



Summary Note

India's economic growth is constrained by its low female labour force participation rate, which remains well below the average for low and -middle-income countries. Despite ongoing policy efforts to improve women's workforce participation, systemic barriers continue to limit their ability to access, retain, and re-enter employment. Factors such as limited access to skills training, financial exclusion, informal employment structures, and caregiving responsibilities create persistent challenges that prevent women from fully participating in the labour market. Overcoming these barriers is not just a social imperative but also a strategic business opportunity that corporations can harness to drive inclusive economic growth while strengthening their own supply chains and workforce resilience.

Acumen, in partnership with Primark, designed this study to examine the role that social enterprises play in bridging the gender gap in employment. This study analyses the impact of services offered by social enterprises and identifies scalable models that corporations and investors can support to expand employment opportunities for women, enhance business sustainability, and contribute to a more inclusive economy.

This study was conducted by LEAD at Krea University through a survey of 1,030 women across India where LabourNet, Haqdarshak, and Gram Vaani, Acumen's investee companies participated as social enterprises. The study was commissioned to understand how social enterprises drive women's workforce participation through **'Active'** and **'Facilitative' Pathways**.

- Active Pathways provide direct employment solutions, including skills training, job placements, and business support, ensuring immediate income opportunities.
- Facilitative Pathways address systemic barriers like financial exclusion, lack of legal documentation and identification, and workplace insecurity, enabling long-term job stability.

Key Findings

1. While Active Pathways can provide more immediate income opportunities through skills training, job placements, and financial services, Facilitative Pathways can address structural barriers such as financial exclusion, legal documentation, and access to government schemes. Together, these pathways can create a more inclusive and sustainable employment ecosystem for developing countries with high degrees of informality and slow growth in formal jobs. While the earlier stage enterprises have demonstrated impact through Facilitative Pathways, the more mature enterprises in Acumen's portfolio demonstrated deeper impact in the form of income growth through Active Pathways.

2. When women have access to financial services and social security benefits, they are significantly more likely to obtain formal employment contracts,

which offer income security, workplace protections, and employer-provided benefits. Continuous upskilling, financial literacy programs, and career counselling are crucial in improving job retention and stability.

3. Women who attempt to re-enter the workforce after a career break face compounding challenges such as time constraints because of household responsibilities, outdated skills, caregiving responsibilities, which further limit job opportunities. Social enterprises unlocking access to salaried work have an opportunity to deepen inclusion within their business models to provide refresher training, access to flexible work arrangements, and career counselling.

4. Women who are engaging in Active Pathways experience greater financial independence, and are able to make self-directed economic decisions.

5. Social enterprises that support entrepreneurship through business development, financial inclusion, and market access can help self-employed women increase their earnings, aspiring to achieve financial stability. Additionally, female role models and mentorship programs play a crucial role in encouraging leadership aspirations and business growth.

6. Social enterprises by bridging information gaps and providing greater awareness of job opportunities, financial services, and employment rights also enhance access to digital platforms and financial literacy programs particularly for self-employed women or those in casual jobs. Investing in digital upskilling initiatives is critical for long-term workforce participation and employability.

The findings from the study ultimately highlight how access to vocational training and staffing, social security access, and digital upskilling can help women navigating labour market opportunities.

Insights can be useful for investors and corporations who are either already working or interested in working more closely with social enterprises (e.g., as part of their inclusive supply chain management or ESG efforts) in emerging markets that have a predominantly female workforce.

Corporations have a strategic opportunity to drive inclusive economic growth by integrating social enterprises into their supply chains and partnership or investment strategies. By partnering with social enterprises that serve women from low-income communities—whether through employment, skilling, or financial inclusion—businesses can enhance their own operational resilience while fostering gender-inclusive labour markets. Further, larger corporations can also design programs or strategies that invest in social enterprises to advance gender equity in corporate supply chains in emerging markets.

Social enterprises like LabourNet, Haqdarshak and Gram Vaani needed patient equity capital with longer

investment horizons and flexible return expectations, to expand skilling programs, employment linkages, and financial inclusion services. Their support has been instrumental in enhancing women's ability to access, retain, and re-enter the workforce. The findings of this study thus underscore the critical role investors and corporations can play in shaping and strengthening social enterprises, ensuring that women gain sustainable workforce participation.

A collaborative approach between investors, corporations, and social enterprises is essential to addressing workforce gender gaps at scale. By aligning investment capital, business partnerships, and policy advocacy, stakeholders can amplify the collective impact of workforce solutions, enabling more women to achieve financial independence and long-term career growth. The study reaffirms that supporting social enterprises is not just a social responsibility but a key strategic business decision that can drive economic prosperity, strengthen supply chains, and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable workforce.

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