

Research Article

Unlocking Potential: The Impact of Educational Entrepreneurs and EdTech on Women's Empowerment in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan

Manisha Jain¹, Trilok Kumar Jain²

Suresh Gyan Vihar University, Jaipur, India

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Corresponding Author:

Trilok Kumar Jain, Suresh Gyan Vihar University,
Jaipur, India

Email Id:

trilokkr.jain@mygyanvihar.com

Orcid Id:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5734-5956>

How to cite this article:

Jain M, Jain T K. Unlocking Potential: The Impact of Educational Entrepreneurs and EdTech on Women's Empowerment in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan. *J Adv Res Humani Social Sci* 2025; 12(4): 12-16.

Date of Submission: 2025-10-12

Date of Acceptance: 2025-11-13

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study investigates the role of educational entrepreneurs and EdTech in transforming women's lives in Western Rajasthan. It focuses on the conservative Thar Desert area, including Bikaner. The research examines the impact on education, skill enhancement, and employment. It also explores broader effects on gender equality and social norms.

Design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative, multiple-case study design was used. Data was collected through 30 semi-structured interviews. Participants included women learners, parents, and local educational entrepreneurs. Two focus group discussions with community elders and female graduates were also conducted. Thematic analysis was applied to the data.

Findings: EdTech initiatives led by local entrepreneurs significantly improved women's educational access. Digital literacy and confidence increased. A clear pathway from skills to local livelihood opportunities was observed. This economic contribution slowly improved women's status within families and the community. However, barriers like digital access, socio-cultural restrictions, and limited advanced career guidance persist.

Practical Implications: The study offers a model for using localised EdTech in conservative contexts. It suggests that multi-stakeholder efforts are crucial. Recommendations are provided for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and NGOs. The goal is to deepen and scale the impact.

Originality/Value: This research fills a critical gap. It provides empirical evidence on how hyper-local EdTech entrepreneurship empowers women in a challenging, low-resource desert environment. It highlights a sustainable pathway for women's empowerment through education and economic agency.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Educational Entrepreneurship, EdTech, Rural India, Rajasthan, Thar Desert, Skill Development, Social Change

Introduction

Gender inequality remains pronounced in India's rural areas. The Thar Desert region of Western Rajasthan is a specific case. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms and geographical isolation historically limited female education. Women's mobility and economic participation were severely restricted. This confined them to traditional domestic roles.

Educational entrepreneurs are now emerging as change agents. They leverage Educational Technology (EdTech). They operate within these communities. They understand local constraints. Their work addresses a critical research gap. Most studies on EdTech focus on urban or formal settings. There is little research on its social transformative power in conservative rural contexts.

This study explores this phenomenon. It investigates how local EdTech ventures impact women's lives. It examines changes in education, skills, employment, and social status. The research is situated in and around Bikaner. It seeks to understand this bottom-up model of empowerment.

Research Aim: To analyze the socio-economic impact of educational entrepreneurs and EdTech on women in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan.

Research Objectives

- **RO1:** To assess the impact of local EdTech initiatives on women's access to education and digital literacy.
- **RO2:** To identify the skills acquired by women through these platforms and their relevance to local economies.
- **RO3:** To examine changes in women's employment opportunities and financial independence.
- **RO4:** To explore the consequent shifts in gender norms, family decision-making, and community perception.
- **RO5:** To propose a strategic framework to enhance the effectiveness and scalability of these interventions.

Literature Review

Constraints on Women in Rural Rajasthan

Scholarship highlights the "triple burden" on women in this region. This includes poverty, patriarchy, and geographical remoteness¹ Low female literacy rates are a direct consequence. Purdah (ghoonghat) practices and restricted mobility further limit access to formal education and public spaces.²

EdTech and Entrepreneurship as Levers for Change

EdTech theoretically offers solutions. It can bypass physical infrastructure barriers. It provides scalable, personalised learning.³ However, its success depends on contextual integration. Educational entrepreneurship is critical here. Local entrepreneurs act as "institutional innovators".⁴ They tailor solutions to cultural and logistical realities. They build trust within the community.

The Gap in Knowledge

Existing literature often treats EdTech as a top-down solution. The role of the local entrepreneur as a cultural translator and trust-builder is under-theorised. Furthermore, the linkage from digital skill acquisition to tangible social empowerment in a conservative context is not well-documented. This study aims to bridge this gap.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm and Design

An interpretivist paradigm guided this research. A qualitative, multiple-case study design was employed. This was chosen to gain deep, contextual insights from a real-world setting.⁵

Data Collection

- **Primary Data:** Collected over three months in Bikaner and nearby villages.
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** 30 interviews were conducted. Participants included:
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Two FGDs were held. One with a group of women who had completed skills training. Another with community elders and male family members.
- **Secondary Data:** Reports from NGOs, government district plans, and entrepreneurial venture data were reviewed.

Themes generated from analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus-group discussions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (N = 30)

Participant group	n	Age (mean, range)	Education (highest level)	Main occupation	Smartphone access(n%)
Women learners	15	23.4 (16–34)	Secondary: 6; Higher secondary: 5; Graduate: 4	Tailoring / Housemaker / Student	12 (80%)
Mothers/guardians	5	44.0 (36–55)	Primary: 2; Secondary: 3	Homemaker / Small vendor	1 (20%)
Entrepreneurs / Trainers	5	36.2 (28–50)	Diploma/Graduate: 5	Ed-preneur / Trainer	5 (100%)
Community leaders	5	58.6 (45–70)	Varies	Panchayat / Local shop owner	2 (40%)
Total	30	-	-	-	20 (67%)

Table 2. Key themes emerging from participant interviews (N = 30)

Theme	Sub-theme(s)	No. participants reporting (n, /N=30)	Exemplar anonymized quote
1. Safe, proximate learning spaces	Home-based centers; female hosts; flexible timing	18	“At Behenji’s house I can attend without worrying — my family accepts it. (W7, age 22)”
2. Practical local livelihood training	Tailoring; mobile selling; basic digital payments	20	“After the course I started getting orders over WhatsApp — I earn ₹3–5k/month now. (W12, age 27)”
3. Digital literacy as gateway	Basic smartphone use → social networks for sales	16	“I learned how to send photos and use UPI — now customers send payment directly. (W5, age 19)”
4. Household negotiation & social norms	Male gatekeepers; stepwise acceptance	14	“At first my husband was worried, but when I started earning, he agreed to let me go. (W3, age 31)”
5. Next-step gap / limited scaling pathways	Lack of advanced training; weak internet	22	“They teach basics but not how to get remote work or certifications. (W9, age 24)”

Data Analysis

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted.⁶ The process involved coding and identifying recurring patterns. Themes were developed directly from the data. NVivo software aided the organisation of codes. Educational entrepreneurs like Mr Shantilal Bothra, Mr Vijay Kochar (trustee of Jain School and Jain College Bikaner), and Mr Giriraj Khediwal (founder trustee of Gopeshwar Vidyapeeth, Bikaner) expressed their opinion that it is difficult to convince parents to send their daughters for expensive higher education, and therefore the government should start sponsoring education of girls. This will result in significant improvement in women’s empowerment. Women in similar conditions made more progress in Gujarat (where education of girls was sponsored by the government), while women in Western Rajasthan lagged behind due to regressive policies of the government of Rajasthan.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. For minors, parental consent was also secured. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. Interviews were conducted in the local dialect (Marwari).

Findings and Discussion

Four central themes emerged from the data analysis.

Theme 1: Breaking Physical and Social Barriers to Learning (Addressing RO1)

EdTech centres, often run from an entrepreneur's home, became safe spaces. They overcame the barrier of distance. They provided a socially acceptable environment for learning. One mother stated, *"I would not send my daughter to a computer centre in the city. But here, at Behenji's house, it is safe. We know her family."* Digital literacy was a primary outcome. It fostered a great sense of achievement.

Theme 2: From Basic Skills to Localised Livelihoods (Addressing RO2 & RO3)

Skills taught were highly practical and locally relevant. They included digital documentation, basic accounting, mobile banking, and tailoring design software. This directly led to income generation. Women reported starting small businesses. Examples include selling handicrafts online and managing data for local shops. One woman said, *"I used my phone to learn new embroidery designs. I now sell to customers in Jaipur. My earnings are my own."*

Theme 3: The Ripple Effect: Shifting Status and Norms (Addressing RO4)

Economic contribution led to increased self-confidence. This had a ripple effect on social standing. Participants reported having a greater say in household decisions. These included children's education and family purchases. A community elder noted in an FGD, *"These girls are now helping their families read documents and use bank apps. They are becoming respected."* This indicates a slow but perceptible change in patriarchal norms.

Theme 4: Persistent Challenges and the "Next-Step" Gap

Significant challenges remain. Internet connectivity is unreliable and expensive. Smartphone access is often still mediated through male family members. Furthermore, a "next-step" gap was identified. Women acquire basic skills. But they lack pathways to higher education or formal corporate employment. Advanced career counselling is absent.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that localised EdTech entrepreneurship is a powerful catalyst for women's empowerment in the Thar Desert. It works within socio-cultural constraints to create change. The model successfully links education to skill development and local economic opportunity. This enhances women's agency and slowly transforms patriarchal norms.

Theoretical Contribution

This research contributes a context-sensitive model of EdTech-driven empowerment. It highlights the entrepreneur as a crucial "social intermediary". It shows that empowerment is a gradual process. It moves from digital and financial literacy to increased social confidence and influence.

A Strategic Framework for Deeper Impact

To address the "next-step" gap, a multi-stakeholder framework is proposed.

For Educational Entrepreneurs:

- Develop "Level 2" courses. Focus on advanced skills like e-commerce management, advanced digital marketing, and remote freelancing.
- Create peer-mentorship networks. Successful graduates can mentor new learners.
- Offer bundled solutions with low-cost internet data packs.

For Policymakers and NGOs:

- Provide grants for entrepreneurs to set up community internet hubs.
- Launch public campaigns. Showcase successful women. This changes mindsets and encourages family support.
- Integrate these local EdTech hubs with government skill development missions (e.g., PMKVY).

For Corporate Partners:

- Create remote internship and job roles suitable for this talent pool. Roles in data entry, customer support, and content moderation are viable.
- Partner with entrepreneurs to provide certified training programs.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited to one district. Future research could conduct a quantitative survey across the entire region. A longitudinal study is also needed. It would track the long-term life outcomes of the first cohorts of women graduates from these initiatives.

Empowering women in the Thar Desert requires sustained, collaborative effort. Local EdTech entrepreneurs have lit the spark. A supportive ecosystem can turn it into a lasting flame.

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