

Women Entrepreneur: Indian Rural Women Entrepreneurs Their Journey so Far and Challenges Ahead

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Dr.G.Yoganandham

*Associate Professor, Department of Economics
Thiruvalluvar University, Serkkadu, Vellore*

Ms.Babitha Kunnath

*Ph.D. Research Scholar (Part – Time), Department of Economics
Presidency College, Chennai*

Abstract

According to the 2011 census 70% of Indian population lives in rural areas. Most of the population is involved in the agriculture. In actual terms more than 90% of women in rural areas are employed in agriculture. The education level (high school education) among women in rural areas is also very less. Given all these adverse conditions and challenges, women in rural areas are standing up for themselves and breaking out from their comfort zone to make meaningful contribution towards their local community and society as a whole. Entrepreneurship has always been considered as an urban term, but in the recent past we have been observing that more and more ideas coming from rural areas to address their local problems or building business models that suit their environment. This paper explores about some of the success stories of Entrepreneurship of rural women in India and also highlight on the challenges facing rural women in pursuing entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurs, Rural Women, technology, women entrepreneurship challenges

Introduction

From time immemorial entrepreneurship was considered to be a man's pride and job. Women were never permitted to even think of venturing into any business. Their role especially in rural areas was to cater to the needs of the households and taking care of children. They were suppressed and were never allowed to step out of their secured homes. They were denied their basic right of education or taking up any employment. Indian Villages consisted of a male predominant society where women never had any say in the household's decision making. She was expected to oblige to the decisions made by male elders of the family. But times changed, and so was the role of women in rural areas. The right to education witnessed many girls getting enrolled in schools.

A period of evolution of women thinking gave her the strength to step out of their home, their comfort zones to take up ventures towards financial freedom. Women are gifted with multitasking skills. Precise decision making helps her to face the challenges of today's business world. Her hard work and perseverance to attain her goals towards reaching the heights, leads her way as successful entrepreneurs

Becoming an entrepreneur or even starting one was a real time herculean task for any women. The challenges she confronts starts with managing home, handling society's judgments and biasedness, financial constraints, lack of education, hardship of commuting or getting connected with market etc., amidst these challenges and all resistance, she as part of progressive evolution, transforms herself into the fire of challenges, marching forward and venturing into new business as entrepreneurs. Rural women are no less to any urban women in their success stories or challenges faced; they are in par with their urban counter parts in this historic paradigm shift towards becoming entrepreneurs.

Literature Review

Saikia et al. (1983) reported that the average working hours engaged under reference in the agricultural activities as per the categories of various age groups were analyzed and have found that women contributed in sorting of seeds, harvesting and also were much involved in livestock rearings and poultry farming.

Srivastava (1988) has mentioned that lack of education was the greatest hurdle that deprived rural women from getting the fruits of modern technology. This stood as barrier from adapting to latest technology for increased productivity and more income.

Juneja & Sobti (2013) in their study had identified that women in urban areas had their odds better than the women in rural areas with reference to opportunities and employability. In spite of the truth that urban women are blessed with better educational background, better economic feasibilities and every other resource, the rural women seems to have performed better overriding all these hurdles of lacking and in capabilities like lack of education, shortage of money, scarcity of resources and difficulty in adapting to technology.

Medha (1987) defined a woman entrepreneur is a person who is an enterprising individual with an eye for opportunities and an uncanny vision, commercial acumen, with tremendous perseverance and above all a person who is willing to take risks with the unknown because of the adventurous spirit she possesses.

Singh (2008) made a cause and effect analysis behind entry of women in entrepreneurship. He came out with certain characteristic traits pertaining to the business associated with Indian women in general and also obstacles and challenges faced. He has also advocated for high end support from various women in ministerial cabinet and other government agencies to help in easing of the business for women in India.

Grise (1990) has made special mention on the concern and challenges encountered by women entrepreneurs especially from the period of generation of idea of starting a business. He has also highlighted on the problems relating to lack of confidence, lack of support from financial institutions, and various supply and market chains. Finally, he has also mentioned problems pertaining to issues raised from family and society as well for any women entrepreneur.

Rao (2002) has identified certain disparities with relation to women entrepreneurs. He has broadly categorized the issues into personal, social and economic categories. At personal front, Problems relating to inexperience and lack of business exposure and very emotional and conservative attitude towards handling of risk was identified. Male domination and biasedness of society was also highlighted in socio economic problems. Economic issues of difficulties in obtaining of loans from various financial institutions were also highlighted.

Vijayakumar and Jayachitra (2013) reported that failure with reference to women entrepreneurs were mostly because of their difficulties in arranging the sufficient funds because finance is the most important life line of any business. Adding to the apathy was the dominance of male counterparts which made it very difficult for women to achieve their desired goals

Objectives

The objective of the study is as follows

- Analyze the existing Socio-economic factors in rural India
- The need for rural women to take up entrepreneurship
- Adopting new technology and business models to support for rural women towards becoming entrepreneurs
- To discuss the challenges faced by rural women in becoming entrepreneurs

Methodology

This paper mainly based on secondary data. Data mainly collected from two sources.

- Central, State and local government publication
- Information from magazines, government websites, books and reports

Analysis and Discussion

Socio-Economic Factors in Rural India

The Indian rural area in terms of geographic regions is vastly different from one another. Similarly the social factors and standard of living is also diverse. Although there have been several improvements in the recent past, the development of rural areas in comparison with other countries is slow. The government also has been constantly rolling out several programme and policies targeting the rural areas, the effectiveness and reach of the efforts has been difficult to ascertain or measure.

With this as the background, the following is the analysis with respect to recent pressures from globalization and urban India on socio- economic factor in rural India.

Agriculture employs more than 40% of the population in rural India. Agriculture employs men and women with inconsistent labor wages. Moreover, due to the exposure of rural population to urban and global developments, there is also migration that is happening from rural to urban. The result of this is non-availability of labor for agriculture and also decline in production.

In this scenario, lot of thrust and focus is required from government and corporate to support the rural areas, by bringing in better infrastructure, connectivity and mobility which will help rural population to increase their economic status which is an impetus to development of rural areas. If this thrust is not done quickly rural area development which serves as a backbone of overall development country like India, due to the dependency on output from agriculture.

Previously, rural women compared to men, were not considered as part of the labor force but the fact is that they are becoming more and more important towards supporting the labor force. There are still gender bias and related social issues when employing women for labor in rural areas.

Entrepreneurship as a Key to Economic Independence

To break out of the status quo, rural women are taking into entrepreneurship by utilizing their limited skills and their knowledge of the local needs and demands. Rural Indian women although a little late, are joining the entrepreneurship bandwagon like their counterparts in many other countries. The determining factors to taking this route are various parameters including economic pressure, labor unavailability, market demand and social acceptance of entrepreneurship.

As per the current statistics there are only around 7% rural women entrepreneurs among the total women entrepreneurs in India. But this number is set to rise considerably, owing to the success of the predecessors and stimulus from government policies and NGO activities.

Another key data to be observed is that the areas chosen by the rural women entrepreneurs. Since they are skilled in agriculture, the default choice has been agriculture, but there have also been other areas that support various fields of agriculture including training about crops, organic farming, renting of tools etc.

Education and training by government bodies and banks play a key role in bringing out these new age entrepreneurs to the fore. The below are some of the programs that encourage the rural women in educating and supporting their own business.

Training & Skill Development

1. Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana or DAY is a Government of India scheme for the helping the poor by providing skill training.
2. Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (English: Universal Rural Employment Programme) launched by the Government of India to attain the objective of providing gainful employment for the rural poor
3. National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) is a poverty alleviation project implemented by Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India. This scheme is focused on promoting self-employment and organization of rural poor. The basic idea behind this programme is to organize the poor into SHG (Self Help Groups) groups and make them capable for self-employment.

Finance& Loans

Stree Shakti Package for Women Entrepreneurs: This scheme is offered by most of the State Bank of India branches to women who have 50% share in the ownership of a firm or business and have taken part in the state agencies run Entrepreneurship Development Programmes (EDP).

Bharatiya Mahila Bank Business Loan: To support upcoming women entrepreneurs for new ventures in the fields of the micro-loans, and SME loans, retail sector loans etc.

The effect of these can be clearly seen and provide the following benefits to the rural women

Technology to Support Rural Women Entrepreneurship

One of the important tools to provide an impetus for the entrepreneurship of rural women, we can leverage information technology and communication. Currently 99.25% of the villages in India have access to electricity. More than 90% have access to mobile/smart phones. This can be used as an opportunity to support the rural women in various ways.

The following are some areas through which technology can be used to support women entrepreneurs in the rural areas

Digital Content: Internet has plethora of information that can support the rural population. Smart phones gives a handy access to this information through search engines. Internet Saathi is an initiative by Google to provide training to rural population

- Banking: Although the number of banks in the rural area has increased drastically, the smartphone apps that support banking, loan information and government subsidy access will be a convenient to the rural women population
- Communication: As in any field, communication is the key to having up to date information. Digital training programme, new Government policies and latest information in their field of business will be very helpful. To achieve this, the existing data and information has to be structured and delivered to the mostly illiterate rural population.

- Transaction & Customer Access: In order to carry on their business activities, there is a need to have close relation with the customer and also have platforms like UPI to perform money transactions. There is a need to simplify this so as the rural women have easier access to the transactions which makes the process more transparent

Challenges Facing Rural Women Entrepreneurs

In the recent past there has been multi-level and multi-directional push towards rural development, in particular the entrepreneurial area. The outlook is very optimistic, but there is still lack of synchronized effort and focus to encourage the rural women towards pursuing their own business or establish their enterprise.

The following summarizes the factors that are supporting the entrepreneurship in rural women and also factors that oppose the development

Factors Supporting

- Specialized government and corporate programs tailored to encourage entrepreneur
- NGOs and other support groups reaching the grassroots to provide able training support for the rural women
- Digitalization and access to technology has provided new vistas for the rural women

Factors Opposing

- Finance, in specific access to loans has been a pain area for rural women for establishing their own businesses
- Social issues/restrictions and gender bias is another key area which affect many rural women to take up entrepreneurship
- Illiteracy in rural areas has always been a bane for our country, since this hampers access to many key information and skill development
- Government and corporate programs not reaching the targeted people due to deficiency in process

Conclusion

Rural women's journey from a home maker to a successful entrepreneur is full of determination and perseverance. The ornament of success she adorns today is the fruit of hardship and challenges faced in her yesteryears. Paths might have been tough to have walked but it has shown a light of hope for any more to come. Understanding the challenges and appreciating her success, agencies involved in policy making, financial institutions and other stakeholders should come together with plans and policies in building this business model for rural women. Educating & Training with latest technology, accommodate her in the developments, ease out financial constraints and acknowledge her as a major force towards growth and nation building. If so little of rural women can accomplish so much, consider facilitating her with all necessary tools, education, resources, finance and training, sky too shall not be her limit. Rural women have proved that "if there is a will there is a way" and further going a little beyond this quote they have also proved that "if there is no way, they create the way".

Scope of Further Study

Rural development in India is a must to sustain the growing population and growing demand from rural areas. The below are some of the key areas which require further study

- Analysis in measuring quantitative and qualitative reach of government and government

supported programme. This will give an idea about affectivity of the programme and the fine tuning required to reach it to more rural population

- Information gathering with respect to ideas, solutions and concepts which address local issues
- Impact of existing social restrictions in the rural areas on rural women pursuing entrepreneurship

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