

## **Fossil Foundation's SelectHER Program: Addressing the low female labour force participation in India**

Despite India being one of the fastest growing large economies of the world today, its women have largely been ignored in the journey towards upward social mobility, as reflected in their declining presence in the workforce. At one level, there is greater traction globally on conversations around diversity and inclusion, better board representation for women in large companies and the coming of age of women-led technology start-ups. On the other hand, India's female labour force participation is not only low but has been steadily falling over the last decade, with only a quarter of the population of women in active paid work-force. Of the women who do work, the majority of them work in low-wage, low-productivity, informal sector jobs.

There are numerous studies which make the business case for increasing the participation of women in the workforce, and the impact on both organizational bottom-line as well as the country's GDP. There is also a strong case to be made from a societal lens if more women were to work. Several studies find that women with more control over resources and those who have an income source report greater mobility, have children with better nutritional outcomes and are less likely to experience violence. Increasing female labour force participation is therefore not just another metric we should be chasing, but should be at the centre of our policy priorities.

However, women in most developing countries, and even in developed nations, have faced structural barriers to working. Few women join jobs which they attain after a skill development course, and fewer continue beyond a few months of working. In India specifically, social norms and gender stereo-typing around women and work goes back centuries. The existing societal construct does not give women agency or choice when it comes to working outside the home.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an important opportunity to "build back better" where all efforts are taken to ensure that many of the structural challenges such as our economic model of focusing on growth over sustainability, or relegating women into doing mostly unpaid care work, are dismantled. To that extent, how we support women build agency and also increase their participation in paid work, will also require re-thinking. The SelectHER program, envisioned by Fossil Foundation, gains even more importance in this context to enable women to have an opportunity to participate in the economy through a structured, women-focused skilling program. The program focused on not just training and honing the technical capabilities of women, but also developing greater agency and self-confidence in their personalities. Through targeted interventions towards counselling, building emotional resilience, exposure to role models, among others, we have found out that it is possible to create a cadre of women who are not just ready for the workforce but also for life.

As part of the SelectHER program for the year 2019-'20, 110 women were engaged to enable pathways in customer experience. Among them, 45 candidates underwent a 30-day, 120-hr training course in retail customer service. The training incorporated exposure visits, role-playing, guest lectures and computer training. The candidates were also introduced to resume building and interview skills, skills that would aid them throughout their professional

lives. Out of these candidates, 17 candidates have undergone rigorous on-the-job training for at least a month at a retail outlet, putting to practice the lessons they have learnt in the classroom. This was also the first instance of these girls earning.

A further 65 candidates have been undergoing a course on personality development and life skills, with the idea to broaden their horizon and develop greater self-awareness and agency to chart out a career of their choice. These candidates have also been participating in a counselling program with a mental health professional in order to build emotional resilience and discuss personal issues.

Through this intervention, we have seen a marked improvement in the personality of these girls. Additionally, for the girls in the retail batch, the training program has introduced them to a peer group of friends who have similar background, aspirations and motivations as themselves. The girls themselves place a higher premium to such intangibles they have gained through the initiative as opposed to tangible outcomes such as improved career pathways they now see for themselves.

The intervention also attests to the importance of supporting the girls with counselling to help the girls adjust to an important phase of change in their lives – transitioning from a classroom to a workplace. The counsellor provides a safe place to listen and discuss the challenges the girls are facing, and provides motivation and support to deal with difficult situations, such as getting parental consent for working, dealing with workplace-related stress, among others.

For those who are looking to solve similar challenges in the Indian context, based on our learnings with SelectHER II, we can safely say that one needs to take a long-term view of the program intervention. The real change, as measured in terms of financial independence, improved standing in the family, greater decision-making capabilities, delayed marriage and child-birth age, can be seen only over a longer time horizon as a direct result of employment. Funders should measure the success of their interventions on intermediate outcomes, however, must lay the foundation for sustainable change to take place through the skilling program.

From a candidate's standpoint, it is imperative to ensure alignment in aspiration and strengths of the women with the program intervention, lest the program may end up filling short-term gaps for the candidates rather than making any meaningful change for them. Tools such as predictive analytics and psychometric testing should be employed to do that check prior to enrolment of candidates. Also, parental engagement is necessary to ensure complete sponsorship and support from their end to see their daughter get trained and work, and women-focused programs need to incorporate this as an intervention.

Focus on soft skill development and agency-building are core to building the employability quotient of the girls as this is what will help her navigate difficult situations on her own. The domain training should be added-on to the foundational training on soft skills, to match the aspiration of the girls. Women-focused interventions such as awareness building on menstrual health, POSH guidelines and financial literacy are important from an overall life-skills perspective. Exposure to role models would help to serve as an inspiration and to build self-belief in their own potential and there could be many ways to leverage this aspect.

Lastly, while selecting an implementing partner, it is important to co-create the mission of the program with the partners, and to ensure that the partner has a skin in the game to see the success of the candidates. Additionally, the funder and partner must look to enable continuous innovation with different forms of delivery, with the twin objective of improving learning outcomes while keeping costs down, in order to make the program more capital efficient and scalable over the long term.

As the Indian society grows more aspirational, it cannot afford to leave behind its women. Assimilating them as active economic agents will require first principles thinking on the structural barriers that inhibit their participation in the workforce. The SelectHER model of skilling, which places equal focus on the head, heart and hand, is a step in that direction.