Women Empowerment Through Self-Reliance: An Impact Assessment of Self-Help Groups of Women Artisans Engaged in Crochet Craft

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Abstract. This research investigates how Self-Help Groups (SHGs) empower women artisans through self-reliance, and was conducted for a project by Mon Ami Foundation (MAF) on women artisans engaged in crochet craft.

Driven by market losses, dwindling skills, and the challenge of adapting to new markets, a significant number of artisans have been forced to migrate to urban centers in search of low-skilled jobs in the industry The purpose of the study is to assess that how the participation of women artisans in SHGs influences economic independence, decision-making power, and social status.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys of women artisans in Mon Ami. The survey instrument was designed methodologically in Hindi language to fetch complete and real essence from the women artisans followed by in depth interviews and focus group discussions.

The results highlight that women artisans have significantly improved their ability in income generation, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial skills. In addition, the study also emphasizes enhanced self-confidence and increased participation in household and community decision-making processes of artisans. However, challenges such as market access and skill diversification persist. The research concludes that SHGs serve as effective platforms for promoting women's empowerment through crochet craft, while also identifying areas for further support and policy intervention to sustain and expand these positive outcomes. The study has identified a range of best practices that can enhance skills training and transform vocational programs, ultimately enabling a crucial demographic group aged 18 to 49. The impact extends beyond individual empowerment, contributing to broader community development and social equality.

Keywords: Self Help Groups (SHGs Women Empowerment, SDG 5

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1. Introduction

India's vision for Atma Nirbhar Bharat' (self-reliant India) cannot be achieved leaving behind the 50% of India's population i.e.women , thus Women's empowerment is a critical component of India's vision. The Indian development policies are being designed to leverage the demographic dividend and reskill and upskill India's young population, especially the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (NPSDE) which aims to foster innovation and boost economic growth (Shaikh & Ganesh, 2024). Though the policy gives special attention to the marginalised section , especially the women it still falls short of fulfilling its purpose. The reasons being the age – old social and gender biases prevalent in the Indian society. Thus , the measures undertaken must be tailor- made to address this gap and efforts should be directed towards women empowerment thus contributing to India's ultimate mission of achieving Atma Nirbhar Bharat. The measures related to women's self- reliance and access to financial services , (Arshad, 2023; Pal et al., 2021), leading to their decision-making power (Mehra et al., 2023), and making provisions for adequate skill development and entrepreneurship (Pécot et al., 2024; Shaikh & Ganesh, 2024). In addition, the efforts need to be made in the direction of eliminating gender-based violence and focusing on gender-transformative approaches to create a safe and robust ecosystem for women (Mehra et al., 2023). These issues need to be focused on the priority – basis towards achieving gender- equality and building a self-reliant nation (Arshad, 2023). Developing nations have taken cognizance that one of the ways to achieve socio-economic development is women empowerment through self-reliance. And in this regard, Self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as a powerful means to provide opportunities for growth and to , giving women with opportunities to elevate their economic, social, and political status. These SHGs provide essentials such as provision for microfinance, a social ecosystem to share and discuss their problems and a support system , especially to women, which are critical for their empowerment The various studies have highlighted the positive bearing of the SHGs on women's empowerment, specifically the economic power and their say in the decision – making , yet the effects on psychological empowerment are less clear (Brody et al., 2017).

In India, primarily in rural areas, The SHGs have definitely given a boost to the socio-economic empowerment of women, which is reflected in instances such as an increase in the women literacy rate , women contesting the social and cultural norms and voicing their concerns and a rise in the women entrepreneurial ventures (Srinivasan & Sharma, 2022). In southern part of India , particularly Tamil Nadu, for instance, SHGs have been instrumental in eliminating poverty and boosting women's financial independence (Dhaneesh et al., 2022). Sharma & Varma, (2016) in one of their studies have stated that SHGs have successfully provided a robust ecosystem supplemented with the flexibility of working hours to nurture entrepreneurial activities among women which have made them financially independent Further, the employment opportunities provided by the SHGs have made these women self- reliant there by enhancing their financial decision-making capabilities and access to credit which are crucial for poverty reduction and improving women's socio-economic

conditions, as evident by various studies conducted across different regions (Chandramore, 2020; Rather & Fulware, 2020; Chandrakala & Teki, 2022; Bhadauria, 2023; Setia et al., 2017). From these studies it is evident that SHGs act as a key driver in accelerating women's empowerment and self-reliance through skill development and entrepreneurship. The study aims to examine in – depth the impact of SHGs on women crochet artisans, encompassing both economic and social scopes of empowerment. The study undertakes a 360-degree approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of SHGs towards women's self-reliance, economic independence, and overall empowerment. The findings of this study not only have the theoretical implications but provide more of a practical insight to the policy makers to enhance the design and operations of SHG programs. The study focuses around the migrant women artisans associated with the Mon Ami Foundation involved in the crotchet craft . Mon Ami Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit Trust, registered in India, with a determined focus on social responsibility. It aims to evaluate the effectiveness of enabling women artisans through skills training and developing future leaders and entrepreneurs through Community Resource Persons (CRPs). The efforts are aimed to include the migrant women into the mainstream workforce by making them self- reliant.

2. Literature Review

SHGs have emerged as a pivotal means to foster women's empowerment and economic development in India, and considered to be a founding pillar in the rural and social context. The extant literature reflects the positive impact on various aspects of women's lives, including economic, social, and political empowerment (Brody et al., 2016; Kumar et al., 2021). A study by Brody et al. (2016), further propagates the positive effects of SHGs on economic and political empowerment, women's mobility, and control over family planning. But the same time , there are varying opinions about the role of SHGs, as some studies suggest that SHG participation can lead to conflictive relations at the household level, potentially due to shifts in control over resources (Alemu et al., 2018). The literature further accentuates the fact that economically, SHGs have been proven to play an instrumental role in establishing women's control over their income, their decision-making powers, and involvement in income-generating activities (Kumar et al., 2021; Paramanandam & Packirisamy, 2015), highlighting the need for a holistic approach towards women's empowerment. This statement is further validated by a study conducted by Khan et al, (2020), reflecting that the women participation in SHG has significantly and positively influenced the economic, social, political, and psychological aspects of women's empowerment . Another study by Kumar et al,(2021) highlights that the women participation in SHGs can lead to increased involvement in community groups providing a social support. But at the same time, the research also points out at addressing the social norms and the involvement of men in the process for a more compatible and sustainable development (Kumar et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2023). SHGs can be a to reap maximum benefits for women's self-reliance by designing and

implementing strategies focused on providing wide-ranging support, access to information especially related to government policies, financial resources, and building market connections. In addition the SHGs can design training programmes, provide social support and networking and easy access to the government policies which are a must for fostering entrepreneurship spirts women artisans.
Further, the literature highlights the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting women's empowerment through immediate livelihood facilities, such as handicraft production, (Gupta, 2021). Likewise, Khan et al., (2022). in one of his research states that SHGs appear to be an effective tool for holistic women's empowerment, particularly for women artisans and entrepreneurs. Specifically, in the context of artisan cooperatives, parameters such as partnerships, the cooperative structure, and personal growth among women and communities have been identified as prevalent themes contributing to both economic and social empowerment (Brogan & Dooley, 2023), as demonstrated in the case of 'Enchanted Threads' , as to how small handicraft businesses can contribute to financial independence and artistic freedom for women (Malhotra, 2024).

3. Research Objectives

1. Evaluate the economic impact of SHG on women crochet artisans
2. Analyze changes in social status and decision-making power within households

4. Research Methodology

Mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection was employed with methodological triangulation techniques to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. This comprehensive research design helped in capturing both measurable outcomes and in-depth insights. The data collection strategy involved conducting one-on-one interviews with women, visiting various sites, and engaging in discussions within focus groups consisting of specific beneficiaries. The assessment pertains to the project's implementation period, which spanned from April 2023 to March 24. A group of 150 artisans dedicated themselves to mastering the art of crochet for an extensive period, from April 2023- March 24, demographic group aged 18 to 49.
We also reached out to two individuals to gather their evaluations and feedback: Women Artisans and CRPs.

1. After each training session, we conducted surveys to gather feedback from the participants. We wanted to know their thoughts on various aspects such as our organization, logistics, quality of CRPs, topics covered, presentation quality, participant responsiveness, and overall training quality. The survey included a combination of numbered scales and free- response questions. The information was compiled and analyzed to create a comprehensive understanding of user satisfaction levels and identify areas for improvement.

2. CRPs were interviewed to gather information about the organization's support, the trainees' (women artisans) performance, and their overall experience.

5. Activities performed:

- A Baseline Survey was carried out on a sample of 100 female artisans in Noida and Greater Noida.
- Design Development workshops—From April 23 to March 24, design development workshops were conducted for Noida and Greater Noida. The workshops involved 50 women artisans and aimed to Create 20 innovative designs.
- Livelihood Support and Business Skill Development Workshops/Training—A capacity development workshop is organized for Self-Help Groups (SHGs) to enhance their skills in participating in show booths, maintaining bookkeeping paperwork, and acquiring technical skills.
- Using social media, ICT materials, and relationships with stakeholders for branding and promotion purposes.
- Enhancing digital enablement through diverse capacity-building initiatives.
- The targeted craftsmen will receive capacity-building training to help them adopt sustainable products and align their businesses with market requirements.
- Training on essential life skills and occupational health and safety.
- Training sessions focused on raising awareness of the process of asserting one's rights, followed by assistance and connection to social programs and benefits.

6. Data Analysis

The analysis was based on 150 women (artisans) and 30 CRPs who undertook the training sessions provided by the authors as Principal investigators (PI) and Co- PI in collaboration with Mon Ami Foundation.

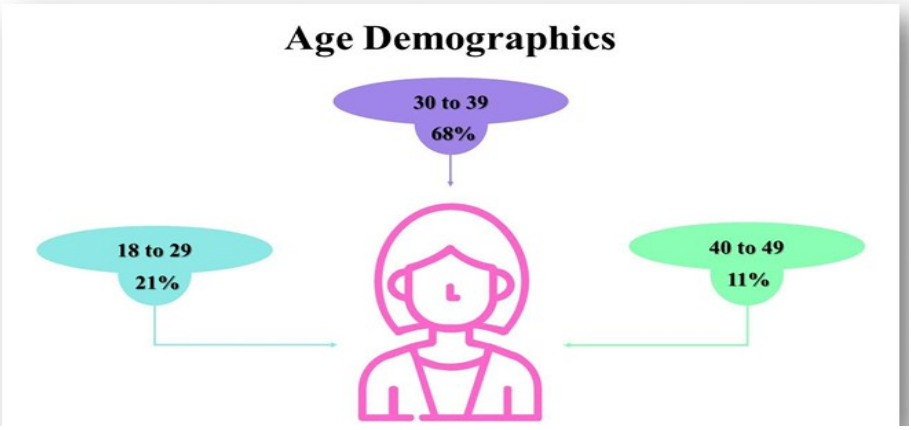

Fig.1. Age Demographics

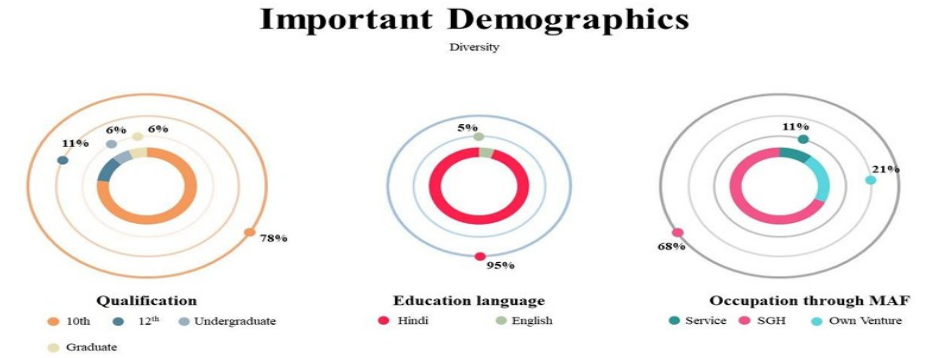

Fig.2. Demographics of women artisans such as educational qualifications, languages known.

7. Training and Post Training Evaluations

The women artisans were given training on the aspects such technical skills , communication , evolve strategies to develop new product , leadership and interpersonal skills.

Fig.3. Skill development interventions imparted to the women artisans

The evaluation of the project reveals that women found the program valuable for a multitude of reasons. While many women found the training highly valuable for acquiring new skills, connecting with others, earning opportunities, learning to develop new products or designs, understanding the production process of sustainable products, and sharing life lessons with other women artisans, some individuals prioritized gaining the knowledge and skills needed for greater independence and managing their family's finances.

Following the completion of the training, women were equipped with the essential resources to attain economic self-sufficiency and secure employment prospects. With the support of the MAF, women were eager to embark on an earning endeavour. The majority of women artisans had a distinct vision for joining an SHG, doing jobs with the help of skills obtained, owning a venture, such as craft classes or vocational training, and supporting their respective family income. Participants in the MAF mentorship and group workshops had the chance to enhance and evaluate their ideas through the use of illustrations, exercises, and checklists.

Community Resource Persons (CRPs) have been instrumental in connecting women artisans with the MAF, effectively bringing the divide between them. It was recognized that women artisans have a strong ability to connect with the local community, as they share a common language and cultural background. They were able to establish effective communication and foster connections with community members, guaranteeing accessibility of information and services for all. CRPs put in

significant effort to earn the trust and confidence of women artisans. They frequently organized training sessions and workshops to enhance their skills and promote self reliance and resilience. They facilitated the women artisans' access to vital services like education, healthcare, social welfare, and financial services. Community Resource Persons played a vital role in promoting sustainable and inclusive development by supporting women's artisan development and welfare.

7. Findings

The training has demonstrated remarkable levels of success. After receiving the training, ninety percent of the women reported that their performance at work had improved as a result.

- After the training, 100% of the women artisans became part of SHG
- 100% of the participants reported improved financial management and communication skills, essential components for self-reliant businesses and sustainable livelihoods. It is to be noted that 68% of the women artisans (as members of SHG) were able to earn 8.5 Lacs during the tenure of the project, which is 2.5 Lacs greater than their targets. However, out of the remaining women artisans, 11% (n=16) were absorbed in a job for at least 6 months, with a minimum wage of ₹ 6000/- (total=16*6(months)* ₹ 6000= 5.7 Lacs). The remaining 21% (n=31) artisans were able to start their work and earned a minimum ₹ 5000 per month (total=31*6 (months)*₹ 5000=9.3 Lacs).
- The findings reveal that **87%** of women artisans gained technological proficiency, such as operating computers, smartphones, and mobile applications, which are critical tools for improving market access and business efficiency in today's digital economy
- 100% of the women artisans have mentioned that the training has helped them to know the production process- increase in production-based training has significantly boosted market access. This has resulted in improved opportunities to showcase products in haats and exhibitions.
- Soft skills training has proven to be invaluable for many aspiring women entrepreneurs. 90% of the participants have expressed that acquiring knowledge in areas such as computer and smartphone operations has greatly contributed to their success and profitability.

This project also helped select the Community Resource Persons (CRPs). Relevant training was provided to these CRPs for successfully carrying out the team activities. Due to this unique mentorship program, the employees' performance in the workplace increased 100% since their completion of the Training Course, and these CRPs had all the necessary factors for participants to understand adequately. This project also achieved a high impact in terms of outcomes. Although not all of the women used the skills and information they gained through training, study tours, or support, they did

experience a significant increase in their self-confidence, teamwork, entrepreneurial, leadership, interpersonal, Business, and Self-Management skills.

- Change in future training objectives: Artisans found the stalls at exhibitions to be quite popular.
- Soft skills training has proven to be invaluable for many aspiring women entrepreneurs. Numerous individuals have expressed that acquiring knowledge in areas such as computer and smartphone operations has greatly contributed to their success and profitability.
- Employment history plays a significant role in shaping individuals' perception of skills training. Women artisans with no prior work experience were more inclined to believe that training would greatly enhance their social and economic prospects than women who had already been employed before undergoing skills training. The significance of training for women was evaluated by examining whether their income improved after acquiring new skills.
- The success stories surrounding skills training in the local community have served as a source of inspiration for women artisans, motivating them to strive for more despite their limited social and economic circumstances.
- Role of women in decision-making: Skills training enhanced employability and job prospects for women. However, despite their financial contributions, a remarkable achievement was that a few women got actively involved in making financial decisions within their families.
- These women's access to credit sources has changed significantly. They are now relying less on moneylenders and family members and instead turning to Self-Help Groups (SHGs), nationalized banks, and Micro Finance Institutions. However, it is worth noting that some women still depend on their family members for financial support. This shift in credit access reflects the progress in financial inclusion for these women.
- The increase in production-based training has significantly boosted market access. This has resulted in improved opportunities to showcase products in haats and exhibitions.
- Artisans reported significant improvements in self-esteem and employability after receiving training, leading to enhanced skills, better service delivery, and increased profitability.
- Challenges in acquiring skills training: Prior to training, many women encountered obstacles such as limited access to information and insufficient support from their families.
- Despite the decrease in other barriers, the skills training proved to be highly effective.

8. Recommendations

- Establishing a training ell is recommended. This will improve artisan' participation in skills development programs and provide artisans with job security. Further, Soft skills should be mandatory with any training, as this would help women develop their overall personalities and thereby enhance their self-confidence.
- An assessment of global and local demand for sustainable products would make for better planning of training programs.
- Creative and innovative investment in the branding and marketing of sustainable products, especially the use of the social media can be explored
- Create plans to enter international markets through export after a few foreign firms approached them about their products. It demonstrates that the product is in high demand in the global market.
- Provide training to the artisans on export-import documentation processes and help them obtain the necessary licenses for operations. This will empower them to handle these aspects independently in the future.
- Offer financial literacy workshops to the artisans to help them manage their earnings effectively and make informed decisions about their businesses.
- Conduct market research to identify potential export markets for the artisans' products. This will help them expand their reach and increase their income.
- Facilitate networking opportunities for the artisans to connect with potential buyers and partners in the export market. This can help them establish valuable relationships that will support their growth.
- While the goal is for the artisans to become independent, it's important to provide ongoing support and guidance as they navigate the process of becoming self-sustainable. Regular check-ins and feedback sessions can help address any challenges they may face.

9. Conclusion

The study assessed the multi-layered impact of self-help groups (SHGs) on the empowerment and self-reliance of women artisans betrothed in crochet craft. It explored the participation and influence of SHGs in socio-economic status, decision-making power, and overall well-being of associated women artisans. Crochet craft sector predominantly lies in traditional craft industry which possess unique challenges and opportunities. The study focused on understanding these challenges and opportunities faced by women artisans also investigated the broader implications for women's empowerment and sustainable development. In the crochet artisans milieu, SHG can play a central role in conserving traditional skills, enhancing economic opportunities, and fostering a sense of community. Creditable cultural heritage and potential for revenue generation in the crochet craft industry presents a stimulating case study for investigating the effectiveness of SHGs in empowering women.

After completing the project, the present model will become sustainable after 24 months, and these artisans will earn more. The organization is planning to go beyond the local market and make these artisans learn the export-import documentation process and the necessary licenses for the operations. It is proposed that for the next year, more emphasis be placed on making the project self-sustainable, on these lines the artisans need to be completely independent of the intervention by the foundation. It is imperative to have a clear plan for the future sustainability of the project and the empowerment of the artisans involved. In the coming time, MAF needs to provide training on Capacity Building, Financial Literacy. Emphasis should be given to conducting Market Research for innovative products, market assessment, the effectiveness of the training, gap analysis, networking opportunities with government and non-government organizations, and providing continuous support to the artisans and various activities for the economic enablement of women Artisans. By focusing on these areas and maintaining clear communication with the artisans about the transition towards self-sustainability, the organization can help ensure the long-term success of the project and the empowerment of the artisans involved.

Finally, the findings of this study will not only aid to academic knowledge but also highlight the practical implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and organizations working to promote women's empowerment and sustainable livelihoods. The kwoledge obtained from the study can be adopted to design more effective interventions, policies, and support systems for women artisans. This in turn will potentially lead to enhanced outcomes for women's empowerment and the conservation of traditional crafts.

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