

Fostering Sustainability through Women's Entrepreneurship

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Abstract- This research paper highlights the pivotal role of women's entrepreneurship in promoting sustainability through India's handicraft sector. With over 70% of the workforce in this sector comprising women, their involvement holds immense potential for ecological innovation and cultural preservation. Despite facing significant challenges such as limited access to finance, markets, training, and institutional support—particularly within a male-dominated society—women artisans continue to drive eco-friendly practices by leveraging traditional skills and sustainable materials.

Based on secondary data, the study examines the socio-economic and environmental impact of women's participation in handicrafts and evaluates government initiatives such as the National Handicrafts Development Programme (NHDP), PM VISHWA, and others aimed at empowering them. Key challenges and case studies underscore the need for targeted interventions in training, financial inclusion, digital access, and policy reform.

The study concludes that fostering women's entrepreneurship in the handicraft sector not only promotes sustainability and gender equity but also strengthens rural economies, supports community development, and enhances self-reliance among women.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of global environmental challenges and economic uncertainties, the role of women entrepreneurs in promoting sustainability is becoming increasingly critical. Women often have a unique "multiplier effect," influencing their families, communities, and workplaces in transformative ways. From a young age, girls are often taught to make do with minimal resources. This upbringing, along with a deep-rooted sense of responsibility and heightened sensitivity to environmental concerns, positions women as central players in advancing sustainable development.

The handicraft sector in India, the second-largest income-generating industry after agriculture, exemplifies this potential. Despite its rapid growth, the sector remains largely informal, with over 70%

of the workforce comprising women. These artisans, deeply connected to traditional practices, often face barriers such as limited market access, education, and infrastructure. Nevertheless, they have the power to drive eco-conscious innovation by using sustainable materials and adopting environmentally friendly techniques.

Handicrafts are more than just a source of livelihood—they preserve cultural heritage. In states like Kerala, where eco-friendly crafts made from bamboo, coconut shells, palm leaves, and clay are common, women artisans are blending traditional craftsmanship with sustainable methods. With proper training and support, they can create intricate, vibrant products that meet the growing global demand for eco-friendly goods—a necessity in today's world.

Various government schemes aim to support the development of India's handicraft sector by preserving traditions while promoting sustainable practices. Programs like the National Handicraft Development Programme (NHDP) provide financial assistance for setting up units, upgrading tools, and enhancing marketing efforts. The Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana supports artisans from disadvantaged communities with infrastructure, skill enhancement, and marketing aid. The Pradhan Mantri Vishwakarma Scheme (PM VISHWA) focuses on capacity-building for artisans across 18 traditional crafts through training, toolkits, and certification. The Mega Cluster Scheme encourages artisan collaboration and competitiveness, while the Market Support and Services Scheme (MSSS) connects artisans with buyers through exhibitions. Additionally, the National Award for Master Craftsmen recognizes exceptional craftsmanship.

This research explores how such initiatives can empower women, bolster rural economies, and promote ecological sustainability through responsible entrepreneurship.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine the role of sustainable handicraft production in empowering women, especially in rural communities.
- To analyze the social, economic, and environmental impacts of women's participation in the handicraft sector.
- To identify key challenges faced by women artisans in adopting sustainable handicraft practices.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of government schemes and initiatives supporting women in the handicraft industry.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study relies on secondary data sources, focusing on India. It investigates how sustainable handicraft production can empower women, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Data is drawn from credible sources, including academic journals, government reports, policy documents, and websites such as those of the Ministry of Textiles, the Ministry of Women and Child Development, and various NGOs.

A descriptive and qualitative approach was adopted to understand the dynamics of the Indian handicraft industry, its socio-economic impact, and its role in women's empowerment. The study also evaluates existing government schemes and skill development programs for women artisans engaged in sustainable craft practices. Case studies were also reviewed. Since no primary data was collected, the research synthesizes secondary data to provide insights into the potential of sustainable handicrafts to empower women across India.

Key Issues and Challenges

- **Limited Access to Resources and Skill Development**
Many women artisans struggle to access financial resources such as loans, subsidies, or grants, limiting their ability to invest in quality materials or scale their businesses. The majority are illiterate, which makes trust and information access challenging. Additionally, limited access to training programs restricts their ability to produce high-quality handicrafts.

- **Market and Supply Chain Constraints**
Women artisans often face difficulties competing with mass-produced goods and struggle with marketing, especially through digital platforms. Low-cost imports from other countries pose additional challenges. Dependence on middlemen reduces their profit margins and limits direct access to markets. Inconsistent access to raw materials also disrupts production.
- **Cultural, Social, and Time Barriers**
Traditional gender roles and societal expectations limit women's participation in entrepreneurship. Many come from marginalized communities where the burden of childcare and household responsibilities rests solely on women. This dual responsibility reduces their time and energy for scaling their businesses or engaging in full-time work.
- **Lack of Recognition and Institutional Support**
Despite their contributions, women in the handicraft sector often receive little recognition. A lack of awareness about government schemes, exploitation, insufficient outreach by NGOs, and inadequate institutional support further hinder their growth.
- **Technological and Environmental Challenges**
Limited access to digital tools and the internet hampers innovation and market outreach. Additionally, climate change and the rising demand for eco-friendly products challenge artisans who lack the resources or knowledge to adapt. Many are also unaware of current trends and sustainable techniques.

Case Studies

- **Dr. Nidhi and Garima (2022)**
This study analyzed how demographic traits and entrepreneurial skills impact attitudes toward entrepreneurship. It found that age, gender, occupation, and marital status significantly influence entrepreneurial behavior. The COVID-19 pandemic increased demand for alternative livelihoods, and the study recommended training programs to boost confidence and develop job creators.
- **Pradeep Pagaria and Sonali Sharma (2020)**
This research examined the handicraft value chain in Barmer, Rajasthan. Key challenges included low wages, outdated designs, poor infrastructure, and inconsistent quality. Many

artisans were leaving the sector due to unsustainable earnings. The study emphasized the need for awareness, skill development, and value chain improvements.

- Swati Shastri, Shruti Shastri, and Abhishek Pareek (2019)
Focused on women entrepreneurs in Jaipur, the study highlighted that creativity, self-identity, and a desire to contribute to society motivated women. However, societal norms and lack of recognition posed barriers. The researchers recommended changing societal attitudes to better support women entrepreneurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's empowerment is a critical issue in the 21st century, with women increasingly stepping beyond traditional roles to play vital roles in society and the economy. In business, women's contributions are essential to inclusive growth and sustainable development.

In the handicraft industry, empowering women supports equitable economic growth, allowing them to break free from traditional roles and take part in financial decision-making, improving their confidence and social standing. Women engaged in micro, small, and medium enterprises challenge stereotypes, foster gender equality, and promote sustainability. Their success drives economic growth not only for their families but also for the nation, while preserving cultural heritage and protecting the environment.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhance Training and Skill Development
Implement focused programs to develop women's entrepreneurial and technical skills, particularly in sustainability, innovation, and the use of eco-friendly materials.
- Improve Financial Access
Introduce dedicated financial schemes, such as microloans and grants, to help women scale their businesses and invest in sustainable production.
- Promote Digital Inclusion and Market Access
Provide training in e-commerce, digital marketing, and sustainable branding to expand market reach and enable competition in global markets.

- Strengthen Policy and Institutional Support
Develop inclusive policies offering incentives like tax benefits, simplified registration, and dedicated platforms for women-led sustainable businesses.
- Foster Collaboration and Sustainability Incentives
Build networks for knowledge sharing and provide incentives for adopting eco-friendly practices such as recycling, waste reduction, and the use of renewable resources.

CONCLUSION

Empowering women through entrepreneurship in the handicraft sector is a powerful strategy for achieving sustainability and gender equality. By providing women with training, financial support, and market access, we can unlock their potential to contribute significantly to economic and social progress.

However, addressing barriers such as limited capital, market challenges, and social norms is essential to fully realizing this potential. With the right policies, institutional support, and a focus on sustainable practices, women artisans can become key drivers of inclusive development. Promoting women's entrepreneurship in handicrafts is not just an economic strategy—it is a vital step toward achieving social equity, environmental sustainability, and true economic empowerment.