

One Stitch, Many Dreams: Women Weaving New Futures

I had just entered the dimly lit room when Sarita, a 33-year-old entrepreneur, instinctively began covering her head with her dupatta. I glanced at the patched roof, surprised that such a worn-out structure had managed to keep the sunlight at bay. "It gets difficult when it rains heavily," she said. Her carefully draped saree made it clear she had been waiting in anticipation for my visit.

In Dhamaniya village, just 30 kilometers from Bhopal, women like Sarita have quietly taken the lead in nurturing their passions. They referred to their work as "small things" they did before marriage, after completing household chores, or while their children were at school—tailoring, make-up and hairstyles, sewing cushions, and making brooms. I was not surprised that they had internalized the belief that their skills were merely hobbies—never daring to imagine that they could become the primary breadwinners of their families if given the right opportunities and encouragement.

Kirti, a 20-year-old, married woman, shared that she was pursuing her B.A. while tutoring children up to class 8. "I just do it to kill time," she said, aware of the reality that when she turns 21, she would be expected to move to her husband's home. Not just Kirti—across villages and cities alike, women are conditioned to see their futures through the narrow lens of marriage and domesticity.



Women Entrepreneurs in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

As I sipped my fifth cup of chai for the day, Savita sat across from me, proudly talking about the 1,000 rupees she earns each month stitching blouses. "*Festival mein zyada ho jata hai,*" she added. One thing about visiting women is that they would never let you leave without a cup of chai or water. We chatted for forty minutes as she shared her latest design, learned from a YouTube video. Her excitement was obvious, but so was the loneliness. "*Sara din akele rehna padta hai, koi baat karne wala nahi hota,*" she said, explaining how her husband works as a security guard in Bhopal. His modest income, their small farm, and her stitching barely supported their family of five. Despite

spending 6-8 hours at the sewing machine, Savita hesitated to acknowledge that her income was crucial in keeping the household afloat. It was a familiar story—women juggling home and work, yet their contributions were seen as supplementary income or something that would simply keep them “busy.”

In another home, I met Rajeen, a 47-year-old who had recently returned to tailoring—something she had always wanted to do but gave up after marriage. *"Shadi ke baad sab chod diya,"* she said, adding with a smile, *"Ab bahu aayi hai toh main free hoon."* Her relief, oddly enough, came from the very patriarchal system that had suppressed her ambition for years. Her daughter-in-law now took care of the household, freeing her to pursue her long-held dream. Yet the irony wasn't lost on her—she wanted her daughter-in-law to work too, but *"Kaun dekhega sabka khana-peena?"* Who would tend to the family if she stepped out of her prescribed role? A question that has echoed through generations of women. Economic independence is rarely seen as a priority over the well-being of the household.

After four days and conversations with over twenty women, one thing was clear: each woman had a unique story, but the common thread was the weight of patriarchy. They could not step outside their homes for any work, but could labor in the fields in the "evenings." They wouldn't dare sit on chairs while older men were present. And if they were fortunate enough to work, it was because they had been "allowed" by the men in their lives. Their sense of agency—if I could call it that—was not their own, but borrowed.

One woman, recalling her entrepreneurial training, said, "I once attended my orientation class from the roadside under a tree. I told everyone I was going to the temple." It was easier for her that way, hidden under the guise of religious duty, partly because of societal pressure and partly because of poor mobile network connectivity in the area. I, too, had to write my observations in a notebook as the signal was too weak to open an online form. Despite all the grand promises about bridging the digital divide and improving welfare schemes, women were not aware that schemes like Udyam or Mudra loans existed. A [World Bank report](#) highlights



that rural women-owned businesses in India face significant difficulties in accessing formal credit. Despite various government initiatives like Udyam and Mudra loans, fewer than 10% of women-led micro and small enterprises in rural areas have received formal financing. While posters of political leaders adorned the walls of their homes, the actual benefits of government schemes had not reached them.

And yet, there was hope. Jayanti, a single mother, was determined to educate her daughters, even if it meant changing two buses to get them to school. “*Sab kuch seekhegi meri beti,*” she said, beaming at her daughter, who served us biscuits while her brother remained glued to his phone.



What would happen if women didn't need permission to dream, to work, to lead? The answer lies in creating initiatives that focus not just on training, but on awareness, mentorship, and community support. Initiatives that not only inform them about loans and opportunities but equip them to avail of them. Financial literacy workshops, digital skills training, and accessible childcare are just a few interventions that could empower women to fully engage in the workforce. Recognizing care work as labor, too, is crucial. Why is household labor so undervalued when it sustains the entire economy? As Gloria Steinem once said, "Women are not going to be equal outside the home until men are equal in it."

Much like the sunlight kept at bay by the worn-out roof above Sarita, the weight of patriarchy had clouded their opportunities, but clearly not their spirits. With the right support, these women will not just lift their families but entire communities—one stitch, one ambition, and one cup of chai at a time.

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