

Empowerment of Women through Entrepreneurship: A Study in Birbhum, West Bengal

Dr. Sharmistha Bhattacharjee¹

Abstract

Empowerment is about people having expanded choices and a much greater level of involvement and control in all parts of their family and community life. Women in rural India participate in a variety of economic activities, to empower themselves but their potential is still underutilized. The growths of enterprises have been a prominent feature of small business in India. To examine the participation of rural women in rural industries, empirical studies become imperative. Withstanding all social and cultural suppressions, a rural woman in India shares abundant responsibilities and performs a wide spectrum of duties in running the family, maintaining the household, attending farm labor, tending domestic animals and extending a helping hand in rural artisanship and handicraft. Rural handicraft has empowered women folk and encouraged them to enter the world of entrepreneurship. It has facilitated ranges of economic and social benefits. Entrepreneurship provides an income-generating activity which has multiple advantages for women, since this can be done at home, a woman gets a fearer deal from the economy. Here the women combine the work with her other duties .She can control her timing rather than having to be at some other persons. She controls her own earnings, the harder she works, more she earns. She is ensured of a year-round income. She learns to deal with people outside her home/village/community and develops her own personality and self-confidence. This article discusses about the women in the village of Birbhum West Bengal, India who are engaged in entrepreneurial work in marketing katha work made by the rural women or themselves.

Key Notes: empowerment, entrepreneur, business, informal organizations

1 Introduction

Entrepreneurship plays an important role in the economic development of each and every country. Researchers from different disciplines studied entrepreneurship under their own premises. They illustrated on various factors like economical, social, cultural, psychological, etc. (Gartner, 1985; Bird, 1988; Greenberger & Sexton, 1988; Herron & Sapienza, 1992; Learned, 1992; Boyd & Vozikis, 1994; Krueger & Brazeal, 1994). Women's entrepreneurship makes a significant contribution to economic and social development and is a major force for innovation and job creation.

However, it is only relatively recently that awareness emerged that women's entrepreneurship is a unique subset of entrepreneurship, deserving of dedicated focus in scholarly research. Given this late start there is only a relatively small and fragmented base of research on women's entrepreneurship. In developing countries, people take loans from banks or other financiers to run their business.

¹ Assistant Professor, Jaypee Institute of Information Technology, Noida, India

But if they fail to do this, the authority finds it difficult to get back the money, hindering the entrepreneurial as well as economic development. Therefore, it is an extremely important task to identify the entrepreneur who has real potential to pursue the business in the long run. Most of the studies have pointed out that women in this sector find it difficult to market the products and take the help of the male members of the family.

This paper discusses the initiative of women made in rural Birbhum, West Bengal to empower them by making and marketing of popular handicraft Kantha (type of embroidery popular in West Bengal) work.. Kantha is the most popular form of embroidery practiced by rural women. The embroidered cloth has many uses including women's shawls and covers for mirrors, boxes, and pillows. In the best examples, the entire cloth is covered with running stitches, employing beautiful motifs of flowers, animal's birds and geometrical shapes, as well as themes from everyday activities. The stitching on the cloth gives it a slight wrinkled, wavy effect. Contemporary Kantha is applied to a wider range of garments such as sarees, dupatta, shirts for men and women, bedding and other furnishing fabrics, mostly using cotton and silk.

2. Nature of Work

2.1 Entrepreneurs Role

Most of the women studied are entrepreneurs and engaged in this work since last twenty five years. The women who had initiated such business interest are mainly helped by their male counterparts, but in certain cases it found in the villages in Birbhum women are chief holders of the business. The women in this venture have learnt the same from their in laws or neighbours. Learning of the art encouraged the women folk to start with the business. The women pursuing such a venture have a good sense of design. They design the embroidery work themselves and establish a contract with women in neighboring villages to perform the work.. Women engaged in such business are well aware about the networks from where they are get their work done and they do the same by delegating the work to women folk of the nearby villages. They even perform the work themselves.

The delegacy of work to the women folk of nearby villages is to establish a contract in piece wage system. . The monetary remuneration is paid as per the pieces handed over. The process of giving the work to the women is a continuous process as per the need of the business. The time taken in completion of the work depend on the type of work assigned to the women big items such as sarees, bed covers and shawls take a year time whereas, kurta's shirts small decorative covers get over in a six month time. If the work does not match to entrepreneur's expectations stitched work is torn off completely and given to a person who will do the work as per the instructions and match the expectations. Money is deducted if such a case arises.

They are finally marketed by the women in nearby metropolitan cities, districts and towns. With time and practice the work becomes adorable. They commute to the metropolitan cities and nearby towns and sell their products. They also participate in fairs and *melas* to exhibit their products to promote their business.

The entrepreneurial work is a full time job for the women. They are even found to take loan from the banks and cooperatives to initiate and run the business. In most of the cases they are able to pay off the loan. There are certain cases were paying becomes difficult since they are unable to get the money from the customers.

They generally hire and shop in the cities of use their friends and relatives place to continue with the venture. In the venture entered upon, the monthly cost is incurred either by direct payment by the customer or in installment made by the buyer. With time, a relation grows between the entrepreneur and the customer which further facilitates the entrepreneur to grow her business.

The entrepreneurs manage the bank accounts themselves sometimes they take the help of their spouses in case the women folk is a widow they take help from the maternal house male counterparts. It is found that they have individual account as well as joint accounts. There is also usage of ATM facilities, debit cards and net banking by these entrepreneurs. This usage gives them a deep sense of confidence and empowerment. The women feel empowered but do not wish to share the same venture with other women folk since there is a feeling of competition in the village. Number of times village politics also affect the business since women who are delegated the work do not submit in the time assigned to them. This encourages conflicts and disparities.

Women's work is valued but is not acknowledged since the women in this sector have to manage both the household and the business. If the entrepreneur is the sole earner sometimes they fail to strike a balance between the household chores and business commitments. Women who are not sole earners use the business as more of a pastime and challenge to occupy them.

These women make their own decisions and are in control of the enterprise. Once they are free from their household chores they want to utilize their skills and have some worthwhile purpose in their lives. The women have responsibility rather than control to serve their customers and supervise their employees who takes work from them.

2.2 Customer and Entrepreneur Relationship

The entrepreneur develops a deep sense of bonding with the customer over time. They have about five to six customers in a month. There are also customers who buy the products from them and sell them outside the state. The peak time for sale is generally the festival time or the *melas* in Birbhum and other neighboring areas in West Bengal during winters. The customers come as tourist or there are local people who wish to enjoy the ethnic beauty. The customer primarily buys ethnic Kantha saree or men's wear. Some customers also go for pillow or decorative covers for gift purposes or personal use. They also take suggestions for the customers to upgrade the type of work performed.

2.3 Difficulties faced by Entrepreneurs

There is no support from the government. One can find government shops also selling these products. The products in these shops are also provided by these entrepreneurs but directed they do not have any link to the government set up. Commuting and getting money from the customers are major problems faced by the entrepreneurs. Cases are found where the routinized customers do not make payment over six months.

Summary and Conclusion

Despite, of various difficulties women use this opportunity to establish a network and make contacts to enhance their social status. The overall work performed by them to make the product or to delegate the same to women folk gives them a sense of empowerment.

They are able to enhance their skills and develop the art by sharing and marketing. Even though commuting becomes a problem as customers are not always available locally. These women use this opportunity as outing and contributing to the family structure economically and empower themselves by acquiring a status of an earning member.

References

- Anne de Bruin, (2007) "Women and Entrepreneurship: Contemporary Classics", Women In Management Review, Vol. 22 Issue: 4, pp.337 – 339
- Spinder Dhaliwal, (2000) "Entrepreneurship – a learning process: the experiences of Asian female entrepreneurs and women in business", Education + Training, Vol. 42 Issue: 8, pp.445 - 453