributions but still encounter structural obstacles that include restricted financial access and inadequate mentorship while cultural norms also restrict their opportunities. The role of social innovation which involves developing and deploying effective solutions to systemic and challenging social and

* Research Scholar, FMS-WISDOM, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India.

** Associate Professor, FMS-WISDOM, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India.

environmental problems remains central to our analysis. In rural contexts, social innovation takes unique forms: Rural social innovation utilizes cost-effective technologies alongside decentralized service structures which incorporate eco-conscious practices to meet local community requirements. Women-led social enterprises exhibit impressive adaptability in innovation creation through the combination of traditional knowledge and modern technology to achieve sustainable solutions that can be expanded. The paper offers a narrative review of how women social entrepreneurs in India create innovative solutions which lead to transformative impacts. The study explores women's leadership in innovation across sectors and investigates the social value generated by their work alongside the ecosystems that support or block their progress.

Methodology

This paper examines relevant literature and policy documents alongside illustrative case studies to advance discussions on gender and innovation for sustainable development while guiding policymakers and practitioners and researchers involved in entrepreneurial social transformation. This research uses a narrative literature review methodology to examine and integrate current studies along with reports and established case studies about women-led social entrepreneurship in India. The research team selected a narrative review to achieve a thorough qualitative assessment of women's innovative contributions to social entrepreneurship and their impact across different sectors. Our review is based on academic articles along with policy papers and institutional reports together with case studies published from 2010 to 2025. To conduct the analysis the research utilized thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and frameworks about innovation gender and social impact across major databases and repositories including JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, ResearchGate and government portals such as NITI Aayog Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship UN Women and ILO. Through iterative literature reading and coding researchers identified key themes including technological, frugal and digital innovations as well as process-based innovations alongside leadership models impact domains and enabling environments. This review avoids claiming statistical generalizability while seeking to deliver conceptual clarity and policy relevance by synthesizing fragmented evidence into a unified narrative about women-led social innovation in India.

Understanding Social Entrepreneurship: Concepts and Indian Illustrations

Social entrepreneurship refers to the identification and resolution of social problems through the application of entrepreneurial principles, practices, and tools according to Dees (2001). Traditional entrepreneurship prioritizes profit generation while social entrepreneurship seeks to create social value through initiatives related to education access, healthcare provision, sustainable livelihoods support and environmental protection. Mair and Marti (2006) explain social entrepreneurship as the innovative resource combination process which creates opportunities to drive social change and meet social needs. As a leading global network of social entrepreneurs Ashoka has played a vital role in India's social entrepreneurship sector through its support of changemakers with ventures aiming for systemic change. The Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship alongside the Skoll Foundation establishes global models which demonstrate the dual objectives of mission-driven approaches and market-driven tactics (Bornstein & Davis, 2010). Social entrepreneurship has become an increasingly important tool for promoting inclusive development across underserved rural and peri-urban areas within India. According to NITI Aayog (formerly Planning Commission of India) social entrepreneurs play fundamental roles in providing sustainable solutions in areas where both government efforts and market mechanisms fail (NITI Aayog, 2020).

Key Characteristics of Social Entrepreneurs

- Social entrepreneurs operate with a primary goal of finding ways to address both social and environmental challenges.
- Social entrepreneurs introduce novel products, services, processes, or delivery methods
- Sustainability through income-generation, cross-subsidy, or reinvestment
- Scalability of solutions across regions or demographics
- Participatory approaches directly involve the communities they aim to assist according to Gupta et al. (2021).

Case Illustrations of Social Enterprises in India

Indian social enterprises demonstrate how grassroots challenges can be transformed into scalable solutions through effective social entrepreneurship.

- **Goonj**

The Delhi organization Goonj was established by Anshu Gupta in 1999 to transform urban waste such as used clothing and materials into development tools for rural regions in India. Goonj uses its "Cloth for Work" program to promote dignity and self-reliance in rural communities by linking material donations to community development efforts. This initiative demonstrates groundbreaking approaches to managing waste and creating jobs while providing disaster aid.

- **Phool.co**

Phool.co began its operations in Kanpur and solves environmental problems from temple floral waste through the transformation of flowers into biodegradable goods such as incense sticks and "Florafoam" which serves as a sustainable Styrofoam substitute. The initiative both reduces pollution in the Ganges river and provides dignified work opportunities for Dalit women (Jaiswal & Bhattacharya, 2021). The project merges sustainable environmental practices with female empowerment initiatives along with circular economic principles. \

- **Haathi Chaap**

A project based in Delhi manufactures sustainable paper products from elephant dung through a combination of animal care principles and artistic design. Haathi Chaap transforms the way people understand waste through its unique production of earth-friendly stationery and handicrafts that merge quirky design with environmental responsibility. By hiring local artisans primarily women the venture merges ecological business practices with traditional craft livelihoods (Tandon & Kapoor, 2017).

- **SELCO India**

SELCO India supplied decentralized solar power systems to low-income households located in rural Karnataka regions. Through their combination of technology and financial solutions with social requirements SELCO shows clean energy as a valuable development tool that supports health services as well as educational and entrepreneurial activities (Harish et al., 2009).

- **Rang De**

Through its peer-to-peer lending model Rang De facilitates credit connections between urban lenders and rural borrowers who are women entrepreneurs while providing cost-effective alternatives to predatory informal lending. Rang De serves as an example of financial inclusion driven by technology according to Sinha & Sinha (2020).

The Role and Need of Women in Social Entrepreneurship in India

- **The Role of Women in Social Entrepreneurship**

Women social entrepreneurs in India have become essential in filling service delivery gaps throughout health, education, environmental initiatives, and livelihood programs. Social entrepreneurs led by women work on basic community challenges through sustainable solutions that prioritize empathy and local involvement (Datta & Gailey, 2012; Katre & Salipante, 2012). Research has highlighted women's unique leadership skills including collaboration abilities and emotional intelligence which they bring to social enterprise operations (Gupta et al., 2021). Research by Kapoor and Kumar (2022) demonstrates that women founders in Maharashtra and Rajasthan who work on waste management and education initiatives have surpassed their peers in their ability to engage communities and influence behavior change. Women leaders in successful social enterprises like SEWA, Phool.co, Saathi Pads, and Goonj show how they incorporate social value into their business models. These business initiatives focus on granting dignity and self-reliance to marginalized groups through work opportunities and educational programs while especially supporting women (Chatterjee, 2020; Jaiswal & Bhattacharya, 2021). A recent study from the Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship (GAME) in 2023 demonstrated that social enterprises guided by women in India have a higher tendency to establish inclusive job opportunities and cooperative structures predominantly in disadvantaged regions. Technology is creating new ways for people to participate in various activities. Women entrepreneurs are overcoming geographic and social barriers through online market access and funding opportunities according to Shah & Mehta (2023).

- **The Need for Women in Social Entrepreneurship**

Women in India need social entrepreneurship because gender disparities continue to exist in economic involvement and leadership positions along with asset ownership. Social entrepreneurship creates opportunities for women to spearhead social change and strengthen their financial autonomy (Singh & Verma, 2019). Women in patriarchal and rural settings frequently have the comprehensive

cultural insights needed to develop solutions that fit their specific context. Their unique position enables them to create bottom-up innovations which top-down strategies commonly miss (Majumdar & Varadarajan, 2013). Pillai and Alok (2021) demonstrate that although women-led social enterprises deliver significant impact they keep encountering gender-based obstacles in obtaining incubators and financial support as well as networking opportunities. The lack of ecosystem support creates the most significant gap in Tier II and Tier III cities. The study by Rani and Bansal(2022) demonstrates that supporting female social entrepreneurs can facilitate simultaneous progress toward multiple Sustainable Development Goals such as gender equality (SDG 5), decent work (SDG 8), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). The meta-analysis of 35 social ventures from 10 Indian states revealed that women-led ventures achieved higher social return on investment (SROI) than men-led ventures within the health and education sectors. Women entrepreneurs have shown resilience in the post-COVID era by changing their business models to focus on local production and essential community care services. According to Jain and Narayanan (2024), women-led social ventures implemented innovative solutions for last-mile delivery, tele-health and decentralized sanitation during the pandemic. The National Policy for Women 2021 together with Startup India Women Cell initiatives has addressed this demand by offering financial support along with training and mentorship programs. The implementation process has remained divided and limited to urban areas which require stronger policy changes and grassroots capacity development according to Gupta & Joshi (2023).

- **Sectoral Contributions and Innovations**

Female social entrepreneurs have delivered significant impact across diverse industry sectors.

- Health: Women-led businesses Swasth India and Saathi Pads provide menstrual hygiene solutions and affordable healthcare services to low-income communities.
- Environment: Phool.co stands as an enterprise that hires marginalized women for floral waste recycling to achieve environmental innovation alongside dignified employment (Jaiswal & Bhattacharya, 2021).
- Livelihoods: Rangсутra and SEWA empower thousands of rural women by establishing artisan livelihoods through collective enterprises (Chatterjee, 2020).
- Waste Management and Circular Economy: The HaathiChaap initiative introduced sustainable paper production from elephant dung and provided job opportunities for women artisans (Tandon & Kapoor, 2017).

Barriers and Gaps

- **Gender Norms and Mobility Constraints**

The continuation of patriarchal standards persists as a fundamental obstacle to women's freedom to move physically and socially. Field studies by Gupta et al. Research by Jaiswal & Kumar (2020) and Gupta et al. (2021) demonstrates that women entrepreneurs encounter family and community pushback when pursuing non-traditional roles in rural regions or Tier-2 cities.

- **Access to Capital and Financial Services**

Policy reforms have not successfully resolved the persistent problem of credit access. Formal institutions regard women's business initiatives as high-risk because these ventures typically lack sufficient collateral and operate informally. The Intellectap report from 2022 showed that institutional loans reached only 17% of women entrepreneurs in India. Scaling innovative ideas requires more than microfinance support as demonstrated by Intellectap (2022).

- **Underrepresentation in Policy and Innovation Platforms**

Women remain underrepresented in policymaking spaces, innovation councils, and startup ecosystems. The absence of gender-specific data and impact measurements makes it challenging to customize support efforts (OECD, 2021). Women remain largely excluded from strategic leadership roles that shape innovation trajectories across different sectors (Bhatia & Malhotra, 2023).

Women-Specific Networks, Incubators, Government Schemes and NGOs: Catalysts for Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship

- **Women-Specific Networks**

Professional networks that focus on women serve as influential platforms that provide mentorship opportunities while enhancing visibility and offering connections to funding sources alongside collaborative learning experiences for their members. These networks enable women to successfully

move through the entrepreneurial system and expand their businesses while strengthening their self-assurance. The online SHEroes women's community delivers career advice together with mental well-being support and funding access while operating a marketplace platform. The network has successfully connected more than 20 million women and sparked the creation of thousands of new businesses (Shah & Mehta, 2023). NITI Aayog's WEP platform delivers a comprehensive access point for women entrepreneurs to leverage government and private resources while accessing mentorship opportunities alongside success stories. NITI Aayog established individualized pathways through the creation of Ichha Shakti for aspirants, Gyaan Shakti for knowledge-seekers and Karma Shakti for entrepreneurs in 2022. Through Lean In Circles and Leap Club platforms women gain access to leadership development and community support along with opportunities for co-learning in both urban and semi-urban areas (Bhatia & Malhotra, 2023). These networks help reduce isolation while building confidence and opening doors for sharing opportunities to expand innovative projects in social and environmental fields.

- **Women-Specific Incubators and Accelerators**

Incubators designed for women entrepreneurs offer essential early-stage support through training programs, business development assistance, legal services, and financial resources. WE Hub Telangana stands as India's inaugural government-backed incubator offering support to women in diverse fields such as social innovation and clean energy as well as agri-tech. GIZ (2022) confirms that it offers business mentorship opportunities alongside market linkages and funding access services. The Women Startup Program at NSRCEL IIM Bangalore delivers training and seed support to women entrepreneurs at the idea stage while providing them with incubation services. More than 2,000 women have gained advantages from the program to date according to Kumar & Bhardwaj (2022). The organization Womennovator partners with the Ministry of MSME to build capacity for women entrepreneurs and to offer storytelling platforms along with a network that includes more than 100 women-led chambers worldwide. The program demonstrates considerable activity in both rural areas and semi-urban districts.

Incubators help women overcome entry barriers through supportive and resource-rich environments which mainstream startup ecosystems commonly lack.

- **NGOs as Social Innovation Enablers**

NGOs play a crucial role in developing grassroots enterprises led by women through comprehensive approaches that include capacity building programs along with micro-financing and SHG formation and market integration. Rural women receive training at Barefoot College (Tilonia, Rajasthan) to operate solar electrification systems and conduct water testing while using eco-friendly technology. The NGO's solar mamas initiative has brought solar power to more than 1,000 villages worldwide (Sahu, 2023). The organization Self Employed Women's Association assists over 2 million Indian women by promoting self-sufficiency through group entrepreneurship in agriculture, textiles, and waste management (Gupta et al., 2021). The Manjari Foundation conducts work in Rajasthan to strengthen women's communities through SHGs and offers livelihood programs in sanitation and rural enterprise creation. Through CSR project collaborations with companies women have been able to initiate eco-friendly and socially inclusive businesses according to Singh et al., 2023. Dhriiti – The Courage Within provides training for young women who want to develop micro-enterprises in sustainable packaging and upcycled crafts. These NGOs function as bridge institutions that convert policy support into practical change for grassroots communities. These programs serve as accessible starting points for women who might face exclusion from traditional startup frameworks.

- **Government Schemes and Support for Women Entrepreneurs**

The Government of India has initiated numerous programs in recent years to encourage women-led entrepreneurship while focusing on inclusive economic growth alongside sustainability and rural development. The Stand Up India Scheme and Startup India Initiative have expanded women's financial opportunities while motivating them to start businesses in fields that have been traditionally dominated by men. According to research findings women entrepreneurs gained improved formal credit access through Stand Up India despite existing mentoring shortcomings (Kumar, Verma, & Sharma, 2023). The MUDRA Yojana initiative has provided microcredit to millions of women from disadvantaged communities for small enterprises. The Reserve Bank of India (2022) reported that women make up more than 70% of MUDRA beneficiaries which demonstrates the policy's direct effect on grassroots economic activity.

Programs such as Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and the Green Skill Development Programme have provided women with new skills for sectors including solar energy, organic farming and

waste recycling (Sharma & Gupta, 2023). The Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP) created by NITI Aayog offers women access to digital resources for mentorship and funding as well as legal support (Bhatia & Malhotra, 2023). The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) has successfully brought together more than 8 crore women in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to develop sustainable community-based micro-enterprises (Verma & Tiwari, 2023). RSLDC has been instrumental in Rajasthan by training women in eco-friendly livelihoods like eco-crafts and solar equipment maintenance through partnerships with CSR-funded initiatives (Singh, Das, & Meena, 2023). These programs have expanded women's entrepreneurial participation while making notable contributions to both India's social development and its green economy. The combination of financial inclusion with skills training and supportive ecosystems has allowed women to drive transformational change in rural and underserved regions. The growing number of women-led startups and increased household income contributions demonstrate how rural economies have diversified while sustainability principles became integrated into local businesses. The current research suggests that effective ecosystem support requires more incubators, impact investors, and policy dialogues which explicitly focus on elevating women's voices and leadership abilities (Mehta & Rao, 2022).

Discussion

Analysis of existing literature together with current practices demonstrates how women-led social entrepreneurship delivers innovative solutions that are both inclusive and deeply connected to their specific social context. The literature consistently demonstrates how women's innovative efforts are deeply rooted in community needs and empathy through their firsthand experiences with grassroots issues. While mainstream entrepreneurship models focus on scale and profit maximization, women social entrepreneurs in India give priority to local relevance and collective benefit through sustainable practices. Research by Gupta and Sharma (2021) alongside Sinha and Bansal (2023) demonstrates that women's innovations tend to be economical and need-oriented while also maintaining environmental awareness which corresponds well with sustainable development objectives. The inclusive nature of women's innovation makes it transformative across key areas including health, sanitation, education, agriculture and climate resilience.

Women's empowerment becomes closely connected to innovative activities. Women benefit from social entrepreneurship beyond economic independence as it provides them with greater agency and decision-making power along with enhanced societal recognition. Through their leadership in innovative projects such as Goonj's urban-rural waste repurposing and dignity work, Phool.co's flower waste recycling efforts, or HaathiChaap's handmade paper production from elephant dung women redefine traditional gender roles and transform into community leaders and agents of change. Recent empirical research demonstrates that entrepreneurial activities lead to increased mobility and confidence and greater political involvement among women (Deshpande & Sharma, 2020; Nair, 2022). The power of innovation to empower people depends on an enabling ecosystem which includes access to finance, incubation support and networks that remain inequitably spread throughout urban and rural areas in India.

Policy discourse needs to focus on how gender aspects can be incorporated into social innovation policies and frameworks. National innovation policies stay gender-neutral while they fail to address the distinct obstacles and systemic barriers women innovators face. Studies by Joshi (2023) and the UNDP (2022) demonstrate that gender-responsive innovation ecosystems with flexible funding opportunities and women-led incubators alongside inclusive procurement practices are essential for scaling and sustaining women's enterprises. Innovations from women lose visibility and support and fail to reach their full potential when the gender perspective is missing. This review identifies a significant movement from charity-driven to enterprise-driven impact models within women's social ventures. The traditional women's community participation models primarily focused on welfare activities and volunteer work and depended heavily on grant funding and donor contributions. Women entrepreneurs have begun to implement business models which create social value and maintain economic sustainability. The shift to enterprise-led models enables businesses to expand sustainably while achieving their social goals. The evolution of women's entrepreneurial models can be observed through ventures such as Rangasutra which produces artisan apparel, Samhita which serves as a CSR impact platform, and SELCO Foundation's solar enterprises led by women. Research shows that the transformation process stems from market exposure together with growth in impact investing and government backing along with advancements in digital platforms. Despite progress, barriers persist. A combination of gender norms, lack of recognition, limited mobility and funding challenges limits the potential of many women entrepreneurs who come from marginalized communities and regions. The panel discussion emphasizes

the importance of collaborative efforts between governmental institutions and CSR organizations alongside financial institutions and civil society groups to create inclusive innovation networks. India's transition toward Atmanirbhar Bharat demands the integration of women-led social innovation into development planning to speed up gender equality and establish stronger people-focused solutions to social challenges.

Conclusion

Women who lead social enterprises in India are becoming influential drivers of inclusive innovation and transformative societal change. Analysis of literature, initiatives, and case examples shows how women contribute emotional intelligence alongside community insight and steadfast determination to innovate solutions for health, education, environmental challenges, and livelihood improvements. These women-led initiatives extend their impact beyond economic benefits to promote social fairness together with environmental sustainability and grassroots empowerment.

Even though the policy frameworks and skill development programs with CSR engagement have shown considerable advancement the ecosystem still shows inconsistent support and scale for women's innovations. To foster progress we need to implement ongoing interventions that target gender norms and access to finance and incubation while overcoming mobility challenges and decision-making underrepresentation. It is essential to transition from symbolic participation to comprehensive integration of women in innovation systems by implementing gender-sensitive funding models, exclusive incubators for women and policies that balance social impact with market returns. When women lead and participate in India's innovation economy they provide solutions that are locally relevant yet globally scalable. Social entrepreneurship empowerment of women represents more than gender equity advancement because it stands as an essential strategy for achieving sustainable and inclusive growth.

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