

# Women Empowerment through Social Initiatives: An Indian Story

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It is now proven that the relationship between business and society is integral in the success of any enterprise. With the growing role of business in society, organizations are becoming more “socially responsible” and engaging in various social initiatives. Organizations involve themselves in various kinds of initiatives generally targeted towards a selected underprivileged section of the society or a specific area like education, health, and environment.

Women play an important role in building sustainable development. Promoting women empowerment and widening their contribution in decision-making roles are key strategies for sustainable development. The present paper is an attempt to highlight women empowerment through various social initiatives. In this regard, I attempted to review some of the exemplary sustainable social initiatives running in India through this paper.

***JEL Classifications:*** M14, L31, D64, Q01, I38, O35, O12, I31

***Keywords:*** women empowerment, social initiatives, business, society, India, sustainability

There has been an explicit recognition of the role of business in our society. Markets are embedded in a social context and these social contexts form an integral part of the working of these markets (Kay, 2009). Business leaders have started recognizing this social context and are responding to its complex and increasing demand. Growing concerns for the environment and sustainability, concern for the moral and ethical issues as a result of business scams, economic meltdown, and the growing nexus between business and government are the reasons behind some of these business responses (Sastry, 2011).

There are many scholars (Andriof & McIntosh, 2001; Carroll, 1998; Davenport, 2000; Hawkins, 2006) who have talked about the relationship of business and society and presented various

perspectives in this regard, for example, stakeholder’s perspective, corporate citizenship perspective, capital owner’s perspective, shared value perspective, and so forth. The role of business in society is to innovate and deliver products and services to create a greater value in a responsible manner (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and to conduct operations so that they are performed in a socially accepted and profitable manner. The role of business has evolved towards development of economy and society by way of harmonizing economic, legal, ethical, and social responsibility of companies (Krstovic, Bakić, & Kostić, 2012). By adopting sustainable practices and by assuring social responsibility, companies can gain a competitive edge, increase their market share, and boost shareholder value (Singhal, 2006).

According to Emile Durkheim (1915/1965), a society is made up of individuals, their territorial rights, their occupation, and most importantly ideology that is formed by its own. Many scholars (Krstovic et al., 2012; Sastry, 2011; Dey & Sircar, 2012) have proven that business can impact society through their responsible business practices. A paper entitled “From Challenge to Opportunity – The Role of Business in Tomorrow’s Society” by World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2006) described that the purpose of any business that seeks to be sustainable has to be more than generating short term shareholders value. Growing business entities are recognizing their role and including the idea of social responsibility through various social initiatives.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The paper is aimed towards highlighting the importance of women empowerment through various social initiatives. In this regard, I attempted to review some of the exemplary sustainable social initiatives running in India through this paper. The paper is structured as follows: First, it talks about the existing literature on social initiatives and discuss the various forms of social initiatives and their impact. Second, it discusses the role of women empowerment through social initiatives. Third, it brings out the cases of sustainable social initiatives for women empowerment in India. Finally, the conclusions are presented with implications for researchers, practitioners, and faculty members while offering limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The paper on women empowerment through social initiative was analyzed using the process of systematic literature review. The process of the systematic literature review produced evidence-

based and cumulative information. The search for articles related to the themes like social initiatives, social responsibility, women empowerment, and so forth was conducted in various databases, for example, EBSCO. Apart from it, some of the websites and other offline sources were also used. The selected papers were then analyzed using content analysis. The current paper also deals with the two exemplary examples which are presented in form of case studies. These case studies are drawn from archival records of the concerned organisations and other documentation available in public domain.

### **SOCIAL INITIATIVES-CONCEPT AND IMPACT**

The next section of the paper will chart the understanding about social initiatives and discuss the various forms and their impact. Social initiatives in business context are defined as program, activity, practice, or a policy followed by an organization to benefit society. Social initiative is a strategic plan of action born from beyond the call of duty, realized through passion, diligence, and a genuine concern for the enrichment of communities and the common good (Quinn, 2012) and they are part of a broader movement toward more community involvement (Hess, Rogovsky, and Dunfee 2002). Mayur Manas explained that social initiatives must aim towards value restoration and enhancement of quality of life (Personal communication, October 7, 2013).

Hess and Warren (2008) described that firms can implement their version of social responsibility through community involvement in a variety of initiatives. These social initiatives can range from philanthropic activities, cause-based marketing, association with nonprofit organization, sponsorships, or employee participation in the community (Hess & Warren, 2008; Dey & Sircar, 2012). Philanthropy without active engagement is often criticized in Corporate Social Responsibility literature. However, a research conducted by CSR Asia (2010) talked about strategic philanthropy

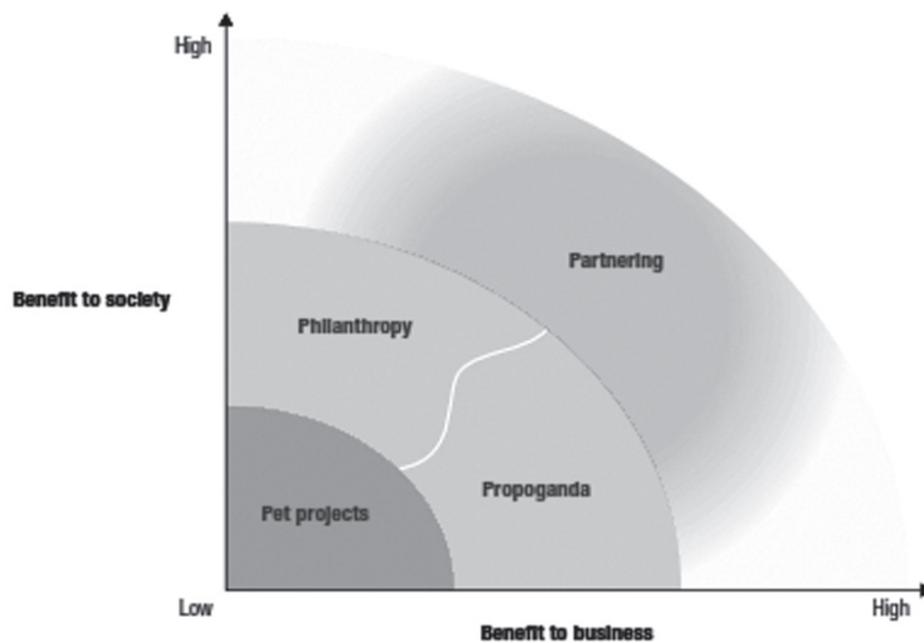
that uses successful business models in order to address challenges as big as poverty, education, and health. In this way, philanthropy has evolved into a new form with the businesslike description of corporate community involvement and can bring enormous social gains to the world's poorest nations, although, very few organizations engage themselves in strategic philanthropy (Hess et al., 2002; Porter & Kramer, 2002). Social initiatives in a true sense moves beyond mere donations to community involvement. Many organizations have taken initiatives out of concern for the common good. The social initiatives are increasingly becoming integrated to corporate strategy than community relations (Hess et al., 2002; Garone, 1999) and such initiative whether meaningful or symbolic contributes to shaping the issue of corporate social responsibility in the institutional field (Hess et al., 2002). Pearce & Doh (2005) expressed that it is not essential that social initiatives be synonymous with those of the company's business, but they should build some aspect of its strategic competencies.

Dey and Sircar (2012) illustrated the strategic alliances with non-government organizations

through social initiatives. They explained that partnership is an effective way to approach social issues where the organization's core competencies are found lacking.

Many studies have talked about cause-related marketing as an effective tool for promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. Liu and Ko (2011) in their study proposed four initiatives, namely, sponsorship, transaction based, joint promotion, and in kind contributions. Vanhamme, Lindgreen, Reast, and Popering (2012) explained how cause-related marketing help in improving corporate image. According to them, it is very important for marketers to track the impact of their campaigns on organizational objectives. Procter & Gamble's pampers UNICEF campaign, Reliance's sponsorship with Helpage India, Tata's endowment schemes in the area of higher education are some of the examples in this regard.

Figure 1 presents the CSR landscape presented by Keys, Malnight, and Graaf (2009), which describes how businesses pursue CSR activities. They described that some organizations run social initiatives or activities that can best be



**Figure 1.** This figure depicts the CSR landscape presented by Keys et Al. (2009) which describes how businesses pursue CSR activities.

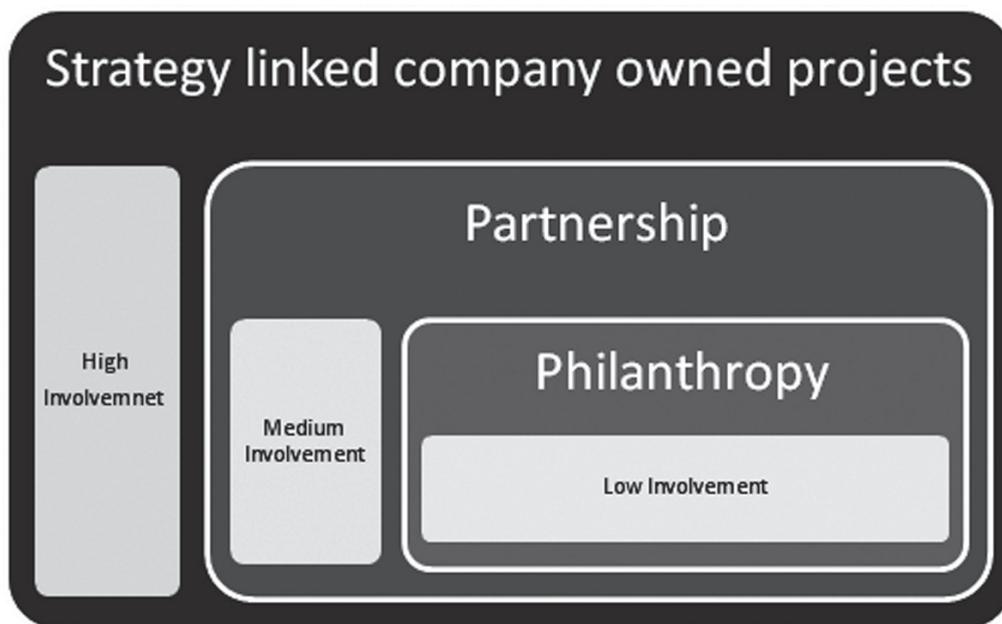
termed as “pet projects.” Pearce and Doh (2005) expressed that pet projects are identified as a specific cause which is of interest to a particular company and where a range of players do not have significant interest. Middle section of the given exhibit represents efforts that can make both sides feel good but that generate limited and often one-sided benefits. Social initiatives which stems from partnership often are more successful toward improving its core value creation ability by addressing major strategic issues or challenges. Partnering or collaborative social initiatives involve ongoing information and operational exchange among participants and benefit both the corporate and partners (Pearce & Doh, 2005).

Figure 2 represents my suggested framework which represent the level of involvement of organisations in their social initiatives. The basis of this framework is my extensive review of literature and my own experience and understanding of social initiatives in Indian context. Basic level initiatives are donations where the involvement and engagement of organizations are very low.

Partnership or collaborative initiatives is next level where organizations involvement is higher than the basic level. The highest involvement of organizations reflects in company owned and executed projects which are linked with its core strategy. Presently, large numbers of corporate entities are taking various social initiatives in the area of education, healthcare, rural infrastructure, environmental conservation, development, and a host of other issues. Prominent Indian examples are Tata Group, Birla Group, Dr. Reddy’s Foundation, Wipro, Infosys, ITC, Bajaj, and so forth. Organizations involve themselves in various kinds of social initiatives generally targeted towards a selected underprivileged section of the society.

### WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SOCIAL INITIATIVES

In accordance to the above mentioned context, women make up a little over half the world’s population but their contribution to



**Figure 2.** This figure represents my suggested framework on involvement of organizations in social initiatives.

measure economic activity, growth, and well-being is far below its potential (Woytek et al., 2013). Moreover, women are perceived as an underprivileged section in many developing and under developing countries and they have been excluded from decision making.

Mayoux (1995) described empowerment as change, choice, and power. Similarly, Jhabvala (2001) described empowerment as the process by which the disempowered or powerless people can change their circumstances and begin to have control over their lives. Antony (2001) expressed that the dominant idea of empowerment is to address the most visible manifestations of discrimination in women's lives. Empowerment can be seen as multi-pronged concept which involves a realization and an awareness about one's potentialities and capabilities, rights and opportunities about various aspects of life. The general term women empowerment means to provide them access to all the freedoms and opportunities. And, in specific term, women empowerment refers to the enhancement of their power and position in the society (Bhuyan, 2006).

Medatwal (2013) related empowerment with the capacity to make effective choices whereas Batliwala (1994) defined it as the process of gaining control. Economic participation is one of the important aspects of women empowerment which is expected to generate increased self-esteem, respect, and other forms of empowerment for women beneficiaries (Torri & Martinez, 2014).

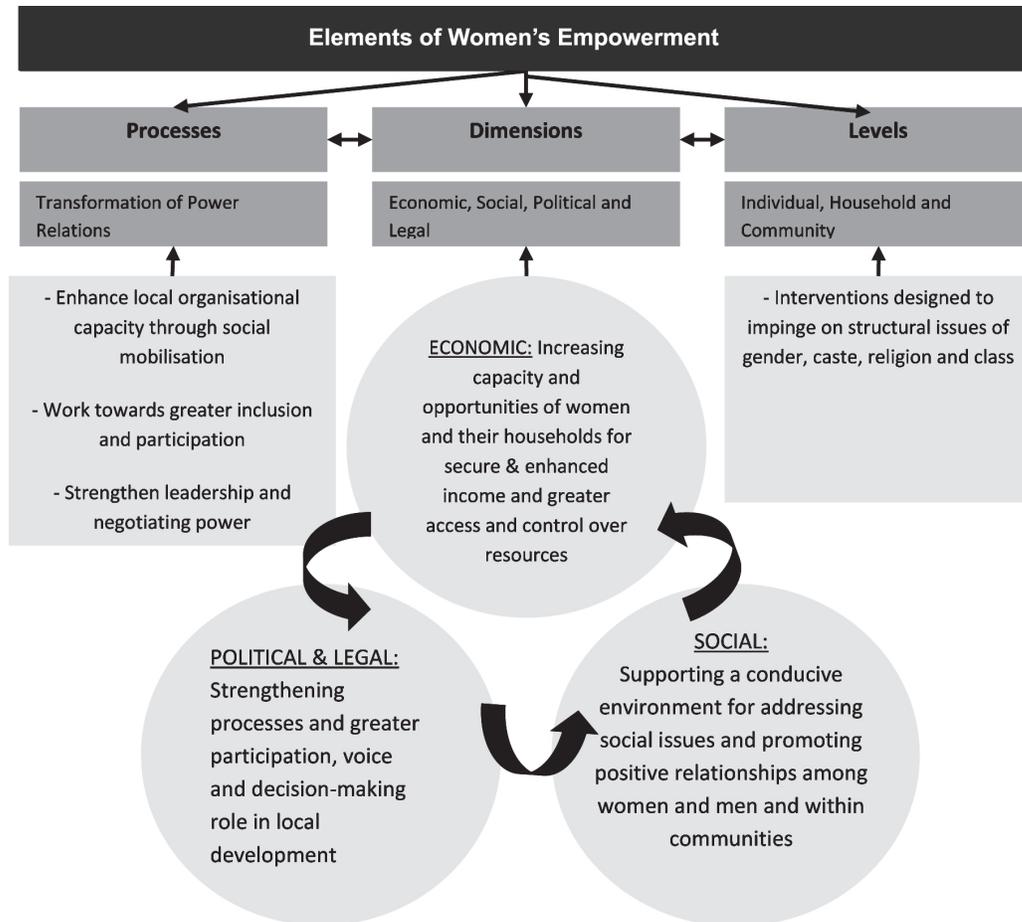
However, the gap between employment and financial independence is evident from the report on gender equality and women's empowerment in India by Kishore & Gupta (2009). The findings suggest that among married women who work and are paid in cash, more than 80% decide how their earnings will be spent, either alone or together with their husbands; however, one in six have no say in how their earnings are spent.

The concept of empowerment of women is indicative of a shift in perspective emphasis from welfare development to one of development of authoritative decision making skills. The empowerment of women at the individual level

helps build a base for social change. Promoting woman empowerment and widening their contribution in decision making roles are key strategies for sustainable development. Hence, women empowerment figures high in the agenda of all stakeholders connected to development related activities. Social initiatives to empower women increase opportunities available to individual women and help towards enhancing their status in their families and societies.

The conceptualization of empowerment that informs this (research) touches on many different aspects of change in women's lives, each important in themselves, but also in their inter-relationships with other aspects. It touches on women's sense of self-worth and social identity; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status and identity; their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives and to renegotiate their relationships with others who matter to them; and their ability to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping the societies in which they live in ways that contribute to a more just and democratic distribution of power and possibilities. (Kabeer, 2008 p. 27)

Bult (2009) in his project proposal on IKEA Social Initiative proposed the framework given in Figure 3. The framework is comprised of three synergistic elements of women's empowerment, namely (i) process: aiming to transform the power relations between women and men among the different social groups thereby linking empowerment to a broader vision of equality and equity; (ii) dimensions of empowerment: economic, social, political, and legal - to encompass women's multiple roles and interests; and (iii) interventions required at various levels: individual, household, and community to impinge on structural issues of caste, religion, and class as these have a cumulative effect on the position of women, including addressing discrimination at the institutional level. He suggested that economic dimension of empowerment complemented with the inclusion of social, political, and legal dimensions would enable women to prioritize



*Figure 3.* This figure represents the framework proposed by Bult (2009) comprising of three synergistic elements of women's empowerment.

their needs and interests as well as encourage greater participation, voice, and decision-making role in local development.

### CASE STUDIES

Next section of the paper will detail Barefoot College's (<http://www.barefootcollege.org/>) initiative and Hindustan Unilever's (<http://www.hul.co.in/>) Shakti initiatives and will elaborate their contribution to women empowerment.

Traditionally, women in Indian villages do more than 70% of the domestic and agricultural work (<http://peprimer.com/barefoot.html>). They are responsible for sowing and reaping, fetching water, taking care of children and livestock, cooking, washing and cleaning the house, and so forth. However, their inputs are not regarded as

“proper” work. Women are still considered to be the weaker sex, incapable of doing hard physical labour. Barefoot College has endeavored to break such stereotypical notions by training rural women in “technically challenging” jobs that have traditionally been considered for men. Women from poor and neglected rural communities live a life of many hardships.

Barefoot College was founded in 1972 at Tilonia, Ajmer District (Rajasthan), India by Bunker Roy as Social Work Research Centre (SWRC). The College focuses its efforts on a holistic development of women by empowering them financially, socially, as well as politically. As part of their social empowerment, rural women have been organized into groups that collectively support and look out for each other.

The barefoot concept relies on the intelligence and practical skills of people who are not formally educated. Barefoot's solar programme trains illiterate and semi-literate men and women as solar engineers. This programme not only provides solar electrification, hot water, and environment friendly cookers but it also boosts the incomes and fosters villagers' self-reliance. The college selects villages or areas where solar electrification can be implemented. The user community selects the youth who will train as barefoot solar engineers to carry out the installation and implementation of solar lighting systems in their villages. The Barefoot model of community-owned, managed, and financially sustained household solar light systems is today replicated in more than 54 countries, empowering more than 600 Women Barefoot Solar Engineers and providing clean energy access to 450,000 people in nearly 1,650 communities throughout India, Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, and Asia. As a result of Barefoot's work, one million litres of rainwater have been harvested to provide clean drinking water to over 239,000 school children in more than 1,300 communities worldwide.

Barefoot College has installed nearly 15,000 solar lighting units and constructed more than a 1,000 rain water harvesting structures in remote, rural villages, so that the drudgery of women can be reduced in 16 states of India, and 17 least developed countries across three continents. Mothers, grandmothers, and young girls who spent hours fetching water, kerosene, wood, candles, and torch batteries at high prices can now spend quality time doing other productive work and put the money to better use. The Barefoot approach to women empowerment has brought qualitative changes in their lives.

In the past 38 years, the College has trained more than 15,000 women in jobs ranging from construction work, education, metal craftsmanship, toy making, and solar engineering, to mechanical repair and fabrication, health care, water testing, handicrafts, film making, and social activism. The College has witnessed social changes in the perception of women, particularly in communities

with social customs so rigid that they would rather have them starve than go out to work. Apart from this, Barefoot College is working the field of education and health and helped thousands of rural women. If we assess the Barefoot College contribution in women empowerment we can see that this is a successful model of local community development by putting technology in the hands of the poor and expanding traditional definitions of education and championing women's equality. This model instills pride along with new set of skill, and raises the social status of women as role models within cultures that are historically oppressive towards women. Barefoot's solar approach is a globally replicable model and has proven to transfer it successfully across diverse geographic and cultural areas and has also uplifted the social status of women as role models.

Another example of sustainable social initiative related with women empowerment is Hindustan Unilever's (HUL) Shakti Entrepreneurial Initiative. HUL's Shakti Entrepreneurial Initiative is rural distribution initiative, which helps women in rural India set up small businesses as direct-to-consumer retailers. The project benefits HUL by enhancing its direct rural reach and also creates livelihood opportunities for underprivileged rural women.

HUL liaise with Self Help Groups (SHGs) and offered them the option of distributing relevant products of the company as a sustainable income generating activity. Many corporate houses, working towards improving income and employment of women in rural India, have used the Self Help Group approach towards creating and enhancing income earning or decent livelihood opportunities (Abraham,2013). A self-help group is an informal voluntary association consisting of 10-12 women belonging to poor strata of society and have homogenous social and economic backgrounds.

HUL's idea of Shakti entrepreneur turns out to be a win-win business model where a member from SHG was selected as Shakti entrepreneur commonly referred as "Shakti Amma". HUL invested resources to provide training to these

Shakti Ammas. HUL also provided their products to them on a cash and carry basis and helped them in availing micro credit wherever required.

The Shakti Amma receives goods from HUL's rural distributor, which is then sold by Shakti Amma to consumers and retailers in the village. The products distributed are some of the country's most trusted brands of consumer goods, and include a range of mass-market products especially relevant to rural consumers. The project started in a few pilot villages in Andhra Pradesh in 2000. In 2002 it expanded to two and by the end of 2011 had grown three million households in 100,000 Indian villages providing livelihood enhancing opportunities to about 45,000 Shakti entrepreneur in 15 Indian states.

On an average, a Shakti Entrepreneur earns Rupees 700-1,000 a month and since most of them live below the poverty line, this earning is significant, often doubling the household income. The Shakti project made rural women self-sustained and helped them improve the living standard and catalyzes affluences in rural India. The HUL Shakti project has been replicated in Pakistan and Sri Lanka and has helped rural women organize strong collectives to enhance their economic capabilities.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of the review was to understand the concept of social initiatives, its various forms, and impact on society. The reviews suggested that a social initiative is a strategic plan, which can transform the life of poor people living in our society and such social initiatives require increased involvement from all stakeholders.

Based on theoretical and empirical literature, this paper is an attempt to chart various types of social initiatives and to highlight women empowerment through them. The paper also presents summary of two exemplary sustainable social initiatives running in India: (a) Barefoot College Solar approach and (b) HUL Shakti Project.

The paper benefits both the academicians and the practitioners by suggesting a new framework which represents the level of involvement of organizations in various types of social initiatives. Further empirical research to gauge the impact of this suggested framework is needed.

## NOTE

The paper was presented during Fourth PRME Asia Research Conference on 13th November at the Ateneo Professional Schools Campus, Rockwell Center, Makati City, Manila (Philippines)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to thank Prof. Fernanda Andrade for her invaluable inputs and acknowledge the support received from Prof. V. Padhmanbhan and K. R. Singhal.

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