Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal

Research

**Women Empowerment: Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Development Goals**

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| Journal: | *Qualitative Market Research* |
| Manuscript ID | QMR-11-2023-0160.R3 |
| Manuscript Type: | Research Paper |
| Keywords: | Women Empowerment, Job Creation, Gender Inequality, Rural Poverty |
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3 1 **Women Empowerment:**

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5 2 **Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Development Goals**

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10 4 **Abstract**

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12 5 The empowerment of women in rural areas through employment route via skill

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15 6 development requires engagement of various actors who facilitate smooth flow of

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17 7 resources and knowledge required for the purpose. This study explores how issues such

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19 8 as gender stereotyping create challenging situations for those promoting empowerment

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22 9 of rural women via inclusion, although engaging women in employment space can

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24 10 improve their status and help them live better quality of life. Based on expert insights,

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26 11 this study recommends application of national system of innovation for empowering

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28 12 women in rural areas, as this has been a challenging task because collaboration between

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31 13 actors engaged in delivery of knowledge as training to women as the member of the

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33 14 civil society has not been successful for various reasons.

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36 16 **Introduction**

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39 17 The pandemic of COVID-19 disrupted lives of women in both urban and rural areas

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41 18 equally by making them economically distressed, isolating them and heightened their

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43 19 engagement into care-giving activities at home, thereby, resulting in reduced earning

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45

46 20 capability of women. The situation also resulted in increased cases of domestic violence

47

48 21 with a larger divide between men and women. During the post-pandemic times, when

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50 22 women in urban areas went back to their jobs for being financially independent,

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53 23 situation of women in rural areas continued to be worst because of closure of many

54

55 24 small-scale businesses that were engaging or employing rural women in contractual

56

57 25 jobs. Hence, the situation of rural women continued to be distressed post-COVID. This

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59 26 raised concerns amongst policy makers about healthcare and safety of women.

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3 27 Therefore, during the recovery period, after the pandemic, women empowerment

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5 28 programmes designed by policy makers again focused training them, but this time was

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7

8 29 to acquire digital skills as the number of jobs for people with IT skills increased.

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10 30 Including women in the broad framework of society by engaging them through

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12 31 technology is in line with the agenda of United Nations Commission established in

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14

15 32 1946 as an intergovernmental body that promotes gender equality through

16

17 33 empowerment of women. The commission has been identifying various priority themes

18

19 34 as focus areas, year on year, while monitoring, reviewing and guiding the agenda of

20

21

22 35 Sustainable Development Goal no. 5 i.e.to achieve gender equality by empowering all

23

24 36 women and girls by supporting women to come into the mainstream commercial

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26 37 activities. For this purpose, the commission defined empowerment as a

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28 38 multidimensional process that fosters social power useful for enabling both men or

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31 39 women to gain control over their lives by focusing on issues they consider to be

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33 40 important. Policy makers have been pushing empowerment of women by addressing

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35 41 equality, while systems and processes remain under-resourced. Lack of resources in

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38 42 rural areas is delaying the achievement of SDG5 in many countries.

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40 43 Today, over 80 per cent of the global impoverished population resides in rural

41

42 44 regions and every individual living in these areas suffers from some kind of inequality

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44

45 45 (Lipton, 1980). Alarmingly, women constitute 70 per cent of this impoverished

46

47 46 demographic and they suffer from gender discrimination in times when equality is a

48

49 47 fundamental human right (Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2022). The condition of social infrastructure

50

51 48 in rural areas creates unique challenges particularly for women in their pursuit of

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53

54 49 economic and social empowerment (Duflo, 2012). Role of enterprises in empowering

55

56 50 women underscores the pressing need for solutions targeted towards the problem with

57

58 51 appropriate interventions and right policies (Onditi and Odera, 2018).

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2

3 52 Empowerment of women with equality requires companies to adopt best

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5 53 approaches with robust policies and practices monitored regularly for progress.

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7

8 54 Enterprises have intentionally committed to gender equality by making it a strategic

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10 55 priority intertwined within their business processes to avoid unconscious biases on

11

12 56 linguistics, traditions, and traditional values (Rad *et al.*, 2012; Choudhary *et al.*, 2019;

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14

15 57 Bardhan, 1985). Various research studies have also emphasised that empowering

16

17 58 women from indigenous and grassroot communities is possible with skills that make

18

19 59 them financially independent and reduce gender vulnerability and inequality (Torri and

20

21

22 60 Martinez, 2011; Gressel *et al.*, 2020). Although reports from various institutions offer

23

24 61 success stories (Biswas and Banu, 2023), real-life situations contradict a smooth

25

26 62 correlation between acquisition of remunerative skill and financial independence with

27

28 63 higher income that can reduce poverty penalty. Furthermore, the role of enterprises in

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30

31 64 empowering women in rural areas has not been considered by either academics or

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33 65 practitioners because focus has mainly been restricted to engaging women in the

34

35 66 boardroom (McCarthy, 2017).

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37

38 67 The success cases of initiatives of the government are very few and findings

39

40 68 reported by researchers working in this area of research are mixed (Butt and Victor,

41

42 69 2014; Hasin *et al.*, 2018; Babu and Sahay, 2018). Simultaneously, managers are

43

44

45 70 confused about implementation SDGs into their business environment and struggling

46

47 71 to find benefits of their participation in SDGs. While the corporate sector can be the

48

49 72 change maker by putting these SDGs into their everyday work as best practices,

50

51 73 literature discusses women entrepreneurship as a solution (Khan *et al.*, 2017;

52

53

54 74 Ademokun and Ajayi, 2012). Authors such as Novak and Adamskyana (2017)

55

56 75 explained how companies can contribute to achievement of gender equality and

57

58 76 women empowerment goals with initiatives such as increasing proportions of women

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3 77 in managerial roles and manoeuvring corporate policies towards women

4

5 78 empowerment. Other scholars such as Sabbaghi (2024) also mentioned that financial

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8 79 sector can push women empowerment by increasing share of women owned

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10 80 businesses in their allocation of funds allocation as loans to businesses, As regards

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12 81 women in rural areas, findings of the research conducted by Sabbaghi (2024)

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14

15 82 indicates the importance of corporate focus towards educational programmes for

16

17 83 women combined with access to financial services and support as they may not be

18

19 84 aware of the opportunities available for them. There is little work done from a job

20

21

22 85 creation perspective.

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24 86 Recent theoretical work on women empowerment suggests that remunerative

25

26 87 skills are vital for the growth of women (Ahmad *et al.*, 2016; Shetty and Hans, 2019).

27

28 88 Theorists like Shetty and Hans (2019) have acknowledged that skill-based education

29

30

31 89 for financial independence combined with involvement of women in decision making

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33 90 can liberate them by easing their mobility with capability to make decisions

34

35 91 respectively. Education activates capabilities and resources to mobilise opportunities

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37

38 92 that together can improve capability of women to make decisions and enhance their

39

40 93 position in their family and social space (Martin *et al.*, 2013; Bovaird, 2007). Women

41

42 94 feel empowered when they make decisions based on their awareness about the

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44

45 95 opportunities available to them and their rights (Kabeer, 1999). As per OECD,

46

47 96 National System of Innovation brings actors who can empower women together, to

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49 97 create a flow of resources offered by private enterprises and knowledge offered by

50

51 98 universities using a framework designed by public bodies for innovative delivery of

52

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54 99 information and knowledge as skill-based education.

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56 100 Skill based education can generate value when decent and suitable jobs that

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58 101 require skill-based remuneration are available (Chambers *et al.*, 1998). To secure

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3 102 well-paying skill-based jobs combined with confidence of decision making can

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5 103 increase self-esteem and enable women to feel empowered (Kabeer, 2005). The

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8 104 studies conducted by Mengstie (2022) and Khursheed (2022) provided insights into

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10 105 how microfinance institutions supported by government are vital in empowering rural

11

12 106 women, but lack of industry and commercial setups in such areas create a gap and do

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15 107 not give an opportunity to local women for recognition of the value skill development

16

17 108 can offer (Malecki, 2003).

18

19 109 Therefore, motivating women in this context to learn remunerative skills will

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21

22 110 remain a challenge despite the push from the government through various social

23

24 111 development programmes. This gap impedes the progress required for women to feel

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26 112 empowered and for achievement of gender equality. Various policy reports have

27

28 113 emphasised that achievement of goals related to women empowerment are very

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31 114 important as gender equality matters across all SDGs with its roots into poverty,

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33 115 hunger, prosperity and inclusivity. Lack of academic studies about alignment of skill

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35 116 development with job creation for empowering women, reflects on the limited

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38 117 understanding on the boundary conditions of the context.

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40 118 Aim of this paper is to explore these gaps by reviewing the information

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42 119 available in various formats to explain how firms can contribute to the achievement of

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45 120 the 5th SDG of women empowerment through skill development and job creation

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47 121 programmes. To find answers to the questions raised by this paper, authors first draw

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49 122 upon the theory of exclusion and inclusion to explore how to facilitate empowerment

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51 123 for women. Luhmannian theory refers to strategic exclusion and inclusion of humans

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53

54 124 as a part of the social system for communication, helped us build on our concept of

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56 125 women empowerment (Luhmann, 1988). Another theory that guides our research is

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58 126 theory of empowerment which states that empowerment can be achieved by adopting

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3 127 an approach to focus on factors that may facilitate and prevent those that may hinder

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5 128 growth (Joseph, 2020; Swift and Levine, 1987), which states that therefore, outlined

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8 129 our research design around inclusion of women that would lead to empowerment of

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10 130 women. Finally, our study expands the scope of Luhmannian theory by considering

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12 131 how in the contemporary post-pandemic context of unemployment of women in rural

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15 132 areas can be addressed via transfer of information, knowledge and employability

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17 133 skills through communications. Simultaneously, we also broaden the employability of

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19 134 theory of empowerment in the context of women in vulnerable situations, by enabling

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22 135 them to gain economically and financially while securing a role of a participant in

23

24 136 decision making process, combined with better quality of life.

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28 138 **Literature Review**

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31 139 Empowerment encompasses acquisition of power that allows an individual to exercise

32

33 140 personal freedom and make choices that enrich their lives and enhance their well-

34

35 141 being (Sen and Batliwala, 2000). Enrichment entails evolution of women about their

36

37

38 142 perceptions of self beyond economic independence as a process that transforms them

39

40 143 through education (Sridevi, 2005). Women receive limited access to opportunities that

41

42 144 will enrich their lives with personal financial independence required to feel

43

44

45 145 empowered (Mosedale, 2005; Malhotra and Mather, 1997). Empowerment of women

46

47 146 is a global challenge because of the discrimination they often encounter especially in

48

49 147 developing countries (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Scholars like Sharma and Das

50

51 148 (2021) explained empowerment as a process that links economic empowerment of

52

53

54 149 women with their personal financial independence and extended it to social

55

56 150 empowerment that enables women to focus on enriching lives of their own and others.

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58 151 Despite contributing significantly to the needs for development of their family,

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3 152 community, and economy in various ways, women are left out from access to

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5 153 opportunities of creating financial independence for themselves through decent

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8 154 remunerative jobs that require specific kinds of skills (Shiradkar *et al.*, 2023).

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12 156 *Skills Development for Women Empowerment*

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15 157 For addressing social issues such as empowerment of women in rural areas,

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17 158 governments appoint agencies to create an environment that is conducive for women

18

19 159 to learn remunerative skills in an organised format of a certified training. Skills

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21

22 160 development is defined as the abilities obtained across all educational and training

23

24 161 levels, taking place in formal, non-formal, and workplace contexts (Sharaunga, 2019).

25

26 162 Therefore, skills development does not pertain directly to the curriculum or the origin

27

28 163 of the educational or training program, but rather to the functional capability gained

29

30

31 164 from such skills, courses, and initiatives (Sharaunga, 2019). Skill development

32

33 165 improves productivity of an individual that results in better wages (Barrett and

34

35 166 O’Connell, 2001), providing stable employment prospects and opportunities for re-

36

37

38 167 employment (Bassanini, 2006), and increasing internal flexibility and external

39

40 168 mobility for employees (Groot and De Brink, 2000). The advantages of skill-based

41

42 169 training have been reported extensively by the academic literature, particularly within

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44

45 170 the context of developed nations. However, women in these countries do not consider

46

47 171 taking up full time employment due to social and cultural reasons (Khan *et al.*, 2017).

48

49 172 Rural women frequently face challenging situations where their abilities and talents to

50

51 173 uplift themselves, their families, and their communities are often undervalued due to

52

53

54 174 societal challenges such as gender bias, caste bias and class bias. Examples of the

55

56 175 literature on challenges faced by women in remote rural areas are given in Table 1.

57

58 176 Despite their crucial contributions to communities, they typically earn lower incomes

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2

3 177 from both agricultural and non-agricultural endeavours (Abrar ul Haq *et al.*, 2019;

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5 178 Faxon, 2020).

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| 180 | Insert Table 1 about here. |
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15 182 Shroff (2019) contends that skill development enhances empowerment by

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17 183 highlighting that creation of jobs in remote areas following skill development is

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19 184 important. Using lens of theory of empowerment, job creation activities can be linked

20

21

22 185 with improved local infrastructure and mobility within the network of various actors

23

24 186 like policy makers, education providers and corporations’. Research scholars who

25

26 187 have studied the engagement of different actors in empowerment programmes on a

27

28 188 day-to-day basis explain how they empower by getting engaged in commercial

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31 189 activities that focus on improving wealth via performance (Helmsing, 2003).

32

33 190 Structuring such a network requires policy makers in the institutional sector to

34

35 191 monitor both the corporate and the education sector, while the education sector

36

37

38 192 supports the policy makers by helping them meet their targets and by engaging with

39

40 193 corporations to identify skills to be developed requirements and operationalisation of

41

42 194 solutions (Thornton, 2002). Importantly, collaboration between policy makers,

43

44

45 195 education sector and corporations can together create a conduit for smooth flow of

46

47 196 information through interactions between them. Creation of a social network of

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49 197 interconnectedness by linking these three can innovatively facilitate fulfilment of

50

51 198 requirements regarding empowerment of women through skill development.

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56 200 *Strategic Partnerships for Women Empowerment*

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58 201 Application of National System of Innovation for empowerment of women in remote

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3 202 areas based on arguments that are embedded in Luhmannian theory of communication

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5 203 for transfer of information and knowledge helps us understand the engagement of

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8 204 enterprises who can provide infrastructure required to implement and execute policy

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10 205 frameworks developed by policy makers. Many studies have indicated that

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12 206 encouraging local companies to operate in remote areas is challenging and it is easier

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14

15 207 to push development of such areas by inspiring multinational firms to make greenfield

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17 208 investments with protective employment policies and consciousness towards serving

18

19 209 the stakeholders in resource constrained rural areas (Dunning and Fortanier, 2007;

20

21

22 210 Gupta, 2017; Wei *et al.*, 2015). It has not been easy for policy makers to encourage

23

24 211 greenfield investments by multinationals and increase productive employment in rural

25

26 212 areas because their geographies do not offer a market attractive enough for

27

28 213 multinationals to consider investment in development of infrastructure (Roberto,

29

30

31 214 2004; Amendolagine *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, many governments have taken

32

33 215 initiatives to push for greenfield investments by applying theory of empowerment to

34

35 216 generate employment intensive investments by promoting cooperative formation by

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37

38 217 women or imparting skills that can promote entrepreneurship amongst these women

39

40 218 (Petridou and Glaveli, 2008; Koneru, 2017).

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42 219

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45 220 *Entrepreneurship for Women Empowerment*

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47 221 Studies such as Al-Dajani and Marlow (2013) explored the relationship between

48

49 222 entrepreneurship and empowerment using qualitative data from 43 migrant

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51 223 Palestinian women who operated home based businesses in Jordan to explain

52

53

54 224 entrepreneurship as a socio-political activity that empowers marginalised and

55

56 225 subordinated women via their cottage or small-scale enterprises. This study reflected

57

58 226 on how traditionally women who are positioned as subordinates, utilise their own

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3 227 enterprises to bring in a change in their society’s attitude towards women. Similarly,

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5 228 Cole (2007) also reflected on the potential for entrepreneurship to enable

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8 229 empowerment at both individual and community level in the context of small-scale

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10 230 enterprises operating in the tourism industry using ethnographic approach to

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12 231 understand factors affecting entrepreneurial development. Author focuses on cultural

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14

15 232 barriers and external factors such as understanding, confidence and education as

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17 233 community level barriers with capital accumulation with human and financial capital

18

19 234 as problems related to entrepreneurship. Various other studies like Hazarika and

20

21

22 235 Goswami (2018) analysed what encourages tribal women to set up a small-scale

23

24 236 enterprise using data collected from two tribes located in different areas. Findings of

25

26 237 Hazarika and Goswami (2018) revealed the role of knowledge spillover about

27

28 238 traditional businesses in encouraging women to take up entrepreneurship and how it

29

30

31 239 leads to women empowerment. Other scholars such as Debnath *et al.* (2020) studied

32

33 240 achievement of sustainable development with economic empowerment by women

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35 241 through entrepreneurship in rural Bangladesh with a focus on skills that impact

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37

38 242 entrepreneurial decisions made by women who lack knowledge about requirements of

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40 243 entrepreneurship such as knowledge proficiency, expertise, network of relationships,

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42 244 associations, information, and bargaining power.

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47 246 *Leadership for Women Empowerment*

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49 247 Various scholars such as De Nmark (1993) and Keller and Dansereau (1995) studied

50

51 248 women leadership and empowerment as superior-subordinate dyad to explain that

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53

54 249 ability of a leader to empower subordinates differs based on the status of the leader

55

56 250 based on assumption that higher status of the leader leads to higher level of

57

58 251 empowerment. De Nmark (1993) conducted interviews of 25 women recognised as

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2

3 252 leaders in the United States and found that confidence of the leader on their personal

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5 253 abilities enabled their subordinates to become successful in their initiatives. Based on

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7

8 254 these interviews De Nmark (1993) explained how leadership by women as a sum of a

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10 255 leader's competent self is, combined with creative aggression and woman power.

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12 256 Author implied a strong sense of self with ability to analyse possibilities and spirit to

13

14

15 257 address obstacles as a competent self. The creative aggression referred to by De

16

17 258 Nmark (1993) constituted the ability to take initiatives, lead others and speak out.

18

19 259 Interestingly the author refers to woman power as a combination of masculine and

20

21

22 260 feminine qualities that nurtures based on both strength and force. Author has

23

24 261 explained how participants reflected on these as “ability to get things done” and

25

26 262 reflected on women leadership based on these qualities as their capability to change

27

28 263 the society. The notion of empowerment was also studied by De Nmark (1993), using

29

30

31 264 theory of empowerment based on leadership developed by Cantor and Bernay (1992)

32

33 265 with dimensions like being loved, feeling special, freedom to choose, being

34

35 266 courageous, ability to take risks, ability to lead others, ability to speak out and being a

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37

38 267 dreamer. Good leaders empower subordinates. Women leaders initially face

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40 268 challenges in attaining legitimacy, but over a period after they have strengthened their

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42 269 capabilities within their context, gathered knowledge about opportunities, understood

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45 270 resources available with a control over them with understanding of their rights and

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47 271 level of authority, they are able to empower other women. The design of internships

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49 272 created by women entrepreneurs promotes ambitious, motivated, conscious, and

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51 273 adventurous characteristics in subordinates who are ready to accept and address new

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53

54 274 challenges through hard work and patience by educating themselves and learning new

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56 275 skills. Unfortunately lack of access to resources for education, training and skill

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58 276 development in rural areas, deprives women from progressing in life and feeling

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3 277 empowered.

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8 279 **Methodology**

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10 280 This paper investigates indicators of women empowerment in the context of rural

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12 281 areas of developing markets, wherein, women have very limited access to

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15 282 opportunities and lead their lives under tremendous social pressure. For this purpose,

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17 283 this paper draws upon the context from the lens of a social enterprise to examine how

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19 284 this issue can be addressed by first identifying the gap in the current literature

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21

22 285 combined with evidence of current practices reported by the United Nations, World

23

24 286 Bank and agriculture and rural development wing of the European Union. For this

25

26 287 purpose, we first reviewed the academic literature followed by a review of market and

27

28 288 policy literature available in the public domain that helped us conduct a gap analysis.

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31 289 The findings from the gap analysis helped us ascertain the positioning of the social

32

33 290 problem we were focusing upon. The gap identified provided us a ground and reason

34

35 291 that guided us to adopt a qualitative research method for the next phase of our

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37

38 292 research. Using these two lenses, we pushed our research by diving into expert

39

40 293 insights gathered through qualitative interviews.

41

42 294 Subject experts were contacted using purposive and emergent sampling

43

44

45 295 strategy. Those who agreed to be interviewed were approached for a suitable time

46

47 296 and venue. The selection of subject experts was based on the experience of those who

48

49 297 had experience of working as artisans in the rural area and had lost their contractual

50

51 298 jobs due to closure of small businesses during COVID-19. The main challenges faced

52

53

54 299 by these women was lack of access to jobs they were doing before pandemic and their

55

56 300 inability to remotely take up jobs in the new technology driven job market. During the

57

58 301 period when interviews of the first batch were being conducted, a second set of

1

2

3 302 subject experts from the list created as a pool of potential respondents were invited to

4

5 303 participate in research. The sampling process underwent refinement five times

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7

8 304 because we had to ensure that the participants had experience and a view that is

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10 305 aligned with the aim of our research. The invitation and interview process were

11

12 306 conducted till the updated list of respondents was completed.

13

14

15 307 Qualitative interviews are an indispensable tool for researchers, facilitating the

16

17 308 exploration and comprehension of phenomena beyond the reach of direct

18

19 309 measurement or observation (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, the qualitative interview

20

21

22 310 method can capture the rich, contextually detailed experiences of participants, which

23

24 311 structured surveys and quantitative methods may not adequately provide (Mayoux,

25

26 312 1998; Roodman and Morduch, 2014; Ganle, Afriyie and Segbefia, 2015). For

27

28 313 qualitative research methodology, the snowball sampling method was utilised to

29

30

31 314 ensure comprehensive coverage of targeted but difficult-to-reach populations and to

32

33 315 enhance efficacy in accessing hidden communities (Noy, 2008). In-depth semi-

34

35 316 structured interviews were conducted with 28 Indian women from rural locales. The

36

37

38 317 semi structured interview format was adopted to facilitate discovery of themes

39

40 318 important for the new themes to emerge. Questions covered aspects of empowerment

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42 319 based on inclusion and exclusion with the role of the public sector, corporate sector

43

44

45 320 and education sector. The determination of the sample size was guided by the concept

46

47 321 of saturation. According to Glaser and Strauss (2017) and Mason (2010), the sample

48

49 322 for the present study was deemed adequate when subsequent data collection ceased to

50

51 323 produce novel information, indicating that saturation had been obtained. Respondents

52

53

54 324 in the study were provided with an interview guide designed to inform them about the

55

56 325 critical aspects of the research, as well as their rights as participants. Three field

57

58 326 workers who had knowledge of Hindi, Rajasthani, and English were appointed to

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2

3 327 conduct the interviews over a period of 5 months. Each interview lasted for a duration

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5 328 of about 40 minutes to an hour. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the

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8 329 participants.

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10 330 Semi-structured interviews involve multiple steps to analyse the data

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12 331 collected. These steps include entering the interview responses into a computer

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14

15 332 system, summarising key points, organising the information, highlighting important

16

17 333 quotes, assigning codes or categories to parts of the text, and determining major

18

19 334 themes that emerge from the participant responses (Alam, 2020). The interview

20

21

22 335 recordings were transcribed and translated from a mix of Hindi and Rajasthani local

23

24 336 languages into English. The transcriptions were cross-checked with interview field

25

26 337 notes to ensure accuracy. Furthermore, interview participants were given the

27

28 338 opportunity to review the transcriptions and provide feedback, which might include

29

30

31 339 corrections or clarifications. The transcripts were then updated to incorporate

32

33 340 participants’ feedback.

34

35 341 Inductive coding during the analysis process highlighted themes specific to

36

37

38 342 women empowerment. Data coding functions as a bridge between the acquisition and

39

40 343 examination of data (Saldaña, 2021). The qualitative data was analysed using NVivo

41

42 344 12.0. The software was helpful for managing the coding process. In the coding

43

44

45 345 process, the revised transcripts were analysed, and relevant sections were coded with

46

47 346 tags that identify key themes or categories within the data. Lastly, the codes and

48

49 347 categories were further analysed through triangulation of relevant documents and

50

51 348 observation field notes. Data was scanned by the software for frequency and usage of

52

53

54 349 terms used during the interviews, to map and draw themes as the sentiments of the

55

56 350 respondents. Use of inductive methods for analysing sentiment data led to emergence

57

58 351 of themes which were expanded into sub-themes (Table 2).

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8 354 Insert Table 2 about here.

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15 357 Most of the themes and sub-themes identified during the analysis matched

16

17 358 with the literature and reflected on some of the arguments made by previous studies,

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19 359 thereby indicating the grounded understanding of the themes. The figure 1 presents

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21

22 360 the method followed for collection and adopted for analysis of data by the authors for

23

24 361 this study.

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26 362

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28 363 ======

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30

31 364 Insert Figure 1 about here.

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33 365 ======

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37

38 367 This study was carried out in a rural area of India with purposively selected

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40 368 participants. So, the findings of the study should be interpreted in the given context of

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42 369 the village. The researchers were also focused on the relevance of the comments

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44

45 370 made by the respondents and their credibility. The transcriptions were initially created

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47 371 in local language and later translated to English for consistency in interpretation by at

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49 372 least two researchers who coded and later read each transcript independently.

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51 373 Whenever there was a difference in interpretation between both the researchers, they

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53

54 374 resolved and concluded after extensive rounds of discussions.

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58 376 **Findings**

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3 377 Invariably women discussed the impact of opportunities of employment in the context

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5 378 of agriculture or related settings and less related to commercial setups. Impact of

6

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8 379 employment on empowerment was therefore relative and individualistic. Progress

Qualitative Market Research

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10 380 experienced by women was not measurable against a defined criterion, but on a

11

12 381 personal definition of each woman. Every woman took account of their role in the

13

14

15 382 society and their personal responsibilities towards their family. Furthermore, every

16

17 383 participant did not perceive the value that employment would contribute to their lives

18

19 384 in any way either individually or cumulatively social, physical, or emotional.

20

21

22 385 Therefore, for presenting our findings, first we describe perceptions of women about

23

24 386 overall impact of skill development and their holistic evaluation of the impact of

25

26 387 employment opportunities followed by a description of the ways in which they

27

28 388 measure and evaluate empowerment. Table 3 presents the finds and implications of

29

30

31 389 this research.

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35 391 =======

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37

38 392 Insert Table 3 about here.

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40 393 =======

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44

45 395 *Barriers to Employability*

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47 396 It would not be easy to overestimate the effect of skill development and employment

48

49 397 opportunities on women living in rural areas with their families (Van den Broek,

50

51 398 2020). The quotations below illustrate the underlying issues in relation to participants

52

53

54 399 taking up employment in a commercial setup. A main point raised by almost all the

55

56 400 respondents was in line with previous literature about their ability to engage in the

57

58 401 activities beyond what they are involved in, as a negative impact of expansion of the

1

2

3 402 scope or periphery of their activities beyond what they consider as their

4

5 403 responsibilities and what they are fulfilling today (Moser, 1989; Razavi, 2011). One

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7

8 404 of the rural local women as respondents was able to express her position about

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 405 freedom and participation to opportunities in relation to financial independence as:

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12 406

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14

15 407 *“My working towards financial independence will create complications in*

16

17 408 *many ways. First, it will increase my current workload because my going out*

18

19 409 *to learn new skills and take up employment will increase my workload as it*

20

21

22 410 *will not enable me to get rid of my responsibilities at home. I will always be*

23

24 411 *responsible for all the domestic chores and my children. Second, if I start*

25

26 412 *bringing in money, men at home will stop making efforts to bring in the*

27

28 413 *current income and their contribution will disappear. Third, if I go away for*

29

30

31 414 *employment, my children will not be looked after by anyone”.*

32

33 415

34

35 416 Most of the interviewees identified profound ways in which taking up

36

37

38 417 employment after learning new skills would impact their lives (Datta and Sahu, 2021).

39

40 418 Some of the respondents reported the social pressure as one of the main issues they

41

42 419 faced, emphasising that the societal norms had a far-reaching effect on their lives and

43

44

45 420 activities they take up, thereby, impacting all aspects of their lives (Mo et al. 2022).

46

47 421 Some of the rural local women participants mentioned these in soft words, but some

48

49 422 were highly stirred by this and expressed their perspective in following words:

50

51

52 423

53

54 424 *“I do not make choices. These are the prerogatives of my first family and my*

55

56 425 *extended family. My family will not want me to go and learn these kinds of*

57

58 426 *skills that may enable me to bring in remuneration from an employer due to a*

1

2

3 427 *fear that after marriage I might want to go out to earn money or if I might stop*

4

5 428 *caring about my husband or his family after becoming financially*

6

7

8 429 *independent. The rules are set and the way I must lead my life has already*

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 430 *been decided by my first and extended family. None of them will support me if*

11

12 431 *I say I want to go out and take up employment. Neither will they want me to*

13

14

15 432 *explore what they have not been exposed to”.*

16

17 433

18

19 434 *Lack of Access to Opportunities for Employment*

20

21

22 435 The interconnectedness of government, educators, and companies in driving financial

23

24 436 independence of women was evident in many examples such as a training institute

25

26 437 that was previously delivering skill-based training in the village but did not offer any

27

28 438 information or knowledge about skill-based employment opportunities (Fujimoto and

29

30

31 439 Uddin, 2021; Spark et al. 2021). One of the rural local women who had experienced

32

33 440 hardship in job search after taking up training from this provider epitomised the

34

35 441 problem from her perspective:

36

37

38 442

39

40 443 *“I waited for ten months to get a job. I applied at many places, but I was not*

41

42 444 *getting a job despite having two certificates as I did not have any work*

43

44

45 445 *experience. There are no internship opportunities available in my village. We*

46

47 446 *do not have any industry here. To gain experience, I will have to travel every*

48

49 447 *day to the city, for which I do not have any means of travelling. So, I had to*

50

51 448 *stop dreaming of taking up a job and becoming financially independent.”*

52

53

54 449

55

56 450 It was clear that few respondents felt that financial independence is not meant

57

58 451 for them as there are no opportunities and even if opportunities were available, the

1

2

3 452 social structure and social norms in which they live their lives, do not allow or enable

4

5 453 them to become financially independent (Schildkrout, 2023). The other set of

6

7

8 454 respondents reflected inline with previous research that skill development

Qualitative Market Research

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10 455 opportunities are available to them, but they find it very difficult to take up

11

12 456 employment (Rietveld et al. 2020), and explained it further as getting employed will

13

14

15 457 mean change of lifestyle and travelling every day and they are not equipped to take up

16

17 458 employment opportunities.

18

19 459 Almost all respondents recognised their observations about the change in the

20

21

22 460 confidence of women who take or do not take-up employment. One of the

23

24 461 respondents spoke positively about the change and the transition of the rural local

25

26 462 women who become financially independent and feel empowered (Schildkrout,

27

28 463 2023), due to their contribution to decisions being made about their own lives and

29

30

31 464 participate in issues related to their family as:

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33 465

34

35 466 *“Women who are financially independent have a wonderful life. They can*

36

37

38 467 *decide what they want from their life and what they would like to do with their*

39

40 468 *children. Since I am not earning, I have no authority in my family, and no one*

41

42 469 *asks me or seeks my opinion about any of the family matters. I would like to*

43

44

45 470 *learn some skills and take up employment in a company so that me and my*

46

47 471 *family can live better lives”.*

48

49 472

50

51 473 Based on the interpretations made by these researchers, this study explicitly

52

53

54 474 explains the need for the government, education sector and corporate sector to come

55

56 475 together to make women empowerment through skill development programmes a

57

58 476 reality. In this study, we have tried to uncover what mattered most to the women who

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2

3 477 need empowerment and how they view skill development as a tool for empowerment.

4

5 478 Findings of our research confirm many of the findings reported by previously

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7

8 479 published research articles and offer further evidence that strengthens the need for

Qualitative Market Research

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10 480 collaboration between government, companies, and educators.

11

12 481 Women empowerment and skill development programmes is an agenda of 5th

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14

15 482 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) and the 2030 agenda for sustainable

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17 483 development. Numerous studies that have explored the empowerment of women

18

19 484 emphasised on achievement of financial independence by taking up employment

20

21

22 485 opportunities through skill development (e.g., Jabbar and Zaza, 2016; Tawiah and

23

24 486 Setlhodi, 2020; Sheshadri, Pradeep and Chandran, 2021). For instance, Thorne (2021)

25

26 487 conducted qualitative research with 25 women in Jordan. This study demonstrated

27

28 488 that skill development empowers women by enhancing their financial capabilities

29

30

31 489 with social interaction due to their ability to get employed. Authors report that

32

33 490 financial independence women achieved through improved employment capability

34

35 491 also boosted their self-esteem, self-assurance, and overall well-being. Several specific

36

37

38 492 skill training programs have been introduced and executed by social enterprises to

39

40 493 assist women in becoming independent and confident.

41

42 494 Burney *et al* (2017) and Shiradkar *et al* (2023) explored the impact of

43

44

45 495 sustainable energy programmes, specifically solar energy, on women’s empowerment

46

47 496 in South Africa and India. Jie Chen and Chindarkar (2017) examined the ‘barefoot

48

49 497 mechanics’ program in India, which specifically trains women to repair village water

50

51 498 hand pumps. As reported by the authors, this program equipped them with non-

52

53

54 499 agricultural skills and opened opportunities for them in the labour market. These

55

56 500 studies provide evidence that skill development significantly impacts employment

57

58 501 capability and increases financial independence of women. Additionally, these studies

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2

3 502 validate the potential for rural women to engage in non-agricultural employment,

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5 503 thereby contributing to the family income. Realising financial independence leads to

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8 504 experiencing increased levels of independence, self-confidence, and self-satisfaction,

Qualitative Market Research

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10 505 it also equips them with greater authority in making decisions related to household

11

12 506 expenditures, showcasing the profound impact of financial independence on their

13

14

15 507 lives and the well-being of their families (Burney *et al.*, 2017; Jie Chen and

16

17 508 Chindarkar, 2017; Shiradkar *et al.*, 2023).

18

19 509

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21

22 510 *Role of Social Entrepreneur*

23

24 511 The previous literature underscores the transformative power of skill development in

25

26 512 changing the socio-economic dynamics for rural women (Kabeer, 2011). Scholars

27

28 513 have explained how skill development can enhance employment capabilities with

29

30

31 514 opportunities in the non-agricultural labour market that improves opportunities

32

33 515 available to women for generating income and achieving financial independence

34

35 516 (Baiphethi and Jacobs, 2009). While acknowledging women's contribution to

36

37

38 517 agriculture considering how they carry a disproportionate share of the effort in these

39

40 518 settings, equipping them with non-agricultural skill training, there is an opportunity to

41

42 519 diversify their income sources. The required diversification will depend on the

43

44

45 520 dynamic relationships among various factors, interactions, and boundaries that

46

47 521 innovatively facilitate the flow of materials, infrastructure, and information. It also

48

49 522 reflects on the roles of different stakeholders engaged in the process of enabling

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51 523 transfer. For this, the role of education will move beyond provider of established

52

53

54 524 knowledge to an innovator as provider of inclusive education by creating specific

55

56 525 context-based knowledge through research and responsibly delivering this knowledge

57

58 526 through social engagement with or without digital transformation for learning in the

1

2

3 527 modules of teaching or training. This diversification will not only enhance their

4

5 528 economic stability but also can diminish their susceptibility to poverty penalty,

6

7

8 529 ensuring a more resilient and sustainable livelihood with reduction in domestic and

Qualitative Market Research

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10 530 sexual abuse (Sharaunga, 2019). The social entrepreneur managing the skill

11

12 531 development centre for women in the village reflected on the complexity of the

13

14

15 532 situation in following words:

16

17 533 *“The skill development programmes in villages focus mainly on training them*

18

19 534 *to work in the informal sector, wherein the condition is not healthy, and the*

20

21

22 535 *situation is quite miserable because they tend to work on very low wages and*

23

24 536 *there is no job or financial security. Hence, the current format is unable to*

25

26 537 *improve the quality of their lives. To improve the situation, the government*

27

28 538 *should devise policies which encourage companies to employ women from*

29

30

31 539 *rural areas and enable facilitators like me to be updated on the skills that*

32

33 540 *corporates need, so that we can in turn train these women.”*

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35 541

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38 542 ***Discussion***

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40 543 *Inclusion for Empowerment*

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42 544 This study examined the extent to which societal support received by women

43

44

45 545 encourages them to learn and use new skills for making decisions involving finances

46

47 546 and feel included (Rosener, 2011). The expert interviews conducted with women who

48

49 547 worked for fashion brands before COVID-19 in the state of Rajasthan, India

50

51 548 experienced exclusion from the employment structure because those local

52

53

54 549 entrepreneurs who were engaging them in the jobs, had to close their businesses

55

56 550 during COVID period. This impacted the socio-economic status of women in rural

57

58 551 India much more than those in urban areas because they could not go back to work. In

1

2

3 552 line with previous research respondents reflected on the need for a supportive societal

4

5 553 framework that can foster an environment where women are encouraged to acquire

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7

8 554 new skills, pursue opportunities, and realise their full potential, thereby facilitating

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 555 their holistic empowerment. Sheshadri, Pradeep and Chandran (2021) conducted a

11

12 556 qualitative study among 16 women in India to identify the factors that either

13

14

15 557 encourage or discourage women to register themselves for vocational training

16

17 558 programmes. They pinpointed several barriers that impede women’s enrolment in

18

19 559 vocational training. These obstacles include perceived risks associated with the

20

21

22 560 training, a limited understanding of the benefits and processes of skill training,

23

24 561 challenges arising from population mobility, and constraints related to the time

25

26 562 availability of potential participants. Consequently, Sheshadri, Pradeep, and Chandran

27

28 563 (2021) advocated for increased government intervention and allocation of resources to

29

30

31 564 bolster the skill development initiatives for women, emphasising the need to address

32

33 565 the identified barriers and ensure their effective participation in vocational training

34

35 566 programs.

36

37

38 567 Our investigation revealed that focusing on employability is of utmost

39

40 568 importance for promoting women empowerment in rural areas. To achieve this goal, it

41

42 569 is vital for the government to undertake a thorough assessment to determine the

43

44

45 570 specific skill training required (Sharaunga, 2019; Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2022). By

46

47 571 understanding their unique needs and challenges, tailored programs can be developed

48

49 572 to ensure effective skill acquisition and empowerment. Indeed, Shan, Liu and Li

50

51 573 (2015) reinforced this viewpoint in their study centred on rural women in China. They

52

53

54 574 stressed the vital role of the government, as well as other relevant stakeholders such

55

56 575 as NPOs, NGOs and educational institutions, in offering support and dedicating

57

58 576 resources to boost skill development programs for these women. Their research

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2

3 577 underscores the impact of common challenges and requirements, irrespective of

4

5 578 cultural and geographical differences. Concurrently, Jabbar and Zaza (2016)

6

7

8 579 highlighted the importance of engagement from major global entities like UN Women

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 580 in rural women’s skill development initiatives. They advocated for these organisations

11

12 581 to work collaboratively with local governments, playing a role in overseeing and

13

14

15 582 evaluating the effectiveness of skill training programs tailored for these women. Our

16

17 583 respondents also confirmed that such a partnership with engagement of a social

18

19 584 entrepreneur can ensure that the women empowerment programs are well-

20

21

22 585 implemented, impactful, and aligned with the exclusive needs and contexts.

23

24 586

25

26 587 *National System of Innovation for Inclusion and Empowerment*

27

28 588 Even though our findings confirm the role of various actors in empowering women in

29

30

31 589 rural areas, the case of women working as artisans for fashion brands in remote areas

32

33 590 of Rajasthan reflect on the ability of a structured approach when coordinated by a

34

35 591 social entrepreneur who can support women in their local environment to remove

36

37

38 592 barriers they face to take up employment or lack of access to opportunities available

39

40 593 to them, by bringing in resources required from corporates. Simultaneously, the

41

42 594 findings explain that engagement of social entrepreneur with policy makers and

43

44

45 595 enterprises can create flow of information and knowledge to innovatively increase

46

47 596 contributions made by local enterprises towards creation of jobs for women.

48

49 597 Literature reflects on the National System of Innovation as a framework that

50

51 598 facilitates smooth flow of information between a network of stakeholders for

52

53

54 599 innovatively finding solutions to social issues. Technology assisted flow of

55

56 600 information amongst stakeholders for empowerment of women can bring right people

57

58 601 together and foster a system of collaboration that can shape the education system and

1

2

3 602 labour markets with support of regulatory policies (Mok, 2005; Chatterton and

4

5 603 Goddard, 2000). The Triple Helix Model of Innovation draws upon the National

6

7

8 604 System of Innovation to explain how interactions between different actors who

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 605 independently create or activate policy frameworks can come together to foster

11

12 606 development (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 1995). The creation and activation of

13

14

15 607 developmental initiatives when supported by enterprises create opportunities of

16

17 608 employment for people who have acquired skills through decentralised training and

18

19 609 education offered by the education sector (Liu and White, 2001; Watkins *et al.*, 2015).

20

21

22 610 The conceptualised model explains how corporations can innovatively mobilise jobs

23

24 611 in cooperation with universities. Simultaneously, it reflects on the role of interaction

25

26 612 between government and education apart from interaction between industry and

27

28 613 government with interactions between education and industry. These initiatives

29

30

31 614 mobilise social development that ultimately led to reduction in domestic violence and

32

33 615 sexual abuse through women empowerment.

34

35 616 While a lot has been written about women empowerment and challenges of

36

37

38 617 women in rural areas (Ahmed, 2016; Mishra, 2014; Moyo *et al.*, 2012), there is

39

40 618 limited attention from academics who have investigated the process of women

41

42 619 empowerment using the lens of the National System of Innovation. Some of the

43

44

45 620 previous studies related to women empowerment have discussed promoting inclusion

46

47 621 of the impoverished by reducing inequality and promoting gender equality (Grown *et*

48

49 622 *al.*, 2005; Chant, 2016; Subramanian, 2003; Luhmann, 1982). Quite a few theoretical

50

51 623 perspectives on women empowerment emerge from the available body of knowledge

52

53

54 624 about women empowerment (Table 1) and the key concept in most of these studies

55

56 625 has been financial independence of women to be developed via opportunities of

57

58 626 employment offered by the corporate sector to those with certified skills and

1

2

3 627 identified level of education.

4

5 628 In this study, we have focused on the need for collaborative efforts from

6

7

8 629 government, education, and corporations in empowering women. The qualitative

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 630 approach to further investigation of exploration was sought to identify what mattered

11

12 631 to women the most for their empowerment and how they perceived their

13

14

15 632 employability as a driver of their inclusion in the labour market and how it

16

17 633 encouraged them to take up leadership or entrepreneurial approach. Considering

18

19 634 reflections gathered from insights from experts combined backed up with previous

20

21

22 635 research studies on various other factors, a conceptual framework is presented as

23

24 636 Figure 2.

25

26 637

27

28 638 =======

29

30

31 639 Insert Figure 2 about here.

32

33 640 =======

34

35 641

36

37

38 642 This study has implications and recommends that there is a need for

39

40 643 collaborative effort from all stakeholders to create a context wherein women feel

41

42 644 empowered. Our study draws attention to many facets of societal issues alongside

43

44

45 645 operational issues in implementation of policies and programmes designed by the

46

47 646 government for social development. Attention to these different types of facets by

48

49 647 academic research community and practitioner community in government, education,

50

51 648 and corporate sector together, should result in better understanding and greater impact

52

53

54 649 on women empowerment. The initiatives of the government for empowerment of

55

56 650 women in rural areas have failed because of the lack of opportunities and facilities. A

57

58 651 focus on development by promoting employment attracting skills will secure jobs for

1

2

3 652 women. The entry of women in these areas into the job market will have revolutionise

4

5 653 the quality of their lives and bring prosperity with improved infrastructure and

6

7

8 654 financial capabilities of residents to act like consumers in urban areas, Availability of

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 655 larger number of productive citizens will have the ability to pull many of them out of

11

12 656 poverty and reduce cases of sexual harassment.

13

14

15 657 The findings of this research also suggest that stakeholders need to consider

16

17 658 the need for greater family and societal support to enhance rural women's

18

19 659 employability and empowerment. More training and policy initiatives could be

20

21

22 660 conducted and extended to families and societies in rural areas to address barriers for

23

24 661 women and reshape societal perceptions to achieve their employability and

25

26 662 empowerment. Moreover, support for rural women should not only focus on helping

27

28 663 them develop working skills or providing financial support but should also offer

29

30

31 664 relevant work or internship opportunities to further engage them and provide

32

33 665 necessary facilities to reduce their costs. This requires collaboration among related

34

35 666 stakeholders, especially the government, educators, and industry.

36

37

38 667 The academic evidence of the efficacy and importance of skill development

39

40 668 and financial support for women's employability and empowerment in rural areas

41

42 669 provided by this research is in line with previous research (e.g., Thorne, 2021; Chen

43

44

45 670 and Chindarkar, 2017; Sheshadri, Pradeep, and Chandran, 2021). Our research

46

47 671 enriches the theory by investigating and providing a novel framework based on the

48

49 672 National System of Innovation. We gained more insights from women in rural areas

50

51 673 to identify what mattered most to them for their empowerment and how they

52

53

54 674 perceived their employability as a driver of their inclusion in the labour market and

55

56 675 how it encouraged them to take up leadership or entrepreneurial roles. This

57

58 676 comprehensive framework includes considerations of related stakeholders and cultural

1

2

3 677 and societal challenges for rural women to achieve empowerment in both spiritual and

4

5 678 economic independence.

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8 679

Qualitative Market Research

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10 680 **Conclusion**

11

12 681 This research provides crucial insights into the challenges and opportunities related to

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15 682 women's employability and empowerment, especially in rural areas and emphasises

16

17 683 on the significant impact of family obligations and societal norms as major barriers to

18

19 684 women's employability, highlighting the need for greater familial and societal support

20

21

22 685 needed to address these challenges. Our findings also stress the importance of

23

24 686 providing women with access to opportunities for empowerment through support in

25

26 687 skill development, the provisioning of necessary facilities, and a reshaping of societal

27

28 688 perceptions, all crucial for enhancing employability and ensuring comprehensive

29

30

31 689 empowerment (Obayelu and Chime, 2020).

32

33 690 The study further identifies the critical role of industry, government, and

34

35 691 academia in aligning skill development with labour market needs, particularly tailored

36

37

38 692 to the unique circumstances of women under investigation. This collaborative

39

40 693 approach is vital for improving the efficiency, manageability, and applicability of

41

42 694 initiatives aimed at enhancing rural women's skills. Despite the obvious importance of

43

44

45 695 this tripartite engagement, there remains a significant research gap in evaluating these

46

47 696 sectors' contributions to underscoring the need for more thorough investigations to

48

49 697 optimise this collaboration (Tiwari and Malati, 2023). In conclusion, this research

50

51 698 offers both managerial and theoretical contributions.

52

53

54 699 *Managerial Contribution:* Findings of this study provide actionable strategies for

55

56 700 managers of enterprises who engage with women in rural areas to contribute to

57

58 701 empowerment of women by getting engaged in skill development programmes of

1

2

3 702 women coordinated by social entrepreneurs. The discussion about role of enterprises

4

5 703 in this study also reflects on the contribution they can make to the attainment of

6

7

8 704 objectives related to sustainable development goals related to inclusion of women in

Qualitative Market Research

9

10 705 the commercial space. Offering knowledge required by women to get ready for

11

12 706 available jobs and resources required by social entrepreneur as infrastructure to

13

14

15 707 successfully and smoothly run skill development programmes can add incremental

16

17 708 value to role played by an enterprise or a company to the empowerment of women in

18

19 709 rural areas.

20

21

22 710 *Theoretical Contribution:* The findings of this research expand the boundary of our

23

24 711 understanding about mechanism required to empower women and contributes to the

25

26 712 academic discussions by situating women's empowerment within the interplay of

27

28 713 societal norms, economic opportunities, and collaborative innovation systems. These

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30

31 714 insights deepen the understanding and applicability of our findings in both practical

32

33 715 settings and scholarly debates, emphasising the ongoing need for research and cross-

34

35 716 sector engagement.

36

37

38 717 *Future Research:* Since the findings of our research lack support evidential support

39

40 718 offered by quantitative methods, future studies should try to hypothesize and

41

42 719 empirically test the propositions being made by the conceptualisation offered by this

43

44

45 720 research. Empirical testing of the framework proposed will also strengthen the

46

47 721 current model of public-private partnership and bring in the social entrepreneurs or

48

49 722 social enterprises as important actors who not only can coordinate, but can also work

50

51 723 as quality assurance and quality control auditors.

52

53

54 724

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1. 963 Figure 1. Data Collection and Analysis Process
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29 966 Figure 2. Empowering Rural Women

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Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal Page 36 of 44

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1. 967 Table 1. A Summary of Selected Studies on inclusion of rural women through skill development
2. Study of analysis Research sample and context

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Method Theory underpinning

Major findings

Acquiring skills empowers rural women by enhancing their abilities in areas

1. Thorne (2021) 25 women
2. in Jordan

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Semi-structured interview

Capability Approach

like social interactions (such as communication), securing employment, and fostering independence. This skill enhancement not only boosts their overall well-being but also elevates their self-esteem and self-assurance.

14 Chen and Chindarkar

15 (2017)

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212 women in India empirical model

test

N/A Women who have received training excel beyond those without training in every aspect of employment and income metrics.

Skill development programs in rural areas that are inclusive of both genders

17 Sheshadri, Pradeep

18 and Chandran (2021)

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Qualitative Market Research

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16 women in India

Semi-structured N/A interview

provide women with advantages like broader access to education and training, improved job prospects, economic self-sufficiency, and the growth of their communities.

Skills in business management, agricultural production, and other key resources, including social connections and infrastructure access, played a

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24 Sharaunga (2019)

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29 Tawiah and Setlhodi

300 households in rural

South Africa

ordered logit model

sustainable livelihood framework

human

pivotal role in reducing poverty. However, they were not sufficient to entirely lift households from impoverished conditions. Similarly, households led by older primary women, who derived more income from social benefits and had greater contributions from their husbands, experienced some relief from poverty but still could not completely escape it.

Incorporating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the

30 (2020) N/A Document analysis

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capital theory

women’s empowerment

educational curriculum for rural women can significantly drive their socio- economic advancement.

1. Shan, Liu and Li
2. (2015)

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China Document analysis

literature review

framework & social-relations approach

Vocational education promotes equality for women in terms of well-being,

accessibility, awareness, involvement, and authority.

Page 37 of 44 Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal

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1. Shiradkar *et al.*, 313 women in India
2. (2023)

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Longitudinal data N/A analysis

Skill training can improve rural women’s self-confidence, decision-making and satisfaction. Women’s satisfaction level strongly associates with education, income, and occupation

9 Jabbar and Zaza

10 (2016)

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26 female Syrian refugees

in Jordan

Structured N/A interview

Rural

Skill training improves women’s self-confidence and self-esteem. Organisations under the UN may conduct regular assessments of the results. Society support is vital for rural women to achieve their well-being.

Content and educators play more essential roles compared with the learner and environment.

15 Ebrahimi *et al.*, (2022) 162 women in Iran Questionnaire

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women empowerment

Skill training enhances women’s financial independence, empowering them economically. It is imperative for the government to extend the required support, such as setting up training programs, to augment women’s skills in decision-making, communication, and social interactions.

19 Burney *et al.*, (2017) 717 women in West Africa

Qualitative Market Research

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Questionnaire N/A Training related to the programme positively impacts women's

empowerment, especially financial independence.

Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal Page 38 of 44

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1. 969 Table 2. Summary of Data Analysis
2. Theme Sub-Theme
3. Corporate sector Engagement Identifying skills
4. Certifying training

Qualitative Market Research

1. Providing internships
2. Certifying provider
3. Public sector Engagement Monitoring employment
4. Monitoring attendance
5. Monitoring credibility

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1. Education sector Engagement Curriculum Development
2. Trainer certification
3. Assessment
4. Women Employability Higher income
5. Reduction in poverty parity
6. Inclusion of women
7. Women Inclusion Independence
8. Freedom of decision making
9. Self confidence
10. Well-being
11. Women Empowerment Women entrepreneurship
12. Women leadership
13. Reduced domestic violence
14. Reduced sexual abuse

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Page 39 of 44 Qualitative Market Research: an International Journal

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1. 972 Table 3. Table of Findings and Implication
2. No. Description of Findings Implication
3. 1 Barriers to Women's
4. Employability

Family obligations and societal norms often hinder women's employability. Enhanced support from both family and society is

1. crucial to overcome these barriers.

Qualitative Market Research

1. 2 Access to Opportunities for
2. Women's Empowerment

Supports in skill development, opportunities, facilities, and societal perceptions are necessary to foster women's

1. employability and empowerment.
2. 3 Collaborations for Women's
3. Empowerment

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Providing non-agricultural skill training diversifies women's income sources, reducing their susceptibility to poverty.

Collaborations among stakeholders promote inclusive, context- based knowledge creation and delivery.

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19 4 National Innovation System for Developed a comprehensive research framework that includes

20 Women's Empowerment government, educators, and industry to address cultural and

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 societal challenges and achieve women's empowerment.

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7 **Reviewer: 1**

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**3rd Review Comments on 6/13/2024**

9 Recommendation: Minor Revision

Qualitative Market Research

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13 Additional Questions:

14 1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify

15

16 publication?: The topic of the paper is good and relevant to the special issue. But **there is no**

17 **reference to the post-pandemic era.**

18

19 *Thank you for your feedback. We have added the context of post-pandemic in the initial part of*

20 *the introduction section. For details, please refer to first 12 lines in the first paragraph of the*

21 *introduction section (Lines 17-29).*

22

23

24

25 2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the

26 relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any

27

28 significant work ignored?: The literature review has improved. but **there is no justification for**

29 **why the National System of Innovation is being adopted as a theoretical lens.**

30

31 *Thank you for your feedback. Please refer to second paragraph in the introduction section*

32 *wherein we have included the justification for the theoretical lens of National System of*

33 *Innovation (Lines 30-42).*

34

35

36

37 3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or

38 other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been

39

40 well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: **What are the criteria for the subject**

41 **experts? It says that the sampling process went through refinement 5 times. Why?**

42

43 *Thank you for notifying us of this gap in the sentence formation. We have completed the sentence*

44 *as “The sampling process underwent refinement five times because we had to ensure that the*

45 *participants had experience and a view that is aligned with the aim of our research” (Lines 303-*

46 *306).*

47

48

49

50 4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions

51

52 adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: **The quotes have not been identified to**

53 **specific respondents as claimed in the table of responses to reviewers.**

1

2

3 The findings and discussion are now integrated into one section. However, **there is**

4 **inconsistency in using the literature review to discuss the findings or using the data to**

5

6 **present findings**. For example**, in section 4.1 there is no reference to the literature review at**

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7 **all.** In **section 4.3. there is only one direct quote being used to support arguments**. For

8 sections **4.4, 4.5 and 4.6, no evidence from the findings is included**. Some parts of the

9 discussion **read like a literature review instead of a discussion of findings (e.g. sections 4.4**

10

11 **and 4.5). Separating the findings and discussion would have improved the quality of the**

12 **Findings and Discussion section.**

13

14 **Some of the discussion sections should be moved to the conclusions**

15

16 *Thank you for your observations. We have updated the discussion and findings section with*

17 *relevant literature in subsections of section entitled findings, which was earlier numbered as*

18 *section 4 with sub-sections 4.1 and so on. Furthermore, as suggested, we have separated the*

19 *sections earlier numbered as 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6 now as discussion section. The three subsections of*

20

21 *findings sections each have 2 quotations and the last one has one quotation. The discussion*

22 *section has been improved with more discussion around the findings.*

23

24

25

1. 5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any
2. implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory

28 and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in

29 teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What

30

1. is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these
2. implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: . **Managerial**

33 **implications should be put in a separate section.**

34

35 *Thank you for your feedback. The managerial implications have been put in a separate section*

36 *after the conclusion (Line 699).*

37

38

39

40 6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the

41 technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has

42

43 attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon

44 use, acronyms, etc.: **Communication has improved.**

45

46 *Thank you for your encouraging feedback.*

47

48

49

50 **Page 4 line 47, Remove “.” Between growth and (Joseph, 2020…)**

51 *Thank you. The “.” Has been removed.*

52

53

54

55 **Add space between “De” and “Nmark” in DeNmark 1993**

1

2

3 *Thank you. A space has been added between “De” and “Nmark”.*

4

5

6

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7 **Please check that the full stop between sentences and citations are removed.**

8

9 *Thank you. The full stop between sentences and citations have been removed.*

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3 **Reviewer: 2**

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7 Recommendation: Minor Revision

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11 Comments:

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13 Overall, your study was well conducted and used some rigorous methods. I have only few

14 comments for further improvement of your study.

15

16

17

18 **In your introduction, you could clarify the contributions of your study to the theory**

19 **further; in this section could elaborate how the study contributes or builds on Luhmannian**

20 **theory or the theory of empowerment**.

21

22 *Thank you for your feedback. We have added few lines to explain how our research expands the*

23 *scope of Luhmannian theory and theory of empowerment in the context of empowerment of*

24

25 *women in the rural areas via skill development and employment opportunities (Lines 130-133).*

26

27

28 **In your literature review, you could provide more elaboration of the Luhmannian theory.**

29

30 **Also it would be better if you could provide an exclusive focus on the chosen theories rather**

31 **than referring to some wider theories such as Triple Helix model or you could provide a**

32 **clearer link between the wider theories referred and the underlying theories of the study.**

33

34 *Thank you for your feedback. The linkages and embeddedness of Luhmannian theory and theory*

35 *of empowerment has been explained in the second paragraph of third section entitled “skill*

36

37 *development for women empowerment (Line 156)” and fourth section of literature review*

38 *entitled “strategic partnerships for women empowerment (Line 200)”*

39

40 **In the research method, you could provide more elaboration of your recruitment process**

41

42 *Thank you for your feedback. The recruitment process of respondents and criteria used to recruit*

43 *them has been explained in the methodology section. Please refer to second paragraph of the*

44 *methodology section for details (Lines 294-306).*

45

46

47

48 Additional Questions:

49

50 1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify

51 publication?: Overall, this is an interesting study focusing on an important research phenomenon

52 by aiming to understand how firms can contribute to the achievement of the SDG associated with

53

54 women empowerment through skill development and job creation programmes. In general, this

55

1

2

3 was a well conducted study and contains new and significant information which is needed for

4 publishing. Still, I would be giving a few recommendations for further improvement of the study.

5

6

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7

8 2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the

9 relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any

10

11 significant work ignored?: Yes, the literature review was appropriately conducted, however, I

12 will have a few minor comments for improvement

13

14

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16 3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or

17 other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been

18 well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: The methodology was rigorous

19

20

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22 4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions

23 adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: Yes, they were well presented

24

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27 5. Implications for research, practice and/or society: Does the paper identify clearly any

28 implications for research, practice and/or society? Does the paper bridge the gap between theory

29

30 and practice? How can the research be used in practice (economic and commercial impact), in

31 teaching, to influence public policy, in research (contributing to the body of knowledge)? What

32 is the impact upon society (influencing public attitudes, affecting quality of life)? Are these

33 implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: Yes implications were

34

35 sound and clear

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38 6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the

39

1. technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has
2. attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon

42 use, acronyms, etc.: Yes, clear communication of information was evident

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