

BETTER SKILLS BETTER CARE

Driving women's economic empowerment through an integrated vocational skilling and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) intervention serving low-income families in India.

The 'Dharma Life Community Learning Centre' through 'Better Skills Better Care'

aims to increase women's economic participation while providing their children with a space to learn, thrive and grow in rural and semi-urban vulnerable populations in India.

This project seeks to advance, in an integrated manner, two important issues, namely, the need for (1) women's economic empowerment and (2) holistic early childhood care and education through the set-up of the 'Dharma Life Community Learning Centre'.

The programme offers:

- 1 Women with digitally enabled skills and job training.
- 2 Their children access to affordable and quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

Reinforcing the importance of ECCE, with the first eight years of childhood as a critical period for growth through awareness campaigns and by leveraging the resources, tools, and frameworks from the "Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao" initiative of EkStep Foundation, the programme will support the existing government and educational infrastructure of aanganwadis and the State Rural Livelihood Missions.

The programme aims to achieve:

Vision: Results of planned scaling from 3 to 21 villages

1050 women sensitised	252 - 315 enrolled in training
840 women counselled	210 - 252 engaged in economic opportunities
525 children enrolled	21 community learning centers set up

1000 - 1200

community members reached by behavioural change campaign on unpaid care work and ECCE

21 vocational trainers and teachers with paid opportunities in the care sector

Despite progress on many dimensions of human development, women's economic empowerment in India remains stubbornly low.¹ **The labour force participation rate among women in India in 2022 was 24 per cent - one of the lowest in the world.**² Reasons for this reality are many. Two in particular stand out in the context of rural India, where over 900 million people live (World Bank 2022³): social norms and the lack of uptake of paid jobs. **Discriminatory social norms limit women's agency and time to engage in paid economic activities.** Women bear a disproportionate proportion of the burden of unpaid care and domestic work resulting in time poverty (around the world, women perform two to ten times more unpaid care work than men⁴, and they often lack financial independence and family support to engage in paid employment.

The nature of jobs structured as inflexible working hours— and the lack of access to skills and resources necessary to access them — further compounds the challenge of advancing women's economic empowerment. Early marriage forces women to drop out of school and from existing skilling programs. Families frequently do not permit women to travel for training or work. Furthermore, there are few local jobs, and the ability to access them is further limited by social and gender norms that restrict mobility and restrict the division of labour within families to gendered roles. Often, the role of ensuring the care of children is seen as the mother's role. Livelihoods

training — which requires investing time and consistent engagement without interruptions, such as taking care of children and domestic chores — suffers in the absence of adequate childcare.

Villages in India tend to lack access to high quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) services. While the Government of India has invested heavily into local infrastructure in the form of Aanganwadi centres, the reality remains that learning outcomes for three - five year olds are poor. One reason for this reality could be the severe time constraints that Aanganwadi workers face as they seek to fulfil education, health (e.g., basic vaccination), and nutrition needs among children all at the same time, and often within a few hours from 8:00 to noon. Therefore, some children either attend private kindergartens and nursery schools or enter school directly in grade one, unready and unprepared to face the rigours of formal schooling. Research finds that over 85 per cent of a child's cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of six years, highlighting the critical importance of appropriate care and stimulation of the brain in the early years to ensure healthy brain development and growth⁵.

A solution that addresses both challenges at the same time would allow the mother to engage adequately in the skills and livelihoods training and peer group activities while having assurance that the child is also benefitting from quality learning opportunities in a safe

1 Duflo, E. (2012). Women's Empowerment and Economic Development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 1051–1079. DOI: 10.1257/jel.50.4.1051.

2 World Bank Gender Data Portal. 2022 figures <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/india/> (Last accessed 24 October 2023).

3 World Bank Data Portal. 2022 figures <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SPRUR.TOTL.ZS> (Last accessed 24 October 2023).

4 Gaëlle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando, and Keiko Nowacka. (2014) Unpaid Care Work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes.

5 National Education Policy 2020. PRS Legislative. Link: <https://prsindia.org/policy/report-summaries/national-education-policy-2020>

environment. The 'Dharma Life Community Learning Centre', co-designed with UN Women aims to address these intertwined challenges through an integrated vocational skilling livelihoods training and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) intervention targeted to low-income populations in rural and semi-urban India.

By offering livelihoods training for women together accessible, affordable, and quality care services in one physical space, this programme seeks to build evidence to test innovative models that support the creation of livelihoods for women while improving children's learning outcomes. This model aims to increase women's labour market participation through decent work opportunities both in the care sector as well as jobs relevant to local economies, recognize, and redistribute unpaid care responsibilities between state and the market, and build economic agency of women in their households and communities. The programme will also support broader social norms change on the gendered division of labour within the household and encourage acceptability of taking up

childcare services by women - with the potential to scale across South Asia and beyond. Moreover, by providing evidence of low-cost models for holistic learning that can cater to the low-income communities and create a trained and empowered workforce of women, the programme can generate evidence and insights for enhanced public service delivery.

Implemented as part of the Gender-Inclusive Care Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Programme (GICEEP) funded by International Development Research Center (IDRC), Visa Foundation and in partnership with SAFEEM and Bopinc, the **UN Women & Dharma Life Community Learning Centre through the 'Better Skills Better Care'** is tested in three locations, namely, Ranchi, Satara, and Vadodara. The programme's first phase (from April to September 2023) was focused on conducting a series of community engagement activities and exploratory research to inform the programme design in two of the three locations.

Key findings so far include:

- Mothers play the primary caregiving role within the family, while fathers typically focus on providing for the family's basic needs.
- There is a low awareness about the importance of early childhood years among parents and the community at large.
- There is a lack of access to skill development opportunities for women in the local economy.
- Most skilling initiatives focus on training but not livelihood creation and need to be aligned with Skill India (NSDC).
- Acquiring new skills or engaging in paid work may double the burden on women as men are not expected to do domestic work within their households.
- There is a need to drive support around the successful delivery of the newly introduced NIPUN Bharat Mission.

NEXT STEPS:

These findings were instrumental in further advancing the design of the pilot to ensure a human-and-community-centred design approach detailed below. Once insights from the pilot have been identified and the programme is ready to scale to larger numbers of villages, the project will compare outcomes in a set of randomly selected villages in Pune, Maharashtra that have the integrated childcare and livelihood centers in operation with a set

of control villages that do not have these centres. Dharma Life will add 18 additional villages for intervention, thus adding 18 more preschools. The research will be conducted by Dharma Life Labs, the Wheeler Institute at London Business School, and the London School of Economics in partnership with UN Women. The following will be examined:

Can a multi-pronged intervention that combines (a) childcare facilities and (b) skilling & access to livelihood opportunities lead to:

Increases in women's economic empowerment:

Women having increased skills, resources, and opportunities to access and compete equitably in markets and the agency to control and benefit from economic gains.

Increased acceptance of enabling social norms:

Relating to care responsibilities and gendered division of labour and willingness to use market based childcare services within the household and community.

Improved children's educational outcomes:

Including improved school readiness.

The pilot will generate crucial evidence to adapt and demonstrate care delivery models which can sustain themselves with public, private or blended financing to benefit communities at scale.

Sustainability through community buy in is key and the project will identify local ECCE trainers, ensure that the skills training offered is localized to the village needs and will continue to run the centers even after the project period.



CALL TO ACTION:

JOIN US AND INVEST INTO CARE AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Support the project

'Scaling Innovations for an Inclusive Care Economy'

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