

**“To what extent does female empowerment through skill upliftment serve as a feasible solution to combating gender inequality in rural India?”**

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**Abstract**

Gender is a social construct; consequently, gender roles may differ across different cultures, times and geographies. However, a hierarchical structure, resulting from gender, which leads to several inequalities is evident throughout demographics. Women tend to suffer from these inequalities to the greatest extent in certain regions, such as rural India, wherein deeply embedded stereotypes and biases prevail. That being said, one solution to reducing gender inequality is often cited as being female empowerment. In light of the aforementioned, this research paper was aimed at examining the extent to which skill upliftment could enable female empowerment and thus help reduce gender inequality in the context of Chanditara (a village in India). By conducting thematic analysis on the primary data collected through data triangulation, it was concluded that skill upliftment in Chanditara may stimulate women's, and even young girls', empowerment on an individual level but in order to successfully reduce gender inequality, female empowerment on the collective must be achieved.

***Key Words: Gender, Gender Inequality, Women Empowerment, Skill Upliftment***

## **1. Introduction**

As per WHO (2019), “gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other”. In being socially constructed, empirical evidence has found that gender roles differ across cultures, time and context (Nadal, 2017) and most commonly lead to a distinct hierarchy which results in great levels of inequalities. The issue of gender discrimination is further fuelled due to its ability to intersect with other factors of discrimination including but not limited to ethnicity, disability, age and geographic location.

Gender inequality is a pressing issue with implications for the economy, society and overall well-being of the population. For instance, it has been found that more women live in poverty than men as a result of differing “access to social and legal institutions, resources, employment and earnings, as well as social and political participation” (UNFPA, 2002). This differential access is further worsened in some parts of the world - such as rural India - owing greatly to the enforced social structures influenced by the cultures and norms. Given the severity of the issue, it is essential for action to be taken to facilitate women's empowerment - on both an individual and collective level through education, training, skill upliftment and awareness - and work towards the goal of gender equality.

Considering the above, it is of particular interest to understand the extent to which women empowerment through skill upliftment can enable gender equality in a community greatly enforcing gender roles. In line with the aforementioned, this research study focuses on analysing data gathered from a group of women and girls attending a sewing skill upliftment workshop in Chanditara, a village in India to be able to answer the research question - **“To what extent does female empowerment through skill upliftment serve as a feasible solution to combating gender inequality in rural India?”**

This paper argues that whilst skill upliftment can lead to women's empowerment on an individual level, gender equality - or more realistically, less gender inequality - will not be achieved until it is supported with women's empowerment on the collective level in the context of a community where gender greatly dictates an individual's access to resources.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The sociology of gender**

The sociology of gender contains extensive theories and research that attempt to explain the notion of gender and the manner in which gender interacts with several other social forces in society. In the very early times, there was an evident division of labour between men and women wherein the responsibility of men was to fulfil instrumental roles in society (being a hunter, for instance) whilst women fulfilled the more expressive ones (being a mother or a housekeeper, for instance) (Lindsey, 2015). This perspective of a gendered division of labour being essential for the smooth functioning of society proves how in the earlier days, gender was deemed a tool that allowed order in society by providing men and women with clearly defined roles (Giddens, 2009).

That being said, the functionalist approach is now deemed outdated and instead, a more contemporary approach, influenced by the symbolic interactionist theory has become popular (Crossman, 2020). West and Zimmerman (1987), two of the most prominent sociologists who popularized this approach, strongly believe that gender is not a personal trait but instead "an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society". By recognising gender as a social construct, it can be further explained how in 'doing gender' an individual is taking on certain gender roles whereby they are fulfilling their functional positions in society which may differ across different cultures, times and contexts.

### **2.2 Gender in India**

India is a prime example of a country wherein various historical, social, religious and economic factors have constructed gender roles. From the very early days, India could be identified as a

patriarchal society. For instance, the literature points to how the ancient legends gave messages of the subservience of women by depicting them as pure with self-sacrificing and self-effacing traits. Even historical rituals and practices reduce the role of women merely to faithful wives and devoted mothers. Along with how women and young girls are socialised and indoctrinated to internalise such gendered behaviors - the practices of subordination, exploitation, and subjugation at various levels in the system feed into what we then ascertain to be gender inequality (Sivakumar and Manimekalai, 2021).

One of the most prominent examples of gender inequality lies in the fact that Indian families have since long placed their sons on a higher pedestal than their daughters. Sons are regarded as assets who have the ability to financially support the parents in their old age, whilst daughters are deemed a liability or burdens, confined to the home and house duties until they are married off. These attitudes are particularly heightened in the context of rural India and result in a lack of freedom and investment in education and skill development for women. The aforementioned also explains why India has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world i.e. 21% vs. the 53% global median (Evans et al., 2022).

### 2.3 The Role of Women's Empowerment in reducing gender inequality

Gender inequality is an ugly rampant truth that has pervaded our societies and economies and in turn, has implications for both. This prompts us to ask the simple question ‘What can be done?’ Literature often cites women empowerment to be a critical aspect of achieving gender equality. Empowerment in itself is a multifaceted concept, however, women's empowerment may be explained as the process whereby there is an increase in women’s self-worth, decision-making power, access to opportunities and resources (material, human and intellectual including knowledge, skills, information and finances) and power and control both inside and outside the home (Verma, Jiloka and Kushwah, 2006). As part of this, women's empowerment may take place at two levels, the individual and the collective. When empowered, at an individual level, women may form a more positive self-image and garner a great level of self-confidence in their ability to think, decide and act. On a collective level, women's empowerment entails transforming the collective consciousness, values and attitudes to facilitate the ability of women

to take control of their own lives as well as make demands on the society and state for change (Zubair Meenai, 2003).

The reason why the empowerment of women is considered a pre-requisite to enabling gender equality is that it is observed that when women are empowered, they are able to fight societal barriers, gain access to better opportunities and therefore contribute to a more equitable society. From an economic perspective, one of the most common methods of women's empowerment is through the development and upliftment of women's skills. In fact, several initiatives, including The UP Skill Development Mission (UPSDM), for instance, have been taken by the Indian government to provide opportunities for the youth to acquire and develop skills of the unskilled and semi-skilled workforce. As part of this, there have been fixed provisions for vulnerable sections of society, of which women are one, resulting in 30% targets being earned for them. The ultimate hope is that learning these skills would enable girls and women to get involved with some type of job and be able to increase both individual and national productivity and prosperity (UPSDM, 2023).

## 2.4 Hypothesis

On the basis of the literature reviewed, a few of the key takeaways entail:

- Gender and gender roles are perceived to be nothing more than social constructs whereby women and men are expected to think and behave in accordance with what is acceptable for them as per the society, culture and time
- Gender, being a social construct, leads to great levels of inequality which is greatly prominent in the context of a country like India wherein the rural population, particularly, has been proven to suffer at the hands of the enforcement of gender roles influenced by deeply embedded norms, attitudes and values.
- In the fight against gender inequality, from a holistic perspective, women empowerment is deemed to be a necessary prerequisite as it is expected that when women are empowered on an individual and collective level then they're able to better access opportunities and take steps towards a more equitable society.

- One of the ways of empowering women is through skill development and upliftment with the aim of equipping them with the necessary skills to be able to engage in jobs and become more confident in themselves as well as in their position in society.

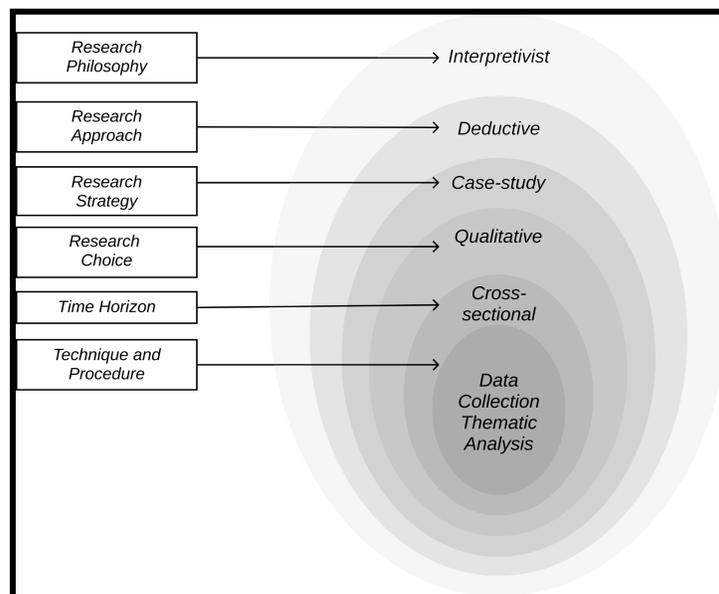
Essentially, if women are not skilled enough to be financially independent, measures to address societal norms which restrict them from doing so seem futile.

This study, therefore, hypothesises that the girls and women of a rural community in India attending a skill upliftment workshop will be empowered and garner greater levels of confidence as well as human capital which may then translate into them taking action to strengthen their position in society and consequently reduce gender inequality in their community.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Onion**

In order to ensure that an effective methodology was implemented throughout the entirety of this paper, the research onion developed by Saunders et al. (2007) was used. In line with the aforementioned, appropriate choices were made at each stage of the research strategy - as detailed below.



### *3.1.1 Research Philosophy*

The first stage is concerned with the research philosophy which refers to the set of beliefs that concern the nature of the reality being investigated. Research philosophies tend to vary based on the goals of the research and the manner that would be deemed best to achieve said goals. Three of the main research philosophies are namely positivism, interpretivism, and pragmatism. As this study aimed to examine the extent to which skill upliftment could enable women's empowerment and thus help reduce gender inequality in the context of Rural India, the interpretivist philosophy was deemed most appropriate as it allowed for a holistic view of the thoughts and actions of the participants whilst accounting for the socio-cultural factors.

### *3.1.2 Research Approach*

The second stage of the research onion is concerned with the type of research approach adopted. Two types of approaches commonly chosen include a deductive approach and an inductive approach. This study adopted a deductive approach as it formulated a hypothesis on the basis of an exploration of the existing theories and concepts related to the research topic in the literature review and then gathered empirical evidence through primary research to support or refute the hypotheses and ultimately contribute to the existing literature.

### *3.1.3 Research Strategy*

The third stage of the research onion is concerned with the research strategy which is to do with how it is most appropriate to conduct the research based on the aims of the study. Whilst there are several strategies that can be adopted, this study, particularly, made use of the case study research and conducted a detailed and in-depth study of a specific group i.e. a sample population of the women attending a sewing skill upliftment workshop in Chanditara, a village in India. This research strategy also complements the interpretivist philosophy to a great extent as it also highlights the importance of taking into consideration the social context and culture of the group being examined.

### *3.1.4 Research Choices*

The next layer of the research onion is concerned with the choices that are made to allow for appropriate data collection. This study adopted a qualitative mono-method - the use of only one

type of data. This choice was made as it allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and lived realities of the women of the sample population whilst taking into consideration the social-cultural factors that greatly influence the degree of empowerment of women and the level of gender inequality in the village. Also, qualitative data is an appropriate choice to maintain cultural sensitivity which was deemed important as this study dealt with individuals coming from diverse family settings and circumstances. Finally, this choice was also deemed most effective as there was a sense of empowerment to be enjoyed by the women who had an opportunity to be directly involved in the research process and got a chance to share their perspectives and contribute to a rather important social conversation.

### *3.1.5 Time Horizon*

The specific skill upliftment workshop was conducted over an extensive time period. Therefore, whilst this study adopted a cross-sectional time horizon, implying that the data was collected only at a certain point in time (the final day of the workshop), certain questions did allow for the collection of data pertaining to changes in attitudes and perspectives that may have occurred for the participants from the beginning to the very end of the workshop.

### *3.1.6 Techniques and Procedures*

With regard to techniques and procedures, it was decided that the focus of the primary research would be to gather data concerning the social situation of the women of Chanditara, including an understanding of the freedom they are allowed in their daily lives, a better insight into what prompted them to attend the skill upliftment sewing workshops and further information regarding their view of the gender inequality that exists in the community and the manner in which this skill upliftment, as well as any other form offered, could help tackle the issue of gender inequality in the village. To collect this data, data triangulation was adopted whereby structured interviews were conducted with the participants of the sewing workshops as well as with the sewing instructor and the social worker who were on the ground at all times and able to contribute beneficial observations. The number of participants part of the sample population was 15 i.e. more than 50% of the total number of participants (25).

With regard to analysing the collected data, as the study adopted a case study strategy and all the data collected was of a qualitative nature, thematic analysis was deemed most appropriate. As part of this, open coding occurred during the initial review of the data wherein numerous topics, both broad and specific, were deduced (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Whilst open coding is often descriptive, clusters using condensed language, referred to as the themes, were developed from these vast arrays of ideas. The purpose of the themes was to go further in capturing dimension or meaning across multiple codes and in this way act as an "argument" about the "phenomenon being examined" (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 18)

### 3.2 Bias

When working with qualitative data and tools such as thematic analysis it is essential to acknowledge any bias that might occur. As per the Oxford Dictionary bias is defined as "an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair". As per Smith and Noble (2014), bias can occur at every stage of the research process and if not mitigated to the best of the researcher's abilities then it can impact the validity and reliability of the findings and conclusions of the study. In light of this, below is a table of some of the most common biases that may occur at the different stages of the research and the manner in which each was mitigated in the context of this study.

<b>Bias</b>	<b>Definition (Smith and Noble, 2014)</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
Design bias	Design bias can occur when a researcher's personal beliefs influence the choice of the research question and methodology.	In order to mitigate design bias in this study, a clear research question that was well-defined and specific to the research problem being explored was developed. Moreover, all choices made as part of the methodology were made within the research onion framework to ensure proper reasoning at all stages.
Selection bias	Selection bias relates to both the process of recruiting participants and the study's inclusion criteria.	This study had a specific inclusion criterion based on the research objectives. By collecting data from only the individuals involved in the skill upliftment workshop, it was ensured that essential characteristics that were necessary for the study were met.

		<p>However, to reduce the impact of the selection bias and to enhance the reliability of the findings, data triangulation was adopted whereby the data was collected from multiple sources including the participants of the workshop as well as the instructor and the social worker observing their work.</p>
Data collection bias	Data collection bias can occur when a researcher's personal beliefs influence the way information or data is collected	<p>Data collection bias was mitigated in this study by approaching the participants with a well-structured interview that contained standardised questions and prompts ensuring consistency across the interviews and minimising the risk of any bias which could have occurred with the introduction of varied questions for different participants. Furthermore, these questions were formulated in a neutral manner in order to prevent any participant from being steered towards a specific response.</p>
Analysis bias	When analysing data, the researcher may naturally look for data that confirm their hypotheses or confirm personal experience, overlooking data inconsistent with personal beliefs	<p>Reflexivity was ensured throughout the analysis process wherein any biases, assumptions or preconceived notions that could influence the interpretation of the data was acknowledged and overcome to ensure a more objective analysis. Moreover, as the paper was using thematic analysis, a strong coding framework was followed to ensure consistency in the identification of codes and then themes.</p>

3.3 Ethical considerations

As the research entailed asking for and collecting details regarding the personal circumstances of the participants, it was essential to adhere to ethical considerations. As part of this, the participants were informed in advance regarding the purpose of the study and the manner in which their responses would be used. As a result of the aforementioned, if any of the participants wished to withdraw from the interview then they could. The participants who took part in the

interviews were also informed that their anonymity would be maintained at the time of analysing and publishing the data.

#### **4. Data collection - thematic analysis**

##### 4.1 Coding (all evidence has been translated from the local language to English)

*\*The codes below have been color coded to correspond with the respective themes they associate with in the second table*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Chanditara was identified as a poverty-stricken village wherein gender inequality existed resulting in stereotypical roles being adopted by the men and women as well as differential access to resources and freedom being enjoyed	<p>The majority of participants noted how the men in their families were the income earners whilst the women remained home.</p> <p>One of the participants, identified as a women in her 40's, also highlighted the lack of resources available in the village and stated that "going to areas where resources are available is difficult because of the restrictions enforced on girls and women"</p>
The girls and women attended the workshop in the hopes to gain a sense of independence and self confidence by learning new skills	One of the participants aged 25 noted that she decided to attend the workshops as she was incredibly "keen and excited to learn in order to feel more independent and confident in being able to stand on her own feet"
The sewing skills that were learned as part of the workshop would ideally be applied in the future to make money and afford oneself and for further education	One of the girls aged 18 stated that attending this workshop was valuable for her as she intends to "apply these skill and earn some money to then further study" as she had to leave her education prematurely due to the financial restraints of her family
The girls of Chanditara were mostly educated, however, their families greatly motivate them to stay confined to their homes which impacts their ability to earn money using the skills	<p>The trainer at the workshops stated that "the girls at the campaign felt good about learning skills but when it comes to earning money by using these skills, it still comes down to finding a way to sit at home and work because going out of the home is not permitted"</p> <p>One of the participants also highlighted that the social stigmas of sending the females out of the house to work is a big contributor in families restricting the</p>

	freedom of the girls
If not able to use the skills to make money, there was a keenness to at least make use of them to benefit the family by making clothes for the members and reducing their clothing costs as well as teaching other women	<p>Many of the participants expressed their desire to use the skills to help their families by “using the skills to sew clothes for them”.</p> <p>There was also a great amount of interest expressed in teaching the skills to other girls and women.</p>
A great sense of empowerment and an increase in self-confidence was observed in and also expressed by the participants at the end of the workshop	<p>When asked about the change in attitude in the women and girls over the course of the workshops, the trainer stated that “all the participants enjoyed attending the workshops with many of them even staying overtime to practice their skills. There was an evident increase in confidence in their work and attitude as the workshops proceeded”</p> <p>The above was also supported by many of the women and girls themselves confirming that the workshops left them feeling more confident and empowered.</p>
Great interest was shown in furthering the skills learned and the need for an increased amount of skill upliftment in Chanditara was also expressed	When asked about what other skills workshops would be beneficial to the girls and women of the village, many of the participants named areas such as technology, more specifically the use of computer, and banking.
Education and awareness campaigns amongst the people of Chanditara were highlighted as a vital requirement in enabling the women with the freedom required to practice their empowerment and reduce the gender inequality	The participants, the trainer and the social worker all highlighted how the skills developed by the women and girls were not sufficient in the fight against gender inequality. Instead, as the thoughts and values of the families and villagers prove to be the main hurdle, there is an evident need for them to be made more aware and educated on the requirement for women and girls to enjoy similar opportunities to men.

#### 4.2 Themes

Theme	Definition
1. Gender roles enforced in the village of Chanditara	In accordance with the literature reviewed, Chanditara too fits the brief of rural India and has a great deal of gender role enforcement influenced greatly by stereotypes. This leads to differential access to resources between the genders.

<p>2. Women and girls of Chanditara wish to be self-empowered and independent</p>	<p>There is a great level of willingness amongst the girls and the women of Chanditara to break through the hurdles and discrimination faced by becoming more empowered and independent.</p>
<p>3. Skill upliftment successfully enables individual empowerment and increase in self-confidence</p>	<p>All the participants who were in the 18-21 age bracket ended the workshop feeling more empowered and confident in their own abilities. There was also a great level of willingness to further attend skill upliftment workshops so more empowerment was achieved.</p>
<p>4. Lack of freedom leads to restrictions for the girls and women</p>	<p>Regardless of feeling more empowered, the women and participants acknowledge the differential treatment experienced by them due to their gender and note that people of the village and their families will not allow them outside their homes and therefore limit their ability to earn from the skills.</p>
<p>5. Empowered women and girls keen to empower themselves further as well as empower other women and girls</p>	<p>Even if earning money by practising the skill is not sufficient, the women and girls wish to leverage opportunities that would leave them empowered so they are able to then further empower many more women and girls.</p>
<p>6. Need for social change in the thought of the villagers</p>	<p>There was a consensus with regard to the need for more education and awareness to be created amongst the villagers if gender inequality is to be reduced.</p>

## **5. Discussion**

As per the literature observed, woman empowerment is commonly cited as a requirement in the fight against gender inequality. In this study, primary research was conducted amongst a group of women and girls attending a skill upliftment workshop in the village of Chanditara, India to assess how the empowerment and increased levels of confidence would translate to them taking

action to strengthen their position in society and consequently reducing gender inequality in their community

On reviewing the data, it can be observed that almost all the girls and women who participated in the skill upliftment workshop signed up with the aim of learning skills to be able to feel more confident in themselves and their ability to later use the skills to earn a living and support their families (referring to theme 2). In light of this, according to theme 3, woman empowerment through skill upliftment was most definitely successful at an individual level i.e. at increasing the confidence of the women and the girls. In fact, by becoming empowered, a keen desire to empower other girls and women was also expressed, as seen in theme 5. That being said, it was repeatedly highlighted how the core problem is not the lack of empowerment of the women but instead the ideology of the villagers and families. Referring to themes 1 and 4, this ideology is one that enforces restrictions on the ability of women and girls to practice their individual empowerment by gaining jobs and making money for a vast array of reasons. These include the unwillingness to allow them to travel far from home due to the perceived risks of women and girls travelling alone, the inability to know their whereabouts at all times as well as the cultural norm wherein the girl is the responsibility of the parent up until the marriage and it is embedded in the psyche that too much freedom may ruin the reputation of the girl in the eyes of the village and therefore decrease her chances of getting married into a good home.

The above leads to the partial acceptance of the hypothesis whereby it can be stated that regardless of the successful individual empowerment, skill upliftment is unable to translate to women empowerment that helps in the fight against gender inequality, in the context of this sample population, as a result of the lack of collective empowerment rooting from the primary foundation of thought that is enabled by myriad social and cultural factors. This consequently necessitates the requirement for ideological change in the thoughts of the villagers, which may be facilitated through increased education and awareness initiatives (referring to theme 6).

## **6. Conclusion**

Gender is socially constructed and in most societies leads to a hierarchical structure which results in inequalities. The victims of these inequalities are most often women and the severity of the impacts of the inequalities may differ based on cultural, social, economic and geographic factors. In rural India, particularly, women have historically and continue to have stereotypes and biases enforced on them. With women empowerment being suggested as a powerful tool in the fight to reduce gender inequality, this research paper aimed to analyse if women empowerment through skill upliftment is in fact a feasible solution to reducing gender equality in the context of Chanditara (a village in India).

On the basis of the primary data collected through data triangulation, the thematic analysis uncovered some concrete themes. Most importantly however it was made evident that the skill upliftment workshop empowered the women on an individual level. The aforementioned was also linked with a sort of domino effect whereby the empowered women showed great keenness to empower other women. However, what was also made evident in the analysis was that the women empowerment on an individual level was not being met with women empowerment on a collective level, consequently, reducing the chances of achieving gender equality within the society. So, it may be concluded that women empowerment through skill upliftment represents a feasible solution to combating gender inequality in rural India to only a certain extent. The key issue of social structures and thoughts of the people, which have been deeply embedded over the years, require change through corrective education and awareness campaigns.

Whilst this research paper provides a sound conclusion, it is essential to acknowledge some limitations that may have occurred in the design and execution of the study. Firstly, the conclusions of the paper may have been enhanced by adding a comparative element to the analysis. For instance, another set of women who did not attend the skill upliftment workshop could have been interviewed to gain an additional perspective on the effectiveness of skill upliftment in achieving women empowerment. Secondly, it may have also been valuable to obtain the opinions and perspectives of the villagers of Chanditara as this could have allowed for a more in-depth study of the social structures, biases and stereotypes that exist and the extent to which it impacts their psyche. The aforementioned could have facilitated a more informed

decision with regard to how these hurdles can be overcome to achieve women empowerment on the collective level and consequently reduce gender inequality.

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