

Chapter 4

Boosting Gender Integration in Social Enterprises as a Solution to Poverty: Cases in India

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ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that economies and societies will prosper if women are economically engaged. However, little attention has been paid as to how social enterprises, driven by business considerations, can pursue social transformation (specifically, gender issues). A study is thus needed to study social businesses and its capacity to facilitate economic empowerment of women thus making markets more inclusive. Such an affirmation, however, poses three questions: Is capitalizing on the gender integration trend going to be enough to advance the cause of women? Is the ‘social change industry’ (social enterprise sector) giving gender equity the attention and investment it deserves? Could it become a catalyst for gender integration in their value chain? The study employs a persuasive case study approach highlighting five case studies in India that are social enterprises that are employing women across India and explores the intersectionality between gender, empowerment, and employment in the context of social entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

Women and girls are more likely to experience poverty, violence, and abuse globally. They are less likely to be educated, less likely to own a business, and more likely to be undernourished. To achieve, UN’s sustainable development goal 5, which says, “*achieve gender equality and empower all women*

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and girls,” social enterprise seems to be a fertile ground. Social enterprise has so far made a modest but substantial contribution to the worldwide empowerment of women. The present study demonstrates that it has the potential to have a considerably bigger influence. It is well known that the global economy is neither equitable, nor, sustainable, nor inclusive. With a focus on people rather than profits, social enterprise challenges this paradigm. This study aims to narrate how social entrepreneurship addresses gender inequality and women’s empowerment.

Salovaraa and Wade (2018) assert that the social enterprise sector is ready to understand the multiplier effects of women’s leadership. It involves women hiring women, as well as focusing on women beneficiaries, and to transmit their gains to female family members. That’s especially true in India, where nearly 25% of social enterprises are led by women. Research shows that ventures with women on their founding teams have reported positive revenues (Roberts & Peters, 2014). In other words, social entrepreneurship has the capacity to empower women by creating environments conducive to addressing inequalities. (Pueyo and Maestre, 2019).

For social enterprises that seek financial viability aligned to social impact goals, a female customer and a female employee base represent an enormous untapped opportunity to optimize for both. Having women in leadership positions in this industry means not only shattering the glass ceiling, but also creating a wealth of opportunities for other women. It also means introducing goods and services that benefit customers, the stakeholders who make them, and the communities in which they are used. Silverstein and Sayre (2009), asserted that women represent today’s most powerful consumer group— making up a market whose growth potential is greater than that of China and India’s combined.

Studies have also found that women-led enterprises tend to employ women. Supporting women-led social enterprises will lead to increased employment opportunities for women and, eventually, a higher labour force participation rate (Seno-Alday & Bourne, 2017). More than 350 million women (Richardson, 2017) are living on less than 2 USD a day, and have lower education levels, worse health outcomes, fewer economic opportunities, and higher exposure to violence than men (World Bank 2015). Thus, there needs to be a greater focus on the nexus of gender and investment within the social enterprise sector, but, this calls for a greater financial, technological, and managerial resources to ensure the growth and continuity of these businesses.

With respect to India, social change in women’s status is crucial for it to continue its progress; empowering them economically can play a significant role in realizing women’s rights and narrowing the gender gap. An example of an ecosystem that is playing an increasingly important role in economically empowering women is the social enterprise space.

BACKGROUND

Given the above, across social enterprises sector, there are significant opportunities for market expansion through focus on female consumers/customers. However, little attention has been paid as to how social enterprises, are driven by business considerations as well as pursue social transformation (specifically, gender issues). For instance, businesses have the ability to increase productivity by investing in women’s capacity building and improving the engagement of female employees; opportunities for market expansion through emphasis on female consumers galore; underrepresentation of women at senior management and board level, slows down the progress in efforts to integrate gender. Women would and have benefited along four dimensions in this space: as leaders, as employees, as value chain participants, and as customers.

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