

perspectives

A Quarterly Viewletter

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Role of Industry in Promoting Women-Led Development

GUEST VIEW

Women-led development is emerging as a powerful movement globally, and especially in India. As we work towards the vision of Viksit Bharat – 2047, there is growing emphasis on the role of women as leaders, innovators, and key contributors to economic and social progress.

With over three decades of experience in the corporate sector, I have witnessed how industry has, over the years, played a pivotal role in fostering an ecosystem that supports and accelerates women's development. Today, corporates are not only devising and implementing policies that ensure equal opportunities, but they are also creating inclusive work environments and supporting women entrepreneurs.

Industry has been, and can be, an immensely powerful catalyst in this transformative journey of advancing gender equity.

One of the critical ways in which industry can accelerate this transformation is by increasing female workforce participation.

By promoting gender diversity in the workplace, companies can enhance productivity, creativity, and innovation. Companies that prioritize gender-inclusive policies witness higher employee satisfaction and financial performance.

Some of the key measures which have helped increase female workforce participation include:

- Flexible work policies that support work-life balance.
- Equal pay and transparent career progression opportunities.
- Mentorship and leadership programs for women.
- Encouraging women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as engineering, technology, and manufacturing.

Going forward, greater emphasis needs to be placed on the following areas to accelerate the shift towards gender-balance in the workforce, leading to greater productivity and a truly inclusive India.

As we work towards the vision of Viksit Bharat – 2047, there is growing emphasis on the role of women as leaders and key contributors to economic and social progress.

Creating Inclusive and Safe Workplaces

A work environment – whether in offices or factories - that is safe, inclusive, and empowering is essential for promoting women's inclusion and development as part of the workforce. Corporates must proactively address workplace challenges such as discrimination, harassment, and unconscious bias



Priti Srivastava
Senior Vice President and
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through robust HR policies. Implementing robust policies along with awareness and sensitisation programs can foster a culture of respect and equity, where women can realise their full potential and contribute meaningfully.

Key steps include:

- Establishing and enforcing zero-tolerance policies for harassment and discrimination.
- Conducting regular gender-sensitivity training for employees.
- Investing in and promoting women-friendly infrastructure, such as safe transport and childcare facilities.
- Encouraging male allies to support and advocate for gender equality.

Empowering Women Entrepreneurs

Women-led businesses often face challenges such as limited access to funding, lack of mentorship, and gender biases. However, there are corporates and banks that have come forward, offering financial and strategic support thereby empowering women entrepreneurs.

Some steps which can support women entrepreneurs are:

- Offering venture capital and seed funding for women-led startups.
- Providing networking opportunities and mentorship programs.
- Partnering with women-owned businesses for procurement and supply chain operations.
- Facilitating skill development and training programs tailored for women entrepreneurs.

Encouraging Women in STEM and Innovation

The science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) sectors are crucial for economic growth and innovation, yet women remain underrepresented in these fields. Industry can play a transformative role by encouraging women to pursue careers in STEM and break stereotypes that hinder their participation.

Key initiatives may include:

- Offering scholarships and internships for women in STEM fields.
- Partnering with educational institutions to promote STEM education for girls.
- Highlighting female role models in STEM careers.
- Creating return-to-work programs for women who have taken career breaks.

Leveraging CSR for Women's Empowerment

Many corporates have corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs that can be leveraged to promote women-led development. CSR initiatives focusing on women's empowerment can create long-lasting social and economic impact.

Effective CSR initiatives can include:

- Supporting vocational training programs for women in underserved communities.
- Launching initiatives that provide digital and financial literacy training.
- Partnering with NGOs to promote women's health, education, and entrepreneurship.
- Conducting awareness campaigns on gender equality and women's rights.

Policy Advocacy for Gender-Inclusive Growth

With my experience in driving policy advocacy and gender-responsive policies, I believe that industry has the influence and resources to advocate for policy changes that support women's development. By collaborating with government bodies, policymakers and civil society, industry can help shape policies that create a more gender-inclusive economy.

Industries can advocate for:

- Gender-responsive labour laws and workplace policies.
- Increased maternity and paternity leave policies.
- Tax incentives for businesses that prioritize gender diversity.
- Inclusion of women in leadership roles and boardrooms.

While much ground has been covered, industry can accelerate women-led development by actively promoting gender diversity, supporting women entrepreneurs, fostering safe and inclusive workspaces and advocating for policy changes.

On the occasion of International Women's Day, 2025, let us recognize the responsibility of industry in creating a world where women can lead, innovate, and contribute without barriers. True progress is only possible when industry and society collectively invest in the empowerment of women, ensuring sustainable and inclusive development for all.

Views expressed are personal.

MY VIEW

A Commitment For Change



Mr Sunil Misra
CEO
CII Foundation

“For any nation aspiring for sustainable and inclusive growth, it is essential to include women in every sphere of social and economic activity.

At the CII Foundation we are making small, but significant contribution in promoting women-led development through various initiatives. These initiatives support women in skill development, livelihood, healthcare and waste management. Our flagship Woman Exemplar Program identifies, recognizes, and empowers women leaders working on education, health, micro-enterprise and building community resilience in very challenging and difficult environment. These catalysts of change are driving social transformation and today our network of woman exemplars is creating lasting impact on the ground.

Since a large portion of India's population resides in its villages, it is important to focus on women in rural areas, particularly in geographies where the challenges of development and opportunity are much more acute, particularly tribal areas and the Gangetic basin, to ensure that no one is left behind as we move towards Viksit Bharat by 2047. ”



Sustainable Development Goal 5

Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. There has been progress over the last decades, but the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030.

Women and girls make up half of the global population and potential, yet gender inequality persists, hindering progress. Women earn 23% less than men on average and perform three times more unpaid care work. Women also make up 70% of global health and social workers.

COVID-19 has worsened these inequalities, with increased reports of

sexual violence and women taking on more care responsibilities.

Urgent political leadership, investment, and reforms are essential to dismantle barriers and achieve gender equality.

There are 9 targets under SDG 5 to monitor gender equality and ensure empowerment of women and girls.

Goal 5 Targets

Target 5.1: End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

Target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including

trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

Target 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

Target 5.4: Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

[Click here to read more](#)

Stories from the Field

For ALL Women and Girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment. This year's International Women's Day theme emphasizes the power of women and girls in shaping a more just and equitable future.

Our CII Foundation Woman Exemplars, grassroots women leaders who are driving social transformation, are truly remarkable women.

Meet Ranjita Pawar, the 2024 Woman Exemplar Award winner in the Education category.

A tireless advocate for the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes (NT-DNT), Ranjita is working to break the cycle of discrimination and marginalization through the transformative power of education.

In this feature, we trace her inspiring journey - from overcoming adversity to becoming a powerful leader and changemaker within her community.

Transforming Education: Ranjita Pawar's Grassroots Movement for the Laman Banjar Community

Born into the Laman Banjar tribe in Omerga, Osmanabad district, Ranjita Pawar experienced firsthand the double burden endured for generations by women in her community: discrimination based on caste and gender. Part of the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes (NT-DNT), the Laman Banjaras have historically been criminalized under colonial laws. Despite the Government revoking the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 in 1952, NT-DNTs continue to be stigmatized by law enforcement and society alike. For women, the injustice cuts deeper – they

are denied education, forced into early and often abusive marriages, and subjected to gender-based violence.



Ranjita grew up in a family of eight siblings - four girls and two boys. Within the community, sons were valued, and daughters considered a burden. Education was seen as a waste for girls, and most were married off young and became silent witnesses to - and often victims of - domestic violence, which was considered normal.

Growing up, Ranjita saw not only the economic struggles of her family but also the systemic violence faced by women around her, including her own sisters, who suffered domestic abuse in their marriages. From the pain, Ranjita found purpose.

Determined to change her fate and that of other women like her, Ranjita began fighting the injustice to emerge as a champion fighting for the rights of girls and women in her community.

Education as Resistance

Ranjita saw education as the only way out of her crippling circumstances. She aspired to become the first female teacher from her Tanda (tribal settlement), but the path was strewn with obstacles.

At school, she faced hostility from teachers and classmates alike. Banjara children, particularly girls, were treated as outsiders—mocked for their dialect, ignored in classrooms, and made to feel unwelcome. Yet, Ranjita persisted, excelling academically despite the odds stacked against her.

During her tenth grade, she volunteered with a grassroots organization that worked on gender violence and discrimination. Recognizing her dedication, the organization encouraged her to assist para-teachers in local dialect classes. This experience not only deepened her passion for education but also earned her the trust of her community. Her academic success convinced her parents to let her pursue higher studies, though with restrictions. She was allowed to attend college only for exams and barred from studying science, considered a subject for upper castes. Undeterred, she pursued arts and stayed committed to empowering others through education.



A Community-Led Approach to Change

While pursuing a Diploma in Education (D.Ed.), Ranjita began training para-teachers in rural areas of Beed and Osmanabad. Her dedication led to a new role—helping Self-Help Groups (SHGs) connect with banks and understand financial literacy. Simultaneously, she tutored tribal children, addressing the language barriers that often kept them from succeeding in mainstream education. Ranjita devised a comprehensive survey in Omerga to gain insights into the existing learning barriers among children and their lack of interest in regular school attendance. The most significant revelation was that many students, those in fourth and fifth grades, struggled with fundamental reading, writing and arithmetic skills.

In 2008, she established her own organization, Samarthya Kalyankari Sansthan, dedicated to the educational upliftment of NT-DNT children. Her approach was simple but powerful—teaching in Gormati, the mother tongue of the Banjara community, to help children transition into Marathi-medium schools .

Determined to address this gap, Ranjita received training from Pratham, an NGO focused on foundational literacy and implemented their "Learning to Read" and "Reading to Learn" programs. In 2008, she established her own organization, Samarthya Kalyankari

Sansthan, dedicated to the educational upliftment of NT-DNT children. Her approach was simple but powerful—teaching in Gormati, the mother tongue of the Banjara community, to help children transition into Marathi-medium schools .

Her first pilot project covered five Laman Tandas in Omerga, where she assessed children's learning levels using a "Tanda report card." The results were staggering—over 70% of children struggled with reading and arithmetic. Instead of imposing external solutions, Ranjita engaged with parents and community leaders to develop culturally relevant learning models. Ranjita created new learning modules in Gormati and developed a bilingual dictionary and pictorial dictionary to help children effectively understand material. She established the Saksham Shiksha Kendra (SSK), a bridge education program that provided remedial classes within the community. By integrating songs, plays, and storytelling, she made learning engaging for children who had previously feared school. Within three months, mid-line assessments showed remarkable progress—children who could barely recognize letters were now reading paragraphs.



Breaking Gender Barriers: A Woman Leading Change

Ranjita has tackled issues beyond education—raising awareness about healthcare, legal rights, and economic independence for women.



Her organization has influenced the lives of 19,600 children in the Osmanabad district since it began in 2008. Over the course of 16 years, Ranjita has positively affected the lives of 27,000 children, trained a group of 1,000 young leaders, and provided support to 20,000 men and women from the “Banjara Tandas” through a range of empowerment initiatives.

Looking ahead, Ranjita plans to expand Samarthyaa’s reach to all blocks of Omerga and Lohara in Osmanabad. Over the next five years, she aims to transform 30 Zilla Parishad primary schools through large-scale awareness campaigns with teachers, school committees, and elected leaders,

research-based assessments to measure learning outcomes, capacity-building workshops for educators, implementation of community-driven learning models such as Abhyas Kopara (home study spaces), Tanda Vachana (community reading groups), and Tanda Bhashan (oratory training for students).

A Legacy of Grassroots Leadership

Ranjita Pawar’s journey is not just one of personal triumph but of collective empowerment. She has proven that solutions must come from within the community, not imposed from outside. By placing education at the heart of her activism, she is not only breaking barriers for NT-DNT children but also rewriting the narrative for women in her community.

This Women’s Day, as we celebrate grassroots women leaders, Ranjita’s story serves as a powerful reminder that

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change begins with one person’s determination to challenge the status quo—and that person can be a woman leading from the frontlines.



To know more about CII Foundation’s initiatives write to Priya Shirali, Head - Communication at Priya.Shirali@cii.in

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