

# The rise of female entrepreneurship?

SANTOSH DESAI

Everywhere one travels in the country, one comes across a new breed of female entrepreneurs. They don't give themselves that label, but in a variety of small ways, entrepreneurship is blossoming at the smallest unit of change. The efforts are varied; not all ventures are full-time, some are carried out quietly, others with full family support, but there is a common spirit that runs through all these efforts.

A chain of beauty parlours in Gaya. Chit funds in Warangal. An online portal for women in Jalgaon. A dress rental business in Aurangabad. A catering service in Coimbatore. Cooking classes in Rajkot. Jewellery made of out of technology waste in Gurgaon. A skilling centre in Rajamundhry. A hostel in Bikaner. What is common is that they all have been set up, and are being run, by firsttime female entrepreneurs.

Some activities are an outgrowth of jobs traditionally considered to be 'suitable for women'. Adding on tuition to a formal teaching job, gradually moving into it fulltime, and turning it into a business is one pattern. In some cases, a hobby or a skill gets converted into a business. Beauty parlours can be found in every *galli-mohalla*. Small boutiques, sometimes run out of a spare room, are easy to spot too. Catering units that supply homecooked food, cooking classes that turn culinary skill into an organised enterprise. In yet other instances, women convert social networks into a money-making enterprise. Chit funds are extensions of kitty parties, and often get combined with multilevel marketing of products.

Interestingly, becoming entrepreneurs, gives women much greater flexibility than employment in a regular job. The hours are not fixed, there is greater control over one's time and it is possible to operate from home. Technology is helping. Setting up online businesses is much easier, and needs little by way of physical infrastructure. The mobile phone is a godsend. Also, standing outside the hierarchy that every formal job comes with, represents a kind of freedom that is highly valued. One does not work under anyone else, one is not answerable to others. Socially too, as some women pointed out, this make things

easier, for some of the traditional hesitation that exists about having to mingle with and follow the instructions of other men do not apply. Of course, in the course of conducting one's business, such considerations do not count for much, but a veneer of social respectability is useful for women in smaller towns as they emerge into protagonists of their own venture.

At a deeper level, the urge to do something more, to squeeze out greater opportunities from the cards one is dealt with, is an underlying feature of a lot of these efforts. One can see a restless urge, an itch that must be scratched, a sense that deep inside lies untold potential that must somehow get harnessed. This surplus ambition that powers entrepreneurialism is a vital palpable force that can be seen among women of all ages and classes across the country today.

Interestingly, female entrepreneurship does not unsettle men in quite the same way as a woman working in a formal job often does. The fact that there is no designation, no rank that can serve as a relative measure of success and no fixed salary that becomes a benchmark to compete

against, turns out to be an advantage for it sidesteps issues to do with the bruising of male egos. The money made in business has a fluid quality.

This is why a lot of entrepreneurial activity is conducted in the name of 'doing something on the side' or by way of 'keeping busy'. Part of this characterisation comes from a pragmatic understanding of the need to downplay ambition and even success, so as to not threaten the existing power hierarchy with the men around her. Even in instances, where the woman was making more money than her husband, one often saw a low-key description of her work. Of course, this is not always the case; there are examples of women doing really well and men learning to live with it. In these cases, traditional roles are overturned and a new power dynamic is established, but this happens infrequently.

This is part of a long-standing pattern that we have seen where the work contribution of women has been consistently undervalued and inadequately acknowledged. The housewife is widely seen to be 'not working'. It is most stark in the case of women working on farms. There is no such thing as a woman farmer, no word in our languages that describes this; only men can get this label in spite of often doing very little actual work on their farms.

Increasingly, the capabilities and imaginations of women across the country can no longer be contained. An ability to find a way from amongst one's crowded life is propelled by a fierce desire to impose oneself on one's environment. Entrepreneurship becomes an uncontrollable leakage of intent. Running one's own business gives a sense of freedom that few other activities can match. Female entrepreneurship is a form of untethering, a release of desires and aspirations that render the idea of boundaries a little less relevant. The change may as yet be small, but it is unmistakable; the ability to lead life on one's own terms and to create something of enduring value is a profoundly significant shift.

[santosh365@gmail.com](mailto:santosh365@gmail.com)

