

ROLE OF E-COMMERCE IN EMPOWERING WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THE INDIAN CRAFT SECTOR

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Abstract: The fast growth of online retail stores in the recent years has greatly altered many industries of the world economy and the craft industry is not an exception. This paper discusses the prospects of e-commerce as a way of empowering women entrepreneurs socio-economically and enabling them to become more active in the market in the craft sector. Historically, women artisans have been unable to address the challenges in the market as a result of which they do not have much room in achieving economic independence (Brush et al., 2009; Kabeer, 1999). However, the emergence of online market places has facilitated increased exposure, expanded reach and direct communication with consumers both at national and international levels. This paper brings to the fore the role played by e-commerce platforms in removing the traditional barriers such as geographical boundary, limited market penetration and gender related disadvantages using documentary data and applicable case studies. The paper also determines the role played by adoption of e-commerce on skill development, monetary inclusion, and general socio-economic empowerment of women artisans. It also examines the new challenges and opportunities linked to integrating digital platforms to the craft industry, including lack of digital literacy and infrastructural barriers as well as threats of competition.

Keywords: E-commerce, Women Entrepreneurs, Women Empowerment, Craft Sector, Digital Literacy, Financial Inclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is a massive source of crafts produced by different communities and the proficiency of most craftsmen is not known to anyone except women. Even though the craft industry has skilled women with new ideas, they are usually not able to execute them because of the socio-economic obstacles that are encountered by them when trying to put their entrepreneurial enthusiasm into practice. All these impediments together with mobility limitations, informal market insurances, and structural inadequacies like low literacy rates and patriarchy do not permit sustainable lives (SIDBI, 2021). However, this is not the case in this digital era. These are the artists who are residing in the most distant corners of our vast sub-continent have access to markets (Amazon Karigar , Flipkart Samarth etc) with which they can become linked with customers worldwide in real-time (Jain & Sharma, 2020; Kumar & Das, 2021). These platforms of marketing help Women Entrepreneurs to make their business findable, scalable and financially independent.

This paper examines the role of e-commerce in shaping business opportunities for women artisans and craft entrepreneurs across India by exploring contours of empowerment through digital platforms.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To examine the role of e-commerce in empowering women entrepreneurs in the Indian craft sector.

To identify the challenges faced by women artisans in adopting e-commerce platforms.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

In other studies the digital platform has been highlighted as having the capability to empower marginalized communities. In a report released by NITI Aayog in 2021, e-commerce has helped to increase access of artisans to Tier 2 and Tier 3 city markets. Digital inclusion, in its turn, requires diminishing gender differences in the workforce, according to the World Bank (2020). The dynamics between the digital technology, female empowerment, and the creative economy of India have been drawing an increasing amount of evidence. Altogether, these investigations show how the e-commerce could empower the female entrepreneurship and revolutionize the classical artisan industries.

In their paper, E-Commerce and Rural Artisans: Bridging the Market Gap, Jain and Sharma (2020) claim that online marketplaces have greatly helped rural artisans to de-intermediate and improve the price realization and market visibility. This is because their finding demonstrates the easiness and flexibility provided by internet marketing tools as female artisans are likely to be big beneficiaries.

Mehta and Jha (2019) wrote about the increased variety of choices that women who are representatives of historically marginalized groups have today because of the digital entrepreneurship. They have come to the conclusion that e-commerce allows women in rural and semi-urban locations to make informed decisions, feel self-confident, and improve their leader qualities in addition to generating cash.

In a field study, Kumar and Das (2021) examine the trajectories of the success of certain women-led weaving cooperatives in Odisha after being onboarded to e-commerce websites like GoCoop: Women Weavers in Odisha and the Digital Turn. Their results indicate that the number of artisans who had participated in digital skill-building programs and began to sell online increased by 25–40%

UNDP India (2018), in the report, Digital Literacy and Women's Economic Empowerment, discusses the relationship between e-commerce and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). The study has found out that women members of SHGs with some basic digital skills like listing products on cellphones or accepting payments through UPI were more likely to increase their customer base and reinvest their profits back into their companies.

The article by Dasgupta and Sengupta, 2022, titled Mobile Internet and the Financial Empowerment of Rural Women, published in the Asian Journal of Innovation and Policy, showed that the independence of women artisans to choose their income was increased by providing access to mobile wallets and internet banking. The trust of first-generation entrepreneurs in e-commerce platforms such as Meesho and Shop101 which allow social sale through mobile applications increased drastically.

The government efforts to digitise the works of artisans are reflected in the 2021 report by the Ministry of Textiles titled Handloom and Handicrafts in the Digital Economy, which covered digitalisation efforts in artisans via schemes such as Digital India, Skill India, and e-Haat Bazaars. It also reports success cases in such states as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and North East India when women have become one of the key income earners of their families by digital marketing their handmade craft products.

In a Women and E-Commerce: Access, Barriers, and Strategies study (OECD, 2020), India is mentioned as a typical example, in which technology facilitated through platforms is used to bridge the patriarchal divide in contemporary entrepreneurship in the employment field. It refers to the cases of government and individual technology firms partnerships which educate the women of the peripheries on how to cope with digital storefronts as a way of making the crafts industry more open and viable.

This implies that women-led businesses in the crafts industry enjoy the advantages of being integrated in one online platform according to research conducted by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER). Additionally, a study conducted on Okhai and GoCoop proves the way women should be trained to use basic computer skills and logistical skills to become more engaged in the digital economy.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The given research takes the qualitative descriptive research design, which is founded on a thorough examination of the secondary data. The study will be based on academic sources, governmental reports, institutional reports, policy reports, and case studies on women entrepreneurship, digital inclusion, and e-commerce in the Indian craft sector in previous studies already published. Peer-reviewed academic journals, reports that are published by national and international organizations (including the Ministry of Textiles, OECD, UNDP and World Bank) as well as working papers on the topic of digital empowerment and women-led business are included in the category of secondary sources collected. The sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and up-to-date nature, and to maintain the relevance related to being up-to-date, studies published since 2018 were chosen.

To systematically analyze the data, thematic analysis approach was used. The analyzed literature was classified based on the major themes that included market access, financial inclusion, digital literacy, socio-economic empowerment, infrastructural issues, and the intervention of policies. The common themes, observations, and theoretical connections were determined and consolidated to come up with an in-depth view of how e-commerce can empower women businesspersons within the craft industry.

Also, the case studies of Indian e-commerce platforms that assist women artisans (like Amazon Karigar, Flipkart Samarth, GoCoop, and Okhai) were documented to demonstrate the practical work and the real-life assumptions. Theoretical insights and policy discourses were supported using these cases.

It is an exploratory research that does not require the use of primary data. Thus, its results are descriptive and founded on the recorded facts. Although such solution allows taking a wide analytical view, the future studies can include empirical polls or interviews to prove and generalize the results.

V. THE INDIAN CRAFT SECTOR: A SNAPSHOT

The craft industry in India gives employment to more than 7 million people with a large proportion of them being women. This is a region that assists in exports of India as well as cultural identity. There are many crafts that women engage in which include embroidery, weaving, pottery, madhubani painting and basket weaving among others of which many are carried out in their homes or in informal arrangements.

Despite all these contributions, women artisans need to contend with many challenges including:

- Not being in a position to meet the buyers face to face.
- Middlemen exploiting them. Home made products that are selling at extremely low prices.

- Inaccurate accessibility to credit and formal banking financiers.

VI. ROLE OF E-COMMERCE IN EMPOWERMENT

E-commerce websites of the digital age have mushroomed and have given new opportunities to women craftsmen in Indian arts where it has not only allowed them to become entrepreneurs but also achieve economic independence. The digital platforms are changing the way women access the economy and the society as they expand their market access to develop financial independence, as shown in Figure 1.

VII. MARKET ACCESS AND VISIBILITY

Online markets have erased the spatial barrier and women craftsmen in far corners have been able to act in both local and global markets. As observed by Jain and Sharma (2020) and the Ministry of Textiles (2021), such sites as Amazon Karigar and Flipkart Samarth sell items with the emblem of India, which contributes to the brand recognition cultural and economic meaning. The improved marketing possibilities reduce dependence on brokers and allow the female business owners to take a larger share of the income. Kumar and Das (2021) commented that weaving cooperatives, run by women in Odisha earned higher income besides gaining freedom after incorporating into digital systems such as GoCoop.

VIII. FINANCIAL INCLUSION

Due to the emergence of e-commerce, there is now a chance to enjoy direct digital payment opportunities, and the women artisans can control their income without involving middlemen. The financial independence of women is also increasing since by using mobile wallets and digital banking applications, they have entered the formal economy and can now reduce the risk involved in using cash, hence, making them more independent (Dasgupta & Sengupta, 2022). Women in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), who had been trained in digital payments, said that they felt more empowered in their own financial choices, and had the capacity to save and reinvest their income in their craft businesses (UNDP India, 2018).



Figure 1: Role of E-Commerce in Empowerment

IX. SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND DIGITAL LITERACY

Majority of e-commerce websites offer some basic training on photography, writing product descriptions, online marketing, packaging and communicating well with the customers (Mehta & Jha, 2019; UNDP India, 2018). Companies such as Okhai and GoCoop do not only open the markets, but give women artisans power by enhancing their professional and technical skills (Mehta and Jha, 2019). Capacity-building and training programs typically involving SPV-type government programs such as Digital India have played an important role in eliminating the digital literacy gap. As reported by UNDP (2018), digital training, which is provided under Self-Help Groups (SHGs), has dramatically boosted the confidence of women as well as their readiness to dive into the business.

X. SOCIO-ECONOMIC UPLIFTMENT

Women have a game changer in terms of income produced by e-commerce sales, which enables them to contribute greatly to the cover of household bills, investing in the education of their children, and be respected in their communities (Mehta and Jha, 2019; Kumar and Das, 2021). Self-help groups and cooperatives, headed by women, are also using the online platforms to not only sell their products, but also convene, demand their rights, and have their voices heard in the decision-making. The OECD (2020) says

that e-commerce gives women in the developing world the freedom to balance both their household duties and their business, which is transforming the traditional gender roles.

XI. CHALLENGES IN E-COMMERCE ADOPTION

Although e-commerce has tremendous potential of making women in the craft industry stronger, there are various challenges that are encountered before it can be used widely and in a better manner. Lack of digital literacy is one of the obstacles (GSMA, 2022; UNDP India, 2018). The main reason is that many women artisans, particularly those who live in rural and remote regions, have difficulties with learning how to use digital platforms, how to use smartphones and how to understand the principles of online marketing and transactions (UNDP India, 2018; Mehta and Jha, 2019). This digital divide denies them access to training materials, restricts their access to customers, and their capacity to run online businesses on their own as depicted further in Figure 2.

Poor infrastructure also adds to the predicament. Poor internet connectivity in most parts of India poses a challenge in many of its interior areas where people find it hard to connect with the internet all the time (Ministry of Textiles, 2021). Electricity outages, poor mobile network connections, and the expensive nature of electronic gadgets are all factors that slow down the normal running of e-commerce. Also, not all women artisan can afford smartphones or computers, or they may simply lack personal access to these tools, which restricts their autonomy in the digital market (Dasgupta and Sengupta, 2022).

The other significant obstacle is the question of the language and content accessibility. The vast majority of e-commerce sites are in English or Hindi, whereas the languages of many women craftsmen are regional such as Punjabi, Telugu or Assamese. They find it difficult to understand the platform policies, interact with customers, and even enumerate their products in this language, which prevents them from participating in and succeeding (OECD, 2020).

There are also obstacles that are caused by logistics and supply chain issues. Most artisans have problems in packaging, inventory, and delivery of their products to the customers in a timely manner. In other cases, untrustworthy courier and high transportation fees make achieving orders practically unattainable by the artisans involved, and it may happen when they are operating on their own instead of being a member of a bigger cooperative or a self-help organization (Kumar & Das, 2021).

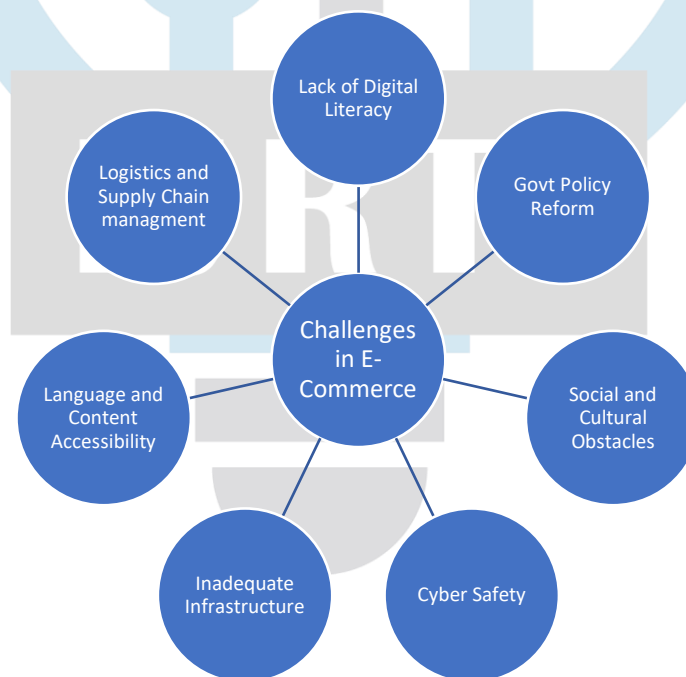


Figure 2: Challenges in E-Commerce

Moreover, the absence of trust and cyber safety knowledge is obvious among most first-time female entrepreneurs. The fear of fraud, internet frauds, or the risk of online payment usually makes them hesitate to adopt e-commerce. They are also afraid of losing money or getting scammed, which is why they are not eager to work with unknown people or invest in online advertising (Mehta and Jha, 2019; UNDP India, 2018).

Another difficult challenge is the competition in the market. The online craft market is becoming increasingly saturated so that small artisans are finding it difficult to compete with mass-produced or machine made goods. The lack of solid branding, digital marketing expertise, or sufficient money to conduct promotions is likely to make women in business fail to attract customers and remain competitive (Jain and Sharma, 2020; OECD, 2020).

On top of all that, there are social and cultural obstacles that still exist. Some societies have a resistance in the part of the family or the society to women venturing in to business especially when involving the use of technology or financial self-sufficiency. The extent of participation and accrual of the digital economy is typically curtailed by traditional gender-based norms, time, due to domestic work, and institutional insufficient support (Dasgupta and Sengupta, 2022; Mehta and Jha, 2019).

All these problems highlight the complex barriers that have to be overcome by policy interventions, training, investment in infrastructure, and selective outreach to achieve the goal that e-commerce promise actually will be realized as empowerment of Indian women in the Indian craft industry.

XII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To transform e-commerce into an empowering and inclusive space to women in the crafts sector of India, there are several policy changes that we need to make. First, we need to increase the scope of systematic digital literacy campaigns and especially in rural and semi-urban areas with focus on local languages and on-the-job training. By fostering the interagency collaboration among government institutions, NGOs, and the e-commerce systems of privates, we can make women artisans to acquire knowledge and skills that will enable them to thrive in the digital economy. Improving the digital infrastructure is another essential condition and having access to a stable internet connection and inexpensive smartphones or tablets can greatly improve participation. The financial institutions should look at providing microfinance facilities and low-interest loaning schemes to women entrepreneurs in the craft industry to finance their capital needs. At the same time, the adoption of secure and convenient digital payment systems will enhance the inclusion of finance.

Moreover, the last-mile delivery can be rationalized by developing logistics facilities in the areas with high concentration of craft and expanding the local courier services to lower shipping costs. Policy models ought to also promote the inclusion of more women artisans through the onboarding process of e-commerce platforms, via reduced commissions, increased visibility, or tax incentives on inclusive practices. Sensitization may also be applicable in breaking down gender biases and cultural barriers in a way that women will not be afraid of becoming entrepreneurs.

XIII. CONCLUSION

E-commerce has proven to be a powerful tool to women entrepreneurs in the craft industry of India as it gives them access to bigger markets, economic empowerment, and professional recognition. However, the obstacles are also there. The lack of digital literacy, infrastructural deficiency, cultural constraints, and market rivalry, are still presenting significant obstacles in the way of equal access. On a wise policy intervention, through collaborative support, India can get all out of the women artisans.

XIV. REFERENCES

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