

The Transformative Impact of Skill Development Programs on Rural Women: A Case Study of Silai Schools

Jivya Kapoor
OP Jindal Global University

¹Received: 19 March 2024; Accepted: 17 June 2024; Published: 26 June 2024

ABSTRACT

This research paper investigates the impact of sewing training programs, specifically the Silai Schools initiative by USHA International, on the lives of rural women in India. The study highlights how such programs promote economic empowerment, gender equality, preservation of cultural heritage, and social cohesion. Field research conducted in rural Jaipur, coupled with interviews with program beneficiaries and NGO representatives, reveals the multifaceted benefits of skill development initiatives in addressing socioeconomic inequities and fostering sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The empowerment of rural women through skill development initiatives has garnered significant attention as a pathway to achieving gender equality and socioeconomic progress. Silai Schools, a program by USHA International, offers sewing training to marginalized women, enabling them to become financially independent while staying connected to their households. This paper examines the program's outcomes, including economic upliftment, enhanced social capital, entrepreneurial growth, and cultural preservation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the impact of skill development programs on rural women's lives. This includes understanding the financial, social, and psychological transformations these women experience and evaluating the role of NGOs and community networks in facilitating such programs.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining fieldwork, surveys, and interviews. Visits to five villages in Jaipur provided qualitative insights from over ten Silai School instructors and numerous students. Structured questionnaires addressed both objective data (demographics, economic outcomes) and subjective experiences (personal transformations, aspirations).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Economic Empowerment

Sewing training programs empower rural women by providing them with income-generating opportunities such as tailoring services and the production of handmade goods. Many participants reported significant improvements in household income, enabling them to afford essential items such as refrigerators and vehicles. Financial independence has also reduced dependency on abusive or restrictive familial structures.

¹ How to cite the article: Kapoor J. (June 2024); The Transformative Impact of Skill Development Programs on Rural Women: A Case Study of Silai Schools; *International Journal of Development in Social Sciences and Humanities*; Vol 17, 63-65

Enhanced Social Capital

Silai Schools foster social networks among women, allowing them to share skills, support each other, and collectively address community challenges. These interactions strengthen community bonds and reduce caste-based and class-based prejudices through shared experiences and collaboration.

Skill Diversification and Entrepreneurship

Beyond sewing, participants gain entrepreneurial skills, including business management and marketing. The USHA mobile app further supports these women by providing accessible tutorials in 12 languages and fostering innovation in design. Many women aspire to launch their own brands or small enterprises, contributing to local economic development.

Gender Empowerment and Agency

The program challenges traditional gender norms, enabling women to gain decision-making power within their households and communities. Enhanced self-confidence and a sense of agency among participants translate into greater advocacy for women's rights and education.

Cultural Heritage Preservation

Silai Schools promote the preservation of traditional craftsmanship by incorporating local designs into modern apparel. This not only sustains cultural identity but also attracts markets for cultural tourism and handicrafts, creating additional income streams.

ROLE OF NGOS AND PARTNERSHIPS

NGOs play a crucial role in bridging gaps between corporate programs like Silai Schools and rural communities. By leveraging local trust and networks, NGOs facilitate smoother implementation, address caste and class divides, and provide holistic support, such as menstrual health awareness and logistical coordination.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenges

Despite significant achievements, challenges persist. These include:

Limited awareness and outreach to the most marginalized women.

Societal resistance to women's economic independence.

Access to resources such as sewing machines and raw materials.

Recommendations

Expand outreach through digital and offline campaigns targeting remote areas.

Incorporate financial literacy and advanced business skills into training modules.

Strengthen supply chains for raw materials and provide subsidies for sewing equipment.

Foster partnerships with government programs to ensure scalability and sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Skill development programs like Silai Schools have transformative effects on rural women's lives, enabling financial independence, social inclusion, and cultural preservation. By investing in such initiatives and addressing existing challenges, stakeholders can create a ripple effect of empowerment and development across marginalized

communities. The stories of these women serve as powerful testaments to the potential of education and skill-building in fostering a more equitable and prosperous society.

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