

Study on Women Entrepreneurship in Tribal Communities: Economic Growth, Social Justice, and Sustainable Development in the Contemporary World

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Abstract

Women entrepreneurship has increasingly been recognized as a strategic pathway for fostering inclusive economic growth, advancing gender equity, and promoting sustainable development. However, women entrepreneurs from tribal and indigenous communities remain largely marginalized within mainstream entrepreneurial discourse, policy frameworks, and empirical research. Situated at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, geography, and historical exclusion, tribal women experience distinctive structural constraints that shape their entrepreneurial opportunities and outcomes. It highlights how women-led enterprises contribute to local economic diversification, livelihood security, and employment generation while simultaneously fostering social empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship through the application of traditional ecological knowledge. The analysis reveals that while entrepreneurship can enhance women's agency and community resilience, it does not automatically translate into social justice or sustainability without supportive institutional, legal, and policy environments. This article examines women's entrepreneurship in tribal communities through the interconnected lenses of economic growth, social justice, and sustainable development in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Tribal women, entrepreneurship, socio-economic empowerment, sustainable development, Jharkhand, MSMEs, gender inclusion, indigenous enterprise

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship has become a central pillar of contemporary development strategies, widely promoted to accelerate economic growth, generate employment, and enhance innovation. Over the past two decades, increasing attention has been given to women's entrepreneurship, not only for its economic value but also for its role in advancing gender equality and social inclusion (Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2009). Despite this growing recognition, women entrepreneurs belonging to tribal or indigenous communities continue to remain largely invisible in mainstream entrepreneurial discourse, academic research, and policy design. Tribal communities, often referred to as indigenous peoples, represent culturally distinct social groups with deep historical ties to specific territories and ecosystems. Although they constitute a relatively small proportion of the global population, they experience disproportionately high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and political marginalization (United Nations, 2009). Women within these communities encounter compounded disadvantages due to the

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intersection of gender inequality, ethnic discrimination, geographic isolation, and limited institutional access. At the same time, they are key bearers of traditional knowledge systems, cultural practices, and sustainable resource management strategies that are increasingly recognized as valuable in the context of global sustainability challenges (Berkes, 2018). This article explores women entrepreneurship in tribal communities by situating it at the intersection of economic growth, social justice, and sustainable development. Rather than viewing entrepreneurship as a purely market-oriented activity, the review conceptualizes it as a socially embedded process shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and ecological contexts. Therefore, giving emphasis on interdisciplinary literature, the paper critically explore theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, structural barriers, policy interventions, and future perspective for enabling tribal women entrepreneurs to contribute meaningfully to inclusive and sustainable development.

2. Rethinking Entrepreneurship in Tribal Contexts

Traditional theories of entrepreneurship, particularly those grounded in neoclassical and Schumpeterian economics, emphasize innovation, competition, and profit maximization as the defining features of entrepreneurial activity (Schumpeter, 1934). While these models have shaped global entrepreneurship research, they inadequately capture the realities of enterprise creation in tribal settings. In many indigenous communities, economic activities are deeply intertwined with social relations, cultural obligations, and environmental stewardship rather than individual wealth accumulation (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Women entrepreneurs in tribal communities often operate micro- or small-scale enterprises that prioritize livelihood security, community welfare, and cultural continuity. These enterprises may include forest-based product collection, traditional crafts, subsistence-oriented agriculture, food processing, and informal trade. Success in such contexts is not solely measured by financial growth but by the ability to sustain households, preserve cultural practices, and maintain ecological balance. Consequently, applying conventional entrepreneurial metrics to tribal women's enterprises risks underestimating their true developmental significance. The concept of intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding the multiple layers of disadvantage faced by tribal women entrepreneurs. Introduced by Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality highlights how overlapping social identities such as gender, ethnicity, class, and geography interact to produce unique forms of marginalization. Tribal women frequently occupy positions at the intersection of patriarchal gender norms and ethnic or indigenous exclusion, resulting in restricted access to resources, education, and decision-making power (Sahay, 2010).

3. Economic Growth and Livelihood Enhancement

3.1. Role of Tribal Women Entrepreneurs in Local Economies

Women-led enterprises in tribal regions play a significant role in strengthening local economies by diversifying income sources and reducing reliance on subsistence livelihoods. Empirical research from South Asia, Africa, and Latin America demonstrates that tribal women's entrepreneurial activities contribute to household income stability and reduce vulnerability to economic shocks (Kumar & Mishra, 2016). In India, for instance, tribal women engaged in the

collection and processing of non-timber forest products such as honey, lac, medicinal herbs, and forest fruits generate supplementary income that supports household consumption and savings. Similar patterns have been documented among indigenous women's cooperatives in Latin America, where traditional crafts and agro-ecological products are marketed through fair trade and niche global value chains (Rutter, 2016).

3.2. *Employment Creation and Spillover Effects*

Although most tribal women-led enterprises operate at a small scale, they often generate employment opportunities for other women within the community. These enterprises tend to rely on local labour, locally sourced raw materials, and community-based production processes, thereby ensuring that economic benefits remain within the region (Campos et al., 2017). Income controlled by women is frequently directed toward education, healthcare, and nutrition, producing positive intergenerational outcomes (World Bank, 2019). As a result, the developmental impact of women's entrepreneurship in tribal communities extends beyond immediate economic gains to include long-term human capital formation.

3.3. *Structural Constraints on Growth and Expansion*

Despite their contributions, tribal women entrepreneurs face significant challenges in scaling their enterprises. Limited access to credit, technology, transportation infrastructure, and market information constrains productivity and profitability. Moreover, integration into external markets often occurs under unequal conditions, with intermediaries capturing a disproportionate share of value (OECD, 2018). These structural constraints reinforce patterns of economic marginalization and prevent tribal women from fully realizing the growth potential of their enterprises.

4. **Social Justice and Women's Empowerment through entrepreneurship**

4.1. *Entrepreneurship as a pathway to community build-up*

Entrepreneurial engagement can enhance women's agency by increasing economic independence, self-confidence, and bargaining power within households and communities (Minniti, 2009). In tribal societies, where women's roles are frequently confined to unpaid domestic and subsistence labour, income-generating activities can challenge traditional gender hierarchies. Studies indicate that women entrepreneurs in tribal areas are more likely to participate in community organizations, self-help groups, and local governance structures, thereby expanding their influence in collective decision-making processes (Heilman, 2012). This increased participation contributes to more inclusive forms of community development and governance.

4.2. *Cultural Continuity and Identity Preservation*

A distinctive characteristic of tribal women's entrepreneurship is its strong connection to cultural heritage. Enterprises based on traditional crafts, indigenous food systems, and herbal knowledge serve not only as sources of income but also as mechanisms for preserving cultural identity in the face of rapid globalization (Martin & Schouten, 2014). However, commercialization of cultural products carries inherent risks. When external actors control

branding, marketing, or intellectual property rights, tribal women may lose ownership over their cultural expressions. Protecting indigenous knowledge and ensuring fair benefit-sharing remain critical challenges within cultural entrepreneurship initiatives.

4.3. Persistent Inequalities and Gendered Burdens

While entrepreneurship can promote empowerment, it does not automatically eliminate structural inequalities. Patriarchal norms, unequal inheritance systems, and limited legal recognition of women's property rights continue to restrict women's control over assets and profits (Deere & Doss, 2006). In many cases, women entrepreneurs experience an increased workload, as entrepreneurial responsibilities are added to existing domestic and caregiving duties without corresponding shifts in household labour distribution.

5. Sustainable Development and Environmental Dimensions

Tribal women possess extensive traditional ecological knowledge related to biodiversity conservation, sustainable agriculture, and climate adaptation. Enterprises grounded in this knowledge such as organic farming, seed conservation, medicinal plant cultivation, and eco-tourism often align closely with environmental sustainability objectives (Berkes, 2018). Women-led initiatives in sustainable forest management and community-based eco-tourism illustrate how economic activities can support conservation while generating livelihoods (Pretty, 2018). These models offer important alternatives to extractive development approaches that prioritize short-term economic gains over ecological integrity. Despite their sustainability potential, tribal women's enterprises are vulnerable to environmental degradation when exposed to external market pressures. Weak regulatory frameworks, insecure land tenure, and limited community control over natural resources increase the risk of over-extraction and ecological harm (Anaya, 2004). Strengthening governance mechanisms and recognizing indigenous land rights are therefore essential for ensuring that entrepreneurial activities remain environmentally sustainable.

6. Barriers to Tribal Women's Entrepreneurship

6.1. Financial Exclusion and Credit limits

Limited access to financial services remains a major obstacle for tribal women entrepreneurs. Lack of collateral, formal documentation, and financial literacy restricts access to bank credit and insurance (Mayoux, 2001). Although microfinance initiatives have expanded outreach, evidence suggests that they often fail to support long-term enterprise growth and may contribute to indebtedness (Banerjee et al., 2015).

6.2. Education, Skills, and Digital Marginalization

Lower levels of formal education and limited access to vocational training constrain managerial and technical capabilities. Additionally, the digital divide restricts tribal women's ability to access online markets, financial services, and information networks, further reinforcing economic marginalization (UNDP, 2016).

6.3. Legal and Institutional Barriers, Policy Interventions and Development Strategies

Insecure land tenure, limited recognition of customary institutions, and bureaucratic hurdles impede entrepreneurial activities in tribal regions. Women's land ownership rights are particularly constrained, limiting their ability to leverage assets for enterprise development and financial inclusion (Schlosberg, 2007). Recent reports have suggested that entrepreneurship promotion programs are more effective when they adopt participatory and rights-based approaches. Initiatives that actively involve tribal women in design, implementation, and monitoring processes are more likely to be culturally appropriate and sustainable (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Holistic interventions that combine entrepreneurship training with education, health services, legal awareness, and digital literacy have demonstrated greater impact than isolated programs (OECD, 2018). Building social capital through peer networks and cooperatives further enhances sustainability. Digital platforms, mobile banking, and e-commerce offer new opportunities for market access and financial inclusion. However, technological interventions must be accompanied by infrastructure development and capacity building to avoid deepening existing inequalities (Jack & Suri, 2014).

While existing literature highlights numerous success stories, it remains limited by methodological constraints. Many studies rely on small-scale qualitative research, limiting generalizability. There is a lack of longitudinal studies assessing long-term impacts on empowerment, sustainability, and intergenerational mobility. Moreover, policy evaluations often focus on outputs rather than structural transformation. Future research should prioritize mixed-methods and longitudinal designs, develop culturally sensitive indicators of empowerment and sustainability, and critically examine power relations within value chains. Policymakers must integrate entrepreneurship promotion with broader reforms addressing land rights, gender justice, and environmental governance. Women entrepreneurship in tribal communities holds significant potential for advancing inclusive economic growth, social justice, and sustainable development. However, this potential remains constrained by structural inequalities, institutional barriers, and market asymmetries. Empowering tribal women entrepreneurs requires a shift from narrow market-based approaches toward holistic, rights-oriented, and culturally grounded development strategies. Recognizing tribal women not merely as beneficiaries but as agents of change is essential for building resilient economies, equitable societies, and sustainable futures in the contemporary world.

7. Conclusion

This article concludes that women entrepreneurship in tribal communities is a vital driver of inclusive economic growth, social justice, and sustainable development. Tribal women entrepreneurs contribute not only to income generation but also to cultural preservation, community resilience, and environmental sustainability. However, their potential remains constrained by structural barriers such as limited access to finance, education, markets, and supportive institutions. The existing policies often fail to address socio-cultural realities and indigenous knowledge systems. Strengthening tribal women's entrepreneurship requires participatory, gender-responsive, and culturally grounded approaches. The empowerment-oriented policies and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems are essential for ensuring sustainable livelihoods and long-term development outcomes.

8. Conflict of Research Interest

Authors declare no conflict of research interest.

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