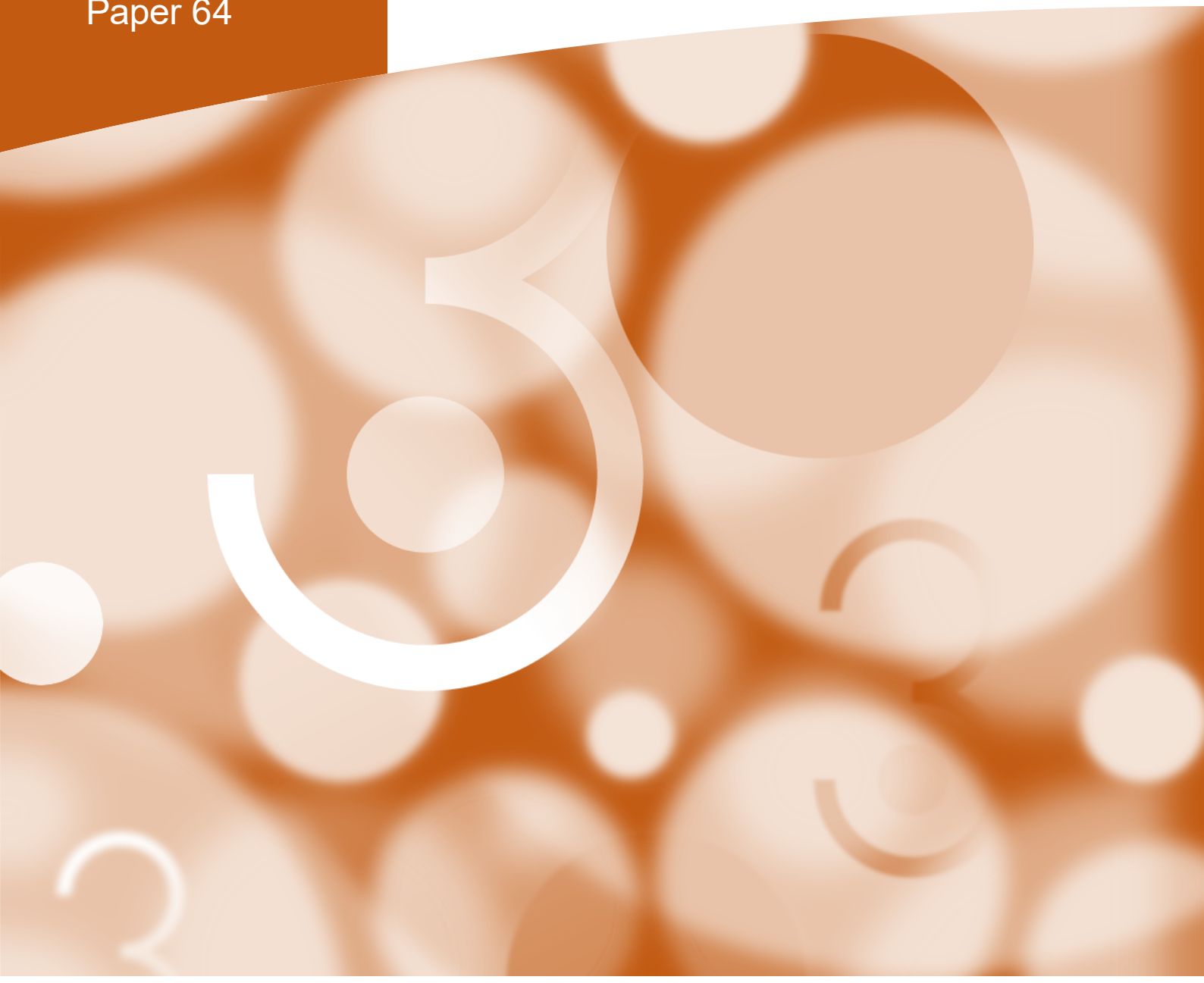
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The enablers and barriers to rural women's participation in management training programs

September 2024

Working Paper 64

Social protection



3ie International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

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About this working paper

The enablers and barriers to rural women's participation in management training programs provides insights into some of the enablers and barriers to women's participation in a micro-MBA program that seeks to cultivate competencies and encourage leadership capabilities among women weavers to initiate or manage their microenterprises. This working paper has been submitted as part of the Swashakt: Empowering Women's Collectives Evidence Program funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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Executive summary

Globally, women are less likely to engage in paid work than men and even when they do, they earn less (Beegle & Rubiano-Matulevich 2020). One possible approach to reducing the gender-specific employment gaps is through skill and management training programs that enhance women's capacities to take on leadership roles in businesses. In this paper, we provide insights into some of the enablers and barriers to women's participation in a micro-MBA program that seeks to cultivate competencies and encourage leadership capabilities among women weavers to initiate or manage their microenterprises.

For this study, we collected primary data through a telephone survey of 39 women, four months after they successfully graduated from the micro-MBA program. The survey focused on questions on participants' demographics and household characteristics and their perceptions of how equipped they felt to take on roles as leaders, trainers, and entrepreneurs. Our findings suggest that providing compensation for lost earnings, small cohort sizes, and higher prior education facilitate women's participation in training programs. Women mentioned how the program made them realize the importance of good communication skills and quality of products. They also recognized the value of their work, and this acknowledgment served as a significant source of motivation and pride. Women found legal, marketing, and technology modules to be the most difficult in the micro MBA program. However, they also reported that household responsibilities, unsupportive husbands, forgone wages to attend training, and regressive community norms constrained their participation in the program.

To mitigate these challenges, some of the recommendations this paper provides include supplying creches and childcare facilities to enable women's participation in training and benchmarking adequate compensation for lost wages to attend the training sessions. It is imperative to create increased buy-in among the women as well as their family members to enable them to participate in these training sessions. This can be done through awareness sessions that highlight the long-term impact and positive outcome of these training sessions on income, productivity, and sustainability of the enterprises. Because understanding and retention of course content can be challenging for several participants, it is recommended that the training sessions be staggered and facilitated through interactive tools and experiences for better learning outcomes. Prior foundational courses for participants with lower education levels and skill sets can be useful for creating a level playing field during the training sessions, thus ensuring better learning outcomes for the women.

Contents

Acknowledgements ..... **i**
Executive summary ..... **ii**
List of figures and tables ..... **iii**
Acronyms ..... **iv**
1. Introduction **1**
2. HMBA Program **2**
2.1 Overview 2
3. Methodology **3**
3.1 Participants' Characteristics 3
4. Key Findings **4**
4.1 Insights into understanding of various modules 4
4.2 The Link between Women's Performance in Tests, their Education, and Experience Levels 6
4.3 Compensation for lost earnings and travel support. 7
4.4 Interpersonal Relations and Small Cohort Size 7
4.5 Impact of gender and social norms 8
5. Discussion **8**
6. Recommendations **9**
References **11**

List of figures and tables

Figure 1: Total marks scored by respondents with varying levels of education 6

Table 1: Comparison between HMBA participants and other women in the districts 4

Acronyms

PC	Producer company
HMBA	Handmade MBA
MCQ	Multiple-choice questions
HR	Human resources
SHG	Self-help group
FIR	First information report

1. Introduction

While women's labor force participation rates are significantly lower than men's in several low- and middle-income countries, this gendered gap in labor force participation is particularly stark in India at 57 percentage points (The World Bank-Gender Data Portal 2022). Rigid gender roles, limited access to financial and productive assets, low education levels, and lack of management and technical training often drive women's low rates of participation and productivity in the labor market (Heenan 2002; Sanghi, Srija, and Shrinivas Vijay 2015). Several policies and programs are designed to alleviate these conditions, including skill development and education programs, awareness-building programs, collectivization and microfinance interventions, and other programs that target gender and social norms.

Many researchers have emphasized the role of collectivization and skill development in enhancing women's entrepreneurship and thereby, economic development (Rowlands 1997; Dulhunty 2021; Batliwala 2007; Sen and Dubey 2021). Female entrepreneurs are important in propelling economic prosperity and job creation (Momani 2017; Meyer and Hamilton 2020; Carranza, Dhakal, and Love 2018). Like many other countries, through various central and state government programs and schemes India is taking significant strides to nurture and promote entrepreneurship in the country (Microsave Consulting 2022). However, there are several barriers to promoting entrepreneurship among women. These include but are not limited to lack of access to value chain, markets, credit, and conducive ecosystem and weaker social networks—all perpetuated by gendered norms and practices that are prevalent in the society (Daymard 2015; Díaz-Martin et al. 2023; Microsave Consulting 2022). Evidence indicates that technical training that improves women's skills in and awareness of the overall business ecosystem can facilitate their participation in entrepreneurship (McKenzie and Woodruff 2014; Chinen et al. 2017).

In this paper, we leverage the rollout of the first batch of a managerial program designed to enhance women's leadership capacities and technical skills to underscore the facilitators and barriers to women's participation in these programs. The course included 12 modules, such as Accounts, Design, Legal, Marketing, Production, and Technology, among others. We conducted interviews with all program participants and implementers on themes such as the difficulty levels of various modules, their experiences with various modules, constraints women faced while attending the classes, and test scores.

Our findings suggest that exposure visits, compensation for lost earnings, small cohort sizes, and higher education can encourage women's learning. However, it is important to provide participants with crucial information about the course's objectives for them to understand the applications of various modules. Furthermore, our study indicates that there is a need for customized course content based on participants' education and skills, as well as for benchmarking the adequate amount of compensation for foregone wages to attend the training sessions. The participants also reported that rigid gender roles that disproportionately burden women with housework can impede their participation in such programs. Our findings have implications for other interventions that seek to train women for higher leadership roles.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: We first describe the course structure of the Handmade MBA (HMBA) program and selection criterion for students. We then highlight the major findings, including the barriers and facilitators women weavers faced during these training sessions, as well as possible application of learning from this training in their work. This study concludes with some recommendations that can augment seamless implementation and learning process for both the course training provider and the women weavers as they continue to scale up the program. Our findings also have implications for other management and entrepreneurship programs for women with low levels of formal education and training.

2. HMBA Program

3ie's Swashakt program supports collectives and group-based models for women-led businesses with the aim of generating evidence on their viability and sustainability, while understanding the barriers and facilitators in the process. One such model, supported by Swashakt, is run by the Chitrika Foundation, which serves as an incubator for handloom and artisan-owned enterprises in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Since its establishment in 2006, the foundation has successfully incubated three registered producer companies (PCs), improved weavers' skills development, facilitated their access to modern weaving techniques and value-added technologies, and provided marketing support. Under Swashakt, Chitrika works to enhance managerial skills among women weavers through a micro-MBA program called the 'Handmade MBA' (HMBA) program. The larger goal of the HMBA program is to enhance women's role in management of the PC and their own businesses. This paper discusses findings from our study of the HMBA training program.

2.1 Overview

As part of its skilling initiatives, Chitrika designed a micro-MBA or HMBA program with multifaceted objectives. The HMBA program aims to cultivate competencies among women to initiate their micro-enterprises, nurture leadership capabilities for guiding producer companies, empower women to assume training and mobilization roles, and assuage the gender imbalance among the PCs' high-level staff. At the time of conducting the surveys, 11 of 12 staff across Chitrika's PCs were men. Through the HMBA program, Chitrika hopes to create a pool of skilled women weavers to hire as employees.

The micro-MBA program provided training to women on 12 modules: Accounts, Design, Human Resources (HR), Legal, Marketing, Production (including Quality Control), Technology, Skilling in Handlooms, Self-Transformation, Gender, Governance, and Sustainability. Participants underwent an end-of-program multiple-choice question-(MCQ) based test encompassing the first seven modules; the remaining five modules were evaluated through practical components. Women were also assessed for their class participation and attendance and required to complete take-home assignments for select modules.

Chitrika engaged industry professionals and PC staff to deliver this training. For the Design module, they selected an external trainer who conducted sessions at PC locations. For modules like HR, Production, Marketing, and Technology, Chitrika assigned dedicated PC members to deliver training at various locations. These training

sessions varied in duration, ranging from half a day to two days. External trainers based in Hyderabad delivered modules such as Self-Transformation, Legal, Governance, and Gender. These training sessions took place during women's weeklong visits to Hyderabad, with one visit occurring at the program's outset and the other near the end of the program. The entire program spanned approximately 6 months.

For its first cohort, Chitrika screened 92 women, of which 55 women enrolled in the program and were selected based on their performance in the following four phases:

- **Phase I:** Written test to assess language and numeracy skills in Telugu (20 marks)
- **Phase II:** Group discussion to gauge women's teamwork and collaboration skills (25 marks)
- **Phase III:** Women's marketing and business skills (25 marks)
- **Phase IV:** Personal interview to understand women's motivations for attending the program (30 marks)

To be considered eligible for the program, women had to score 35 marks out of 100. This selection criterion is in line with the approach other MBA programs have adopted—prioritizing qualities such as motivation, interpersonal skills, and technical knowledge, instead of solely relying on past educational qualifications.

3. Methodology

Using primary and secondary data from HMBA participants and Chitrika, this study provides insights into women's experience with the program. It also aims to identify enablers and barriers to women's participation in training programs, which can offer potential learning not only to Chitrika but also other organizations implementing similar programs.

We collected primary data through a telephone survey conducted with 39 women four months after they had successfully graduated from the HMBA program. The survey consisted of questions on women's age, education, family background (number of members, marital status, assets owned), and perceptions of how equipped they felt to take on roles as leaders, trainers, and entrepreneurs.

Of the 39 women, we selected 17 for in-depth interviews conducted via telephone. This subgroup comprised of the six lowest scorers, the middle six scorers, and the top five scorers based on the HMBA scores. Of these 17 women, we successfully conducted interviews with 14, representing 36 percent of the total 39 women surveyed. Through these in-depth interviews, we collected information about their experience with the program, day-to-day applications of the training content, why they found some modules difficult or useful, and what challenges they faced in attending the lectures, among others. We also used Chitrika's data around women's attendance and marks scored to explore trends vis-à-vis women's characteristics.

3.1 Participants' Characteristics

Of the 55 women who were enrolled, 45 successfully graduated from the program. The average age of participants was 42 years old, with 4.77 years of education. Majority, 82 percent, of the women in the sample were married. Of the 39 women who were available for interviews, roughly half reported that even their spouse weaved.

To better contextualize the characteristics of women in the MBA cohort, we draw a comparison with data from other women in the same districts. *Table 1* presents a summary of key attributes, revealing some discernible differences between the two groups. These disparities shed light on the distinct profiles of women who funnel into such advanced programs.

Table 1: Comparison between HMBA participants and other women in the districts

	Women enrolled in HMBA	**Other women in the districts[1]**
Proportion of homes belonging to OBC Caste Category	0.97	0.88
Average household size (members)	4.00	3.17
Income (INR)	185051.30	120153.50
Proportion of women with self-help group membership	0.97	0.71
Proportion of households with fewer than 6 children	0.0005	0.09

A greater proportion of women in this study sample were members of self-help groups (SHGs). Around 97 percent women in the micro-MBA participants reported being members of SHGs compared to only 71.5 percent of the other women surveyed in the region. SHG membership implies that the women in these households have greater mobility and access to peer support, which can augment their participation in activities outside home (Kochar et al. 2020; Brody et al. 2017). Further, compared with 10 percent homes in the region that had a child under 6, only 2 out of 39 (0.05%) women in the micro-MBA sample had a child under 6 living in the same household. While both groups of women—those in the micro-MBA sample and other women of the region—were past childbearing age, smaller proportion of women with children under 6 and a relatively small proportion of those (around 25%) living with an in-law translate to fewer childcare and household responsibilities, which makes it easier to participate in training programs.

4. Key Findings

4.1 Insights into understanding various modules

According to the literature, marketing skills training and soft skills development have a positive effect on businesses and career advancement (Anderson, Chandy, and Zia 2018; Uckat and Woodruf 2020). In line with this understanding, the HMBA program's pilot was initiated with the explicit objectives of empowering women to assume leadership roles, become effective trainers, and foster entrepreneurship. Responses from program participants indicate the utility of certain modules, particularly those focused on HR and self-transformation. Women emphasized the value of communication skills and people management, citing their relevance to all three program objectives. Additionally, they identified Design and Marketing modules as essential for aspiring entrepreneurs and future trainers, further alluding to their practical applicability.

Our study also suggests that the HMBA program was an avenue for women to gain new experiences and exposure in the weaving sector. The program took participants to IKEA

[1] Women in the Baseline Sample of 3ie's Shashakt Program: The baseline sample consists of information collected from November 2021 to March 2022 from women belonging to villages where Chitrika had not started mobilization from districts as well as those of women enrolled in HMBA.

and the Creyo store in Hyderabad, set up by Chitrika, where their products are sold. Some women appreciated that they were had the opportunity to access these spaces that are, otherwise, inaccessible to them. A participant said, “We usually can’t go to these places by ourselves. We were only able to go to these big malls and stores because the Chitrika team took us. It was very new for me.” Many women also expressed their appreciation of their own work (on display at the Creyo store) and the newfound inspiration to experiment with new and complex designs. Women were also exposed to the different kinds of marketing methods used for different products. “I have understood how to sell things. How to sell different products in different markets is something I learnt through the exposure visit.” Importantly, women reported that the exposure visits assisted them in appreciating the demand and value of handloom products in cities—it helped them understand their work better.

When asked about how the training program helped them in their daily lives, most women reported that they had begun to focus more on producing better quality products. Women also mentioned they had picked up communication and time management skills thanks to the training program. One woman said, “We feel more confident about weaving new designs now. I feel like there is a change in my personality as well. I want to be in the work shed on time, do my work, and weave neatly. There is a realization that if we do our work well, we can achieve so much, that our company can grow many folds, and we can earn a better income.”

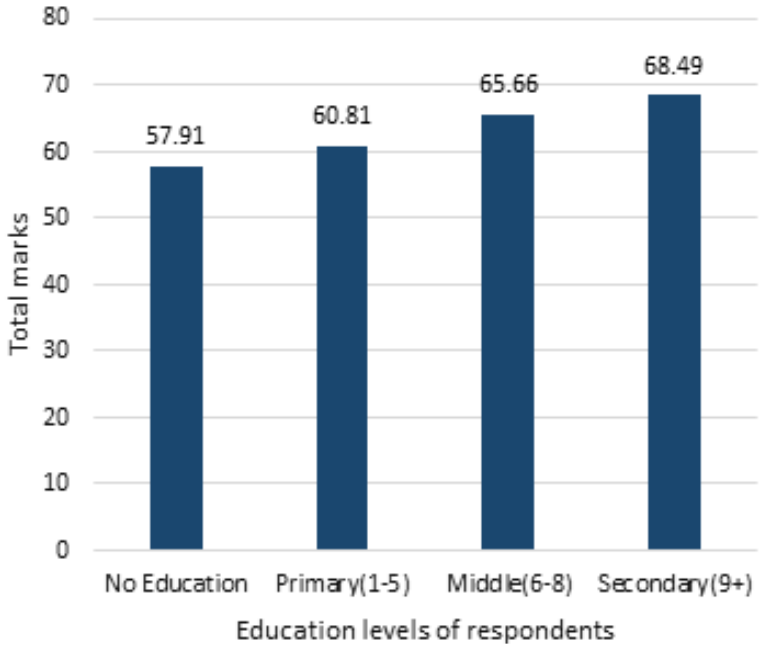
When asked about the most difficult modules, women ranked Technology as the most challenging, followed by Design and Production. They also noted it was difficult to cope with the Mathematical skills requirements related to accounts and production modules. Interestingly, despite these challenges, they had the highest marks in the Technology module. A woman said, “I felt using WhatsApp, YouTube, and Google were very difficult to understand. I don't have education, that's the reason I do not understand them.”

Furthermore, even though participants’ average scores were the lowest in legal and marketing modules, very few reported them as being difficult. During in-depth interviews with the implementation team, they highlighted that participants found the Legal module the most difficult to follow. A potential explanation for the difference in responses between the implementation team and the participants is that the course content did not resonate with their day-to-day work, which probably led to low recall of its content during the interviews, especially because these interviews occurred a few months after the training was completed. A 48-year-old participant from East Godavari shed light on this: “I did not understand the topic of law because I could not relate to it. We were taught how to file a First Information Report. (FIR)and how to talk to people when we are in legal trouble, but we have never been in such situations, and I don’t think we will be in the future. I listened to them and felt that I understood what they were saying when they explained those topics, but I do not remember any of it now.” Another participant highlighted what could serve as a potential solution, “We must learn these every day. It can’t just be a one-month training. Initially, it was difficult to understand math but slowly, it was making sense. By the time we could understand, it was time for us to leave. And here we are, back to our weaving work.” These responses highlight that simplifying more difficult content, including more lectures, and explaining with real-life applications are some ways to ensure participants’ engagement and sustained recall.

4.2 The link between women's performance in tests, their education, and experience levels

According to Blundell et al. (2020), higher education can lead to better learning outcomes through training. Using Chitrika's data on women's test scores across all modules of the handmade MBA program, we examined the relationship between women's performance in tests, education, and experience in weaving. Conceivably, we found that women's performance on tests is positively correlated with their years of schooling across most modules (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Total marks scored by respondents with varying levels of education



Insights from our in-depth interviews with women corroborate this trend. As noted by a 45-year-old participant from East Godavari, "I didn't understand anything that was taught there. The educated people could understand. When it came to math, the people who could understand, did the calculations first, I just copied from their notes. I didn't learn how to use [a] phone." A participant from Srikakulam mentioned, "Math and how to use WhatsApp were difficult to understand because I don't have education and have never done these things before." Another woman said, "Education is important in understanding these things. Without that, it is difficult to understand. I can't think of any changes they can make in making it easy for us."

In our sample, most women participants possessed low levels of education. The case for including even those with low formal schooling in programs such as micro-MBA is frequently made on the basis that experience can compensate for low levels of formal schooling. Evidence suggests that gains from learning-by-doing and mentorship exceed schooling (Heckman, Lochner, and Cossa 2002; Papay et al. 2020; Brooks, Donovan, and Johnson 2018). However, we do not observe any clear relation between women's weaving experience and their performance in the program. It is possible that further relations between experience and performance could be uncovered in the presence of other controls, such as age and education, with a larger sample.

4.3 Compensation for lost earnings and travel support

The opportunity cost of attending the HMBA program was high, because 92 percent of women participating in HMBA reported income-generating work such as handloom and non-agriculture wage labor as their primary activity in the past 12 months. Nevertheless, 97.4 percent of the HMBA participants maintained at least 85-percent attendance. A crucial factor contributing to the high attendance rates was the monetary compensation and transportation Chitrika provided for the time women spent in training sessions conducted at the PC level and in Hyderabad. The importance of this monetary support is reflected in women's responses—82 percent reported that were it not for that compensation, they would not have been able to attend the entire HMBA training. Chitrika also provided accommodation and transport facilities for the duration of classes in Hyderabad. As discussed by Cheema et al. (2023), uptake of training falls substantially when sessions cross the village boundary and safety concerns serve as barriers beyond economic costs. Therefore, Chitrika's travel-related support for the sessions in Hyderabad served as way to make sure women, even those who had never travelled to Hyderabad before, could attend those sessions.

However, given that the in-person training component of the program took place in Hyderabad, many women spoke about the challenges they faced during this time. Most reported that the loss of wages during the training period was a problem and many went on to add that the compensation for the wage loss they received from Chitrika was not sufficient. One woman weaver shared that some weaves require two people to work simultaneously—usually a woman weaver and her husband—so if the woman left home for a 30-day period, the wage would be foregone for not just her but also her husband. She said, "Kuppadam requires two people to weave, so wage loss is for two people. But compensation was calculated for one."

4.4 Interpersonal relations and small cohort size

A benefit of the small cohort sizes was evident in women's responses regarding their motivation for joining the program. They indicated they lacked awareness of the exact purpose of training before joining and fully understandoot it only after the program had commenced, but they chose to join because of their trust in the PC staff. Surprisingly, this is despite the four-phase selection criterion used to identify participants. "The PC staff said we must attend the training without fail. I did not want to go because I have small children to take care of. I did not even know what the training was about." Another participant said: "I am not part of the PC. My neighbor who works with the PC said that the training is [sic] on tailoring. I really wanted to learn because I do know a little of stitching on the sewing machine. Three other women from our village also thought it was about sewing machines. Only after going there, we understood it was about weaving and other things related to the PC."

For programs wishing to train (and ensure successful participation) of larger cohorts, motivations based on interpersonal relations will not serve as a feasible mechanism. This highlights the importance of making sure the purpose and benefits of the program are clearly defined. It is also important to note that while Chitrika was able to compensate the participants and plans to compensate future participants, the intended participants enrolled in HMBA were still relatively few. Thus, the remarkably high attendance levels may not be feasible for larger programs or those with constrained budgets.

4.5 Impact of gender and social norms

Our findings corroborate results from existing research, which shows that gender and social norms inhibit women's time spent on paid work (Arráiz 2018; Chuang 2015; Berge and Jose Garcia Pires 2015; Field, Jayachandran, and Pande 2010; Heenan 2002). In our study, 46 percent of women reported facing difficulties in attending the training due to unsupportive husbands, lack of childcare support, regressive community norms, and loss of wages. These women said that due to competing demands of the household chores, childcare responsibilities, and so on, attending trainings was a challenge for them. Family members reinforced the gendered division of labor within the household by expressing concerns about domestic chores in women's absence.

While gender norms restrict women's engagement in paid work, evidence indicates that intergenerational co-residence can encourage women's labor force participation due to division of responsibility within the household (Khanna and Pandey 2024). This was reverberated in our research. Many women reported that the onus of household chores was passed on to other women like mothers-in-law, daughters, or sisters-in-law in their absence. One respondent shared that her husband had to go live with their son and his wife for the duration of the training due to absence of another woman in the household level to handle the domestic work. In some cases, it was the promise of Chitrika's wage loss compensation that convinced the family members to allow women to attend the training program. It is likely that similar barriers prevented the dropout candidates from joining the HMBA program.

5. Discussion

This section summarizes the main findings from the research and offers a few recommendations for the program as it scales up. These include:

- **Participants' profile:** In terms of course content, we found that modules pertaining to technology, marketing, legal, and accounts were the most difficult. Although the education levels of most HMBA program participants was low, women who had studied up to higher classes performed better in most modules. In some cases, early work experience with master weavers was positively related to their learning outcomes in the HMBA program.
- **Effective course delivery strategy:** Our findings suggest that exposure visits can serve as an important tool for motivation building and learning. In our sample, most participants found the exposure visits to other stores beneficial because they motivated them to improve the quality of their work. Women felt positive reinforcement when they saw consumers in high-end stores buying the products they had made.
- **Wage compensation:** Participants received compensation for the wages lost and food and lodging for the period when they attended the HMBA program. This was a huge impetus because 82 percent of women mentioned that they would not have attended the training were it not for compensation. This is despite the fact that many of them found the compensation inadequate.
- **Ensuring family support:** During the interactions with participants, we realized that the training program's objective was clear to them only after they had attended it. As the program scales up, participants would benefit from proper

information about the training's objectives to better ensure support from the larger community. This is important because lack of support from family and the community due to regressive gender and social norms continues to impede women's participation in these programs.

Based on experience with the first cohort of participants for the training program, Chitrika intends to make some amendments to the course curriculum and the implementation process. They are working with a professional content creator to develop better course material. This includes using more visual tools to make learning easier for participants. Standardizing their course material and design is also on their agenda. For the first HMBA batch, the Chitrika team designed and delivered all the modules in the program. However, the team felt that it would be beneficial to hire an external gender consultant to design the Gender and Self-Transformation modules for the upcoming batches. As the program scales up, the study suggests a few recommendations to ensure better implementation and sustainability of the training program.

6. Recommendations

- **Provision of creche or childcare facility:** It is evident that domestic responsibilities and inadequate family support are two of the major factors that impede women's participation. Thus, it becomes imperative for organizations to make adequate arrangements, especially during long-term training programs that require women to stay away from home. This could be in the form of setting up informal creches at the village level that can pitch in to support childcare activities. Studies by Talamas (2023), Barros et al. (n.d.), Martínez and Perticará (2017), and Clark et al. (2019), among others, show that provision of free or cost-effective childcare significantly increases the likelihood of a woman's (mother's) employment.
- **Staggered training sessions:** It will be helpful to divide the HMBA training into multiple, shorter segments so participants do not have to stay away from home for long periods. Converting the HMBA program into a village-level training with shorter exposure visits to Hyderabad can also be helpful in enabling buy-in from the members to attend the program and ensuring their retention. Berge and Jose Garcia Pires (2015) suggest that development interventions that aim to promote women's entrepreneurship should also target social norms like the burden of domestic obligations that fall on women, which limit their capacity and potential as entrepreneurs.
- **Conducting awareness sessions for robust buy-in:** During training, it became evident that many participants developed clarity on the objectives of the training only after they had attended the sessions. Awareness sessions by Chitrika for both the HMBA program participants and their family members can be helpful in creating increased demand for the program. Awareness of the potential benefits and learning from the training can be helpful as the HMBA program is scaled up. In their study, McKelway (2024) show how awareness through promotional videos among women's family members led to decrease in family's opposition to their employment in carpet weaving work.
- **Conducting benchmarking exercise to decide compensation:** Compensation provided for the wages lost during the training program was an important enabler

for women's participation. However, some women spoke about the compensation being inadequate or lower than the wages they had to forego. Organizations like Chitrika and others conducting similar interventions can consider making the decision-making process for the compensation amount more consultative and transparent.

- **Enhancing training methods through interactive tools and foundation courses:** The implementers of the program also recently started creating lecture videos for their training programs. This can positively influence the learning outcomes of participants attending these courses and be replicated for other training sessions at the PC level. Another potential way to make the course content more relevant is by making it congruent to the participants' needs and interests. The legal and technical content can be further simplified through easy-to-refer-to check lists and succinct and easy language along with refresher training for the trainees (Dang et al. 2022). Hiring external experts who can provide input on training modules and customize it based on the analysis of the participants' test scores can make the content more interesting for participants. Insights from data can be helpful for designing the course in a manner that is the most useful for participants.
- **Creating a level playing field for all the participants:** The micro-MBA was challenging for women with lower prior education, especially in mathematics. This highlights the importance of clear criteria for participation in the program and teaching women foundational mathematics and reading skills at the PC level before the classes commence to try and create a level playing field for all participants.

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