

Barefoot Women Entrepreneurs: Skill Development as a Key Driver of Women Entrepreneurship in India

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Abstract

Women entrepreneurship has emerged as an important pathway for inclusive economic growth, poverty reduction, and social transformation in India. At the grassroots level, barefoot women entrepreneurs operate small-scale, informal, and home-based enterprises despite limited access to formal education, institutional support, finance, and technology. Despite these constraints, they contribute significantly to household income generation, local employment creation, and community development. This study examines how skill development functions as a key driver of entrepreneurial participation and sustainability among barefoot women entrepreneurs in India. The research is primarily based on secondary data collected from academic literature, government reports, policy documents, institutional publications, and official program reports published between 2019 and 2025. To supplement secondary evidence, exploratory survey responses from 49 participants were also reviewed. A descriptive and analytical research design was employed to examine women entrepreneurship trends, compare selected state-level initiatives, identify structural barriers, and assess the contribution of skill development programs. The findings indicate that skill development strengthens entrepreneurial confidence, employability, income generation capacity, digital participation, and market engagement. However, its effectiveness remains uneven due to socio-cultural constraints, unpaid care responsibilities, weak market linkages, and digital exclusion. The study argues that skill development is most effective when embedded within a broader entrepreneurial ecosystem comprising financial access, institutional support, digital inclusion, market linkages, and social support. The paper contributes to the literature by offering an ecosystem-oriented interpretation of grassroots women's enterprise development in India.

Keywords: women entrepreneurship, skill development, barefoot entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial ecosystem, India

1.Introduction

Women entrepreneurship has become increasingly significant in India's development trajectory. It contributes to economic participation, employment generation, livelihood diversification, household welfare, and social inclusion. Across rural and semi-urban India, women are actively engaged in micro-enterprises involving tailoring, food processing, dairy, handicrafts, beauty services, retail trade, agricultural processing, and digital commerce. Many of these enterprises are informal, small in scale, and home-based.

The term *barefoot women entrepreneurs* refers to grassroots women who initiate and manage enterprises with limited formal education, low capital intensity, weak institutional access, and minimal technological support. These entrepreneurs often operate within highly constrained environments characterized by unpaid domestic labour, restricted mobility, social norms, weak market access, and financial exclusion. Despite these barriers, barefoot women entrepreneurs constitute an important yet under-recognised economic force.

Entrepreneurship, however, does not emerge through individual motivation alone. It depends upon the presence of an enabling entrepreneurial ecosystem that includes access to skills, finance, infrastructure, institutional support, digital resources, policy facilitation, and market opportunities. Among these dimensions, skill development occupies a foundational role. Skill acquisition enables women to identify opportunities, improve productivity, manage enterprises, adapt to market changes, and participate more effectively in economic activity.

In recent years, the Government of India and several state governments have introduced multiple programs aimed at improving women's economic participation through vocational training, entrepreneurship development, self-help group mobilization, digital inclusion, and incubation support. Yet the effectiveness of these interventions varies substantially across states and social contexts.

This article examines how skill development functions as a key driver of women entrepreneurship in India. It adopts a secondary-data approach and explores how skill development interacts with broader ecosystem conditions that influence entrepreneurial participation and sustainability.

2.Objectives

- To examine the role of skill development in promoting women entrepreneurship in India.
- To analyse selected state-level women entrepreneurship initiatives.
- To identify structural barriers affecting barefoot women entrepreneurs.
- To assess the relationship between skill development and entrepreneurial sustainability.
- To propose an ecosystem-oriented framework for strengthening grassroots women entrepreneurship.

3.Research Methodology

This study adopts a secondary-data based descriptive and analytical research design. The analysis draws on published material from 2019 to 2025.

Data Sources

The study uses data from the following sources:

- Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME)
- National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)
- NITI Aayog
- Government reports and policy documents
- Academic journal articles indexed in Google Scholar, Scopus, and institutional repositories
- State-level women entrepreneurship mission reports including WE Hub, Kudumbashree, Mission Shakti, and Jeevika

Analytical Approach

Analytical approach was used to map women entrepreneurship trends and program structures. Additionally comparative approach was employed to examine differences across states, identify recurring barriers, and interpret how ecosystem factors influence entrepreneurial outcomes.

Exploratory Survey Supplement

In addition to secondary sources, exploratory survey responses from 50 participants were reviewed to supplement the analysis. The survey was used only as supporting evidence to understand perceived barriers related to work–family pressures, financial stress, digital access, and household support. It was not used as the primary empirical basis of the study.

4.Literature Review

Existing scholarship suggests that skill development plays a central role in women entrepreneurship, but the literature remains fragmented across multiple themes.

Studies by Sulochana and Kumari (2025) indicate that government- and NGO-led skill development programs improve employability, earnings, and decision-making capacity among women. However, they also note that cultural barriers and social restrictions continue to limit outcomes.

Ajjarapu Alimelu Annapurna (2025) finds that education, work experience, managerial capability, and digital literacy positively influence women-owned enterprise performance. Similarly, Sharma and Kaur (2023) highlight the role of digital literacy, social media use, and digital payment adoption in expanding market reach and profitability.

Yuri Reina Marín et al. (2024) emphasise that soft skills, communication capability, and business planning strengthen entrepreneurial outcomes. Mehta and Verma (2022) argue that skill training is more effective when combined with mentorship and institutional support.

Although the literature provides valuable insights, three gaps remain visible. First, many studies examine finance, skill development, digital literacy, and empowerment as separate variables rather than as interconnected ecosystem elements. Second, relatively limited work specifically addresses barefoot women entrepreneurs operating under informal and resource-constrained conditions. Third, insufficient attention has been given to how skill development interacts with social support systems, household responsibilities, and institutional ecosystems.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting an ecosystem-oriented interpretation of skill development and women entrepreneurship.

5. Analysis

Women Entrepreneurship Trends in India

Women-owned enterprises have expanded steadily in India in recent years. Registrations under Udyam and Udyam Assist indicate growing formal recognition of women-owned micro-enterprises. Women-led businesses increasingly contribute to employment generation, local production systems, and household-level income diversification.

Comparative State-Level Initiatives

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of selected state-level women entrepreneurship initiatives and their observed institutional contributions.

State	Program	Major Support	Observed Contribution
Telangana	WE Hub	Incubation, mentorship, digital training, funding linkages	Strong ecosystem support for early-stage women entrepreneurs
Kerala	Kudumbashree	Collective enterprise, livelihood support, local networks	Strong grassroots participation and income generation
Odisha	Mission Shakti	Self-help group mobilisation, enterprise support	Expansion of community-based entrepreneurship
Bihar	Jeevika	Financial inclusion, institutional support, training	Improved rural women's enterprise participation
Andhra Pradesh	Rural skill hubs	Skill training, local enterprise support	Increased local livelihood diversification

The comparative evidence indicates that state-level institutional support plays an important role in shaping women's entrepreneurial participation. States such as Telangana and Kerala demonstrate stronger outcomes where skill development is integrated with mentoring, collective enterprise structures, digital support, and market linkages. The comparison suggests that training interventions are more effective when embedded within broader institutional ecosystems rather than implemented as isolated skill-building programs.

Role of Skill Development

The analysis indicates that skill development contributes to women entrepreneurship through five major pathways:

1. **Income generation:** vocational training creates self-employment opportunities.
2. **Confidence building:** entrepreneurial capability improves decision-making and self-belief.
3. **Digital inclusion:** digital skills enable access to e-commerce, mobile payments, and online marketing.
4. **Household welfare:** earnings contribute to education, nutrition, and family well-being.
5. **Local employment creation:** successful women entrepreneurs often generate work for nearby women.

Major Barriers

The study identifies five recurring constraints:

- unpaid care responsibilities;
- restricted financial access;
- digital exclusion;
- limited mobility and safety concerns;
- weak market linkages.

Ecosystem Factors Affecting Skill Development Outcomes

Table 2 summarises key ecosystem factors that influence the effectiveness of skill development outcomes among barefoot women entrepreneurs.

Ecosystem factor	Enabling role	Constraint when weak
Access to finance	Supports enterprise start-up, working capital, and scaling	Training does not translate into business creation
Institutional support	Provides mentoring, incubation, and business guidance	Women remain isolated after training completion
Digital access	Expands market reach, payments, and customer communication	Limited participation in digital commerce
Household support	Releases time and mobility for enterprise participation	Unpaid care work reduces entrepreneurial continuity
Market linkages	Connects production to sales and income generation	Women remain confined to local low-value markets

Table 2 shows that the effectiveness of skill development depends on the wider entrepreneurial environment in which women operate. Access to finance, institutional support, digital inclusion, household support, and market linkages together determine whether acquired skills translate into enterprise creation, income generation, and business continuity. Where these supporting conditions remain weak, training often produces limited entrepreneurial outcomes.

Exploratory Survey Insights

In addition to secondary sources, exploratory survey responses from 50 participants were reviewed to supplement the analysis. The survey indicates that women entrepreneurs face interrelated constraints including work–family role conflict, financial stress, limited digital access, and uneven household support. These findings complement the secondary evidence by showing that while skill development enhances entrepreneurial capability, its practical effectiveness depends on enabling ecosystem conditions such as institutional support, social support, and market access.

Table 3 presents exploratory survey insights from 50 participants and highlights selected barriers affecting entrepreneurial participation.

Survey insight	Observed implication
Work–family role conflict	Limits time availability and enterprise continuity
Financial stress	Restricts investment capacity and business expansion
Digital access constraints	Reduces participation in online markets and digital payments
Uneven household support	Affects mobility, decision-making, and sustained participation

The exploratory survey findings reinforce the secondary evidence by highlighting practical barriers experienced by women entrepreneurs. Responses indicate that work–family role conflict, financial stress, digital access constraints, and uneven household support affect time availability, mobility, investment capacity, and continuity of enterprise activity. These findings suggest that entrepreneurial capability is shaped not only by skill acquisition but also by social and household conditions that influence women’s ability to apply acquired skills in practice.

Interpretation of Secondary Evidence

The comparative evidence suggests that states where skill development is embedded within broader institutional ecosystems demonstrate stronger entrepreneurial outcomes. Telangana and Kerala illustrate this pattern particularly clearly. In both cases, training is complemented by mentoring, institutional facilitation, collective networks, and market support. By contrast, where skill training remains isolated from finance, market access, and digital support, entrepreneurial outcomes tend to remain limited.

A notable finding is that the effectiveness of skill development is mediated by social conditions rather than determined by training alone. Women who face unpaid domestic work, mobility constraints, and digital exclusion often experience reduced ability to convert acquired skills into sustained enterprise activity. This indicates that the success of women entrepreneurship policy depends not only on training delivery but also on the enabling environment in which women operate.

6. Findings

The findings indicate that skill development functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition for women's entrepreneurial participation. While training enhances technical capability, confidence, and employability, its impact is strongly shaped by the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The comparative evidence shows that states with stronger institutional arrangements—particularly mentoring systems, collective enterprise models, digital inclusion support, and market facilitation—tend to demonstrate more favourable outcomes. Telangana's WE Hub illustrates how incubation, mentoring, and market connectivity can strengthen entrepreneurial entry and early-stage sustainability. Kerala's Kudumbashree similarly demonstrates the value of collective institutional support and community-based enterprise networks.

These findings are consistent with ecosystem-based entrepreneurship theory, which argues that entrepreneurial capability is produced through interaction between individual skills and surrounding institutional conditions. For barefoot women entrepreneurs, skill development becomes most effective when accompanied by financial access, household support, mobility, social acceptance, and market opportunities.

A major implication of the study is that policy design should move beyond training-centric models. Skill development programs that measure success only through enrolment or completion rates may fail to capture whether women are able to convert training into sustained enterprise participation. Outcome-oriented approaches should therefore incorporate enterprise survival, income stability, market access, and digital participation as evaluation indicators.

The study also highlights the importance of unpaid care work as a structural constraint. Even when women acquire entrepreneurial skills, domestic responsibilities often limit time availability, mobility, and business continuity. This suggests that women entrepreneurship policy should integrate childcare support, community-based support systems, and flexible training delivery models.

7. Contribution of the Study

This article makes three contributions to the literature on women entrepreneurship.

First, it advances an ecosystem-oriented interpretation of skill development by showing that entrepreneurial outcomes depend not only on training but also on institutional, financial, social, and market conditions.

Second, it extends the discussion of women entrepreneurship by focusing specifically on barefoot women entrepreneurs operating in informal and resource-constrained contexts.

Third, it provides a comparative state-level perspective that identifies how regional institutional arrangements influence entrepreneurial participation and sustainability.

8. Policy Implications

Based on the analysis, the study proposes the following policy directions:

- Strengthen district-level women entrepreneurship support centres integrating training, mentoring, and market facilitation;
- Expand collateral-free finance and micro-credit access linked to enterprise development pathways;
- Improve digital capability through targeted training in digital payments, online marketing, and e-commerce participation;
- Integrate childcare support and flexible delivery models into entrepreneurship training;
- Strengthen market linkage mechanisms through procurement platforms, producer collectives, and state-supported branding initiatives.

9. Conclusion

Barefoot women entrepreneurs represent one of India's most significant yet under-recognised drivers of inclusive development. Across rural and semi-urban India, women are building enterprises that strengthen household resilience, local employment generation, and community-level economic participation.

This study demonstrates that skill development serves as a key driver of entrepreneurial participation, confidence, productivity, and sustainability. However, the analysis also shows that training alone is insufficient. The effectiveness of skill development depends upon broader ecosystem conditions including financial access, institutional support, digital inclusion, social support, and market linkages.

For policy makers, the central implication is clear: strengthening women entrepreneurship requires moving beyond isolated training interventions toward integrated ecosystem-building strategies. Such an approach can substantially improve the long-term sustainability and developmental impact of grassroots women-led enterprises in India.

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