

I. The birth of Project Swayam

As the Covid-19 pandemic raged on and the whole world was enveloped in news about the rampant deaths, symptoms and health concerns that this epidemic raised it was easy for a concurrent social pandemic to go overlooked - the struggles and grief faced by the widows of India, a community in my country that remains on the fringes of society. These women are ostracised, deemed impure, and unfairly labelled as bad luck. They are condemned to a life in white, never seeing their own reflections in colour. I spent time with one such woman, Ravita Zanghare. Our intimate conversations, over cups of chai, allowed me to better understand the depth of her struggle and her incredible resilience triggering a realisation that her journey was a powerful testament to the potential that lies within every woman.



Glimpses into Ravita's life and my interactions with her and her young son Dev

My interactions with her inspired me to not only better understand the specific struggles faced by these women and how they have made inspirational attempts to overcome them but also to devise solutions

through which they would be able to regain their womanhood and find a sense of independence with which they could rebuild their lives.

Through conducting extensive research in the areas of psychology, sociology and anthropology inclusive of detailed primary data collection and comprehensive literature reviews¹ I was able to identify that a key factor that modulates the quality of life of these women is financial independence and stability. India, a traditional society tied down to societal and gender norms, postulates that men should hold positions of financial importance as the breadwinners and economic support systems of their households whereas women should be focused on domestic tasks such as child rearing and maintaining a home. Hence, several of these women had little to no financial literacy or means of earning money of their own. As widows who are shunned by society and their own families, this caused them to be unable to provide for their children and moreover for themselves.

It was this significant observation and the inherent strength within these women that prompted the initiation of what today is known as Project Swayam - an organic step to to empower women affected by Covid, to gain self-confidence and achieve financial independence through skill training, entrepreneurship education and personal support.

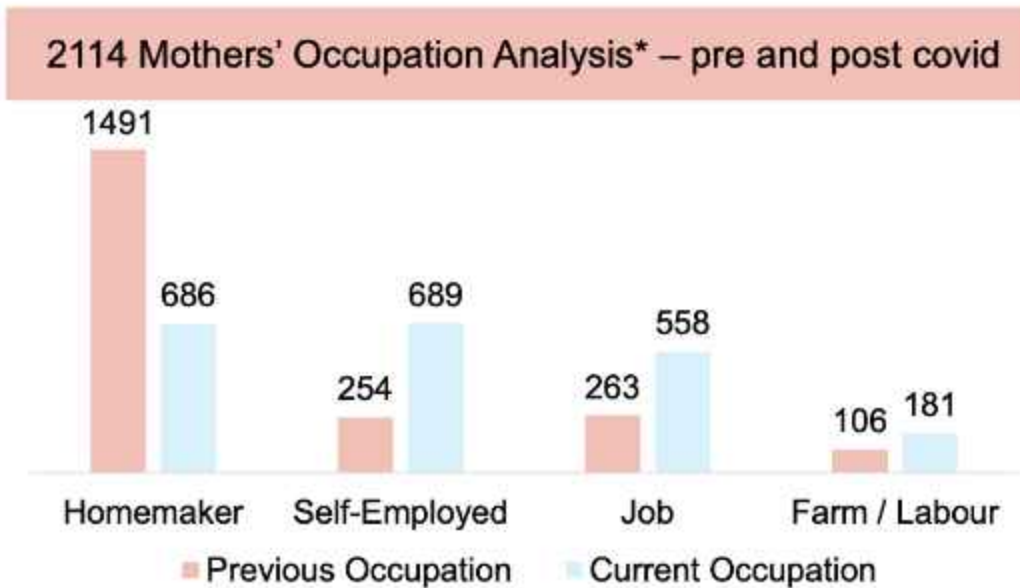


¹ The two research papers that I wrote are as follows:

- 1) A Social Psychological Exploration of Manhood threat and Domestic Violence in India During the Covid -19 pandemic. Under Adam Stanaland Ph.D, Duke University and New York University.
- 2) A Psychological and Anthropological Exploration of Female Participation in Economic Activity and Rising Divorce Rates in India. Under Dr. Douglas Raybeck, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Hamilton College

II. Implementation Details

The implementation process of Project Swayam began with an extensive analysis of the occupations and skill sets of the 2,114 supported Widows both pre and post covid. We found that the majority of the women were homemakers whilst the others were either self employed or involved in basic jobs or agricultural labour.



Based on self-reported skills and interests that we learned through interactions, interviews and questionnaires shared with the women, we organised 2 workshops (dividing the women based on shared abilities) for further skilling and training in Mumbai and Pune respectively. In each workshop, the women were able to create approximately 1,200 pieces each (products included: Candles, Diyas, Aarti plates, baskets, garlands etc.) which were sold at 3 large exhibitions, raising sales of over Rs. 2 Lakhs which served as self-earned income for these widows hence initiating their journey towards complete financial independence.



Our conducted workshops and exhibitions

Our next step was to organise smaller group meetings with these women to better understand their perspectives on financial independence - their current efforts, the necessity and the measures required to sustain it. One such example is the meeting we organised with 34 women living in the Mumbai metropolitan region (Mumbai, Thane, Palghar and Raigad districts). The session began with introductions and basic ice-breaking activities so that a comfortable and safe environment was created in which every woman was accepted and heard without judgement.





Introductions and Ice-Breaking activity

The core activity we planned was a group presentation. We divided the mothers into 5 different groups based on the area of skill / occupation they are interested in - (1) Cooking / Tiffin Services (2) Beauty Parlour services (3) Tailoring / Fashion Services (4) Babysitting / Day Care Services (5) Working from home. We asked the women to use a chart paper to discuss and write down the benefits, drawbacks and challenges they have faced or expect to face when working in these specific areas. Each group of women then presented their thoughts and each presentation was opened to a wider discussion with questions,

suggestions and more from the entire group.



Group Brainstorming and Discussions





Glimpses into the Group Presentations

Findings from Group Presentation (1/5)



COOKING / MESS / TIFFIN SERVICES	Name of Mother	Area
PET PUJA TIFFIN SERVICES - 8 mothers		
CHALLENGES:		
1. Using App and digital platforms,		
2. Irregular customer		
3. Less price point		
4. Place and working capital for orders		
5. Consolidation of food orders		
SUPPORT REQUIRED:		
1. Advanced training in app handling		
2. Customer continuity		
3. Market understanding and its linkages		
4. Proper space and Capital		

Findings from Group Presentation (2/5)



BEAUTY PARLOUR SERVICES	Name of Mother	Area
ANGEL SALON - 4 mothers		
CHALLENGES:		
1. Advanced training		
2. Expensive treatment / styling machines		
3. Irregular customer flow		
4. Low price-point		
5. Space and initial / working capital		
6. Taking care of children		
SUPPORT REQUIRED:		
1. Advanced beauty training		
2. Advanced training in app handling		
3. Client management training		
4. Advance machines / equipment support		

Findings from Group Presentation (3/5)




TAILORING	Name of Mother	Area
PIYE STAIR - 9 mothers		
CHALLENGES:		
1. Tailoring as an extra-income source		
2. Irregular customer flow		
3. Mental stress		
4. People approached changed		
5. Taking care of children		
6. Working Capital		
SUPPORT REQUIRED:		
1. Advanced training		
2. Client management training		
3. Financial Support		

Findings from Group Presentation (4/5)



BABY-SITTING / DAY-CARE	Name of Mother	Area
AAJI KI NAARI SAB PE BHARI - 3 mothers		
CHALLENGES:		
1. Space to set-up and operate day-care		
2. Marketing		
3. Human resource		
4. Set-up and working capital		
SUPPORT REQUIRED:		
1. Client Management		
2. Funding		
3. Training		

Findings from Group Presentation (5/5)



WORK FROM HOME	
AKSHAR SHILP - 4 mothers	
CHALLENGES: 1. Time management 2. Health issues 3. Age limitation 4. Non-availability of system	
SUPPORT REQUIRED: 1. Work from home opportunity 2. Technical training 3. Desktop / laptop	

Name of Mother	Area
1. Sushma Vajpude	Bhayander
2. Kanchan Padnekar	Parvat
3. Smiti Amar Sargandhar Borvati	
4. Deeksha Redkar	Parvat

Our findings from the presentations

Our findings and observations from this meeting showed that their **challenges** included:

1. Basic skills
2. Lack of advanced machines / equipment / material
3. Irregular Customer
4. Low cost of service / products
5. Capital
6. Space
7. Health issues / age
8. Taking care of children along with other work

And their **areas where support was required** include:

1. Advanced training in skills and Technical Training
2. Marketing and its linkages
3. Financial Support – Capex and Working Capital
4. Space

Using this information, we began to create more specific skill training programs that addressed each of these areas providing the women with the knowledge, equipment and opportunities they needed to kickstart their careers. For example, for the women interested in beauty /salon services we organised a

training camp at the Enrich Academy. Through this they were given exposure to the details of working in this field and those that were further motivated have enrolled, with our support, in at least three months of comprehensive beauty services training with the academy.



Glimpses from the Enrich Training Camp

Project Swayam however is not limited to support in terms of financial independence but one of our key motivations is breaking the prejudices that surround widows in India. Our Haldi Kumkum event on January 14th 2024 in Pune (64 Mothers, 89 Children) is testament to our consistent effort towards true inclusion. The Haldi-Kumkum festival celebrated by women throughout India is a social gathering between married women who exchange turmeric and vermilion powder as symbols of their married status wishing for their husbands long lives. Transitioning from darkness to light, the Haldi-Kumkum ceremony that we conducted unfolded anew, redefined by the very women it once excluded. Here, women, widows, once sidelined, stood at the forefront, their laughter ringing out a message of hope and change. "Til Gul Kha, God God Bola" - more than just words, it was a mantra for kindness. On this day, it was a battle cry for liberation, for voices to be heard, for stories to be shared.



The Haldi-Kumkum Event and media coverage of the same

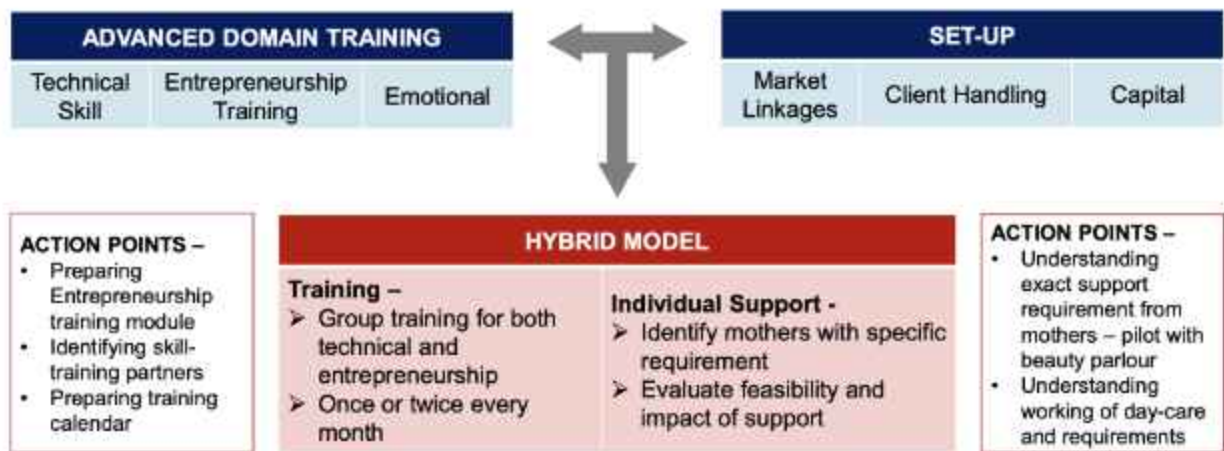
III. Our way forward

Our way forward introduces a Hybrid Model through which we aim to provide these women with two main areas of support:

1. Training: Group training for both technical and entrepreneurship, once or twice every month. Advanced domain training is inclusive of technical skill, entrepreneurship and emotional.
2. Individual attention: Identify mothers with specific requirements, evaluate feasibility and impact of support. The support in terms of set up includes Market linkages, capital and client handling.

Our points of focus include:

- Preparing Entrepreneurship training module
- Identifying skill- training partners
- Preparing training calendar
- Understanding exact support requirement from mothers – pilot with beauty parlour
- Understanding working of day-care and requirements



Visual representation of our plan for the future