Research Article

Strengthening Vocational Training Initiatives for Rural Women in Punjab Evidence-Based Recommendations for Inclusive, Sustainable and Employment-Oriented Skill Development

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Abstract

This policy paper, titled "Strengthening Vocational Training Initiatives for Rural Women in Punjab: Evidence-Based Recommendations for Inclusive, Sustainable and Employment-Oriented Skill Development," examines the effectiveness, accessibility and implementation of government-sponsored vocational training initiatives in promoting the employability, livelihood opportunities and socio-economic empowerment of rural women in Punjab. The paper is based on an ICSSR-sponsored research project, Effectiveness of Government-Sponsored Vocational Training Initiatives: A Study of Skill-Based Education for Rural Women in Punjab. It focuses on three major initiatives: Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) and Punjab Skill Development Mission (PSDM). The study covers eight districts of Punjab and adopts a mixed-method research approach involving 300 beneficiaries. Data were collected through the Rural Women Empowerment through Vocational Training Assessment Scale, Vocational Training Effectiveness Schedule (VTES), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The findings indicate that out of 300 enrolled participants, 270 completed their training, representing an overall completion rate of 90%. Among those completing training, 94.81% were reported as employed, 81.48% were self-employed, and 100% reported improvement in income. Despite these encouraging outcomes, the assessment highlights significant implementation challenges, including limited awareness of training schemes, mismatch between training content and market requirements, inadequate practical exposure, gender-related mobility constraints, limited entrepreneurial support and insufficient post-training monitoring. The paper recommends district-level skill mapping, gender-responsive training arrangements, stronger industry and market linkages, integration of digital and financial literacy, entrepreneurial assistance and longitudinal beneficiary tracking at 6, 12 and 24 months. It advocates an integrated Rural Women's Vocational Empowerment Framework that connects skill acquisition with sustainable employment, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion and economic independence. The paper emphasises the need to shift from a training-centred approach towards an outcome-oriented model that ensures meaningful and sustainable livelihood opportunities for rural women.

Keywords: Vocational Training, Rural Women, Skill Development, Women's Empowerment, DDU-GKY, PMKVY, Punjab Skill Development Mission, Employability, Entrepreneurship, Sustainable Livelihoods.

Background

Vocational education and skill development are important instruments for promoting inclusive economic growth, enhancing employability and empowering women. In rural Punjab, skill-based education has considerable potential to improve women's access to livelihood opportunities, strengthen financial independence and facilitate their participation in productive economic activities. Government-sponsored vocational training initiatives seek to bridge skill gaps, improve workforce participation and create pathways towards sustainable employment and entrepreneurship.

Despite the expansion of these initiatives, translating vocational training into meaningful employment and sustainable income remains a significant policy concern. Rural women often face multiple constraints, including limited awareness of available schemes, inadequate access to training facilities, gender-based mobility restrictions, family responsibilities, digital exclusion and difficulties in accessing financial and market resources. Moreover, the acquisition of vocational skills and certification does not automatically ensure employment, self-employment or economic independence. The relevance of training, quality of instruction, practical exposure, industry linkages and post-training support are equally important in determining programme effectiveness.

Against this background, the ICSSR-sponsored research project, "Effectiveness of Government-Sponsored Vocational Training Initiatives: A Study of Skill-Based Education for Rural Women in Punjab," examines the accessibility, implementation and effectiveness of selected government-sponsored vocational training initiatives across different districts of Punjab. The present policy paper, "Strengthening Vocational Training Initiatives for Rural Women in Punjab: Evidence-Based Recommendations for Inclusive, Sustainable and Employment-Oriented Skill Development," translates the research agenda into a policy-oriented framework. Its primary purpose is to identify the strengths and implementation gaps of existing initiatives and propose practical measures for improving training quality, employability, income generation, entrepreneurship and the overall social and economic empowerment of rural women.

❖ **Major Government-Sponsored Vocational Initiatives Examined**

The study focuses on three major government-sponsored skill development initiatives:

1. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY): A placement-linked skill development programme for rural poor youth, aimed at improving employability and facilitating access to sustainable employment opportunities.

2. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY): A flagship skill development initiative designed to provide industry-relevant training, assessment and certification to improve occupational competencies and employability.

3. Punjab Skill Development Mission (PSDM): A state-level institutional mechanism for coordinating skill development interventions in Punjab and facilitating access to vocational training and employment-oriented opportunities.

The study examines these initiatives in relation to their objectives, accessibility, training processes, institutional arrangements and outcomes for rural women. Particular attention is given to the extent to which training opportunities address women's specific needs and connect skill acquisition with wage employment, self-employment and entrepreneurial activities.

❖ **Geographical Coverage and Research Methodology**

The study covers eight districts of Punjab: **Faridkot, Moga, Fazilka, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Muktsar, Sangrur and Gurdaspur.** The geographical coverage provides an opportunity to examine vocational training initiatives across diverse rural and socio-economic settings within the state. A mixed-method research approach has been adopted to generate quantitative and qualitative insights into programme effectiveness. The study incorporates beneficiary-level information and stakeholder perspectives to understand programme accessibility, training experiences, institutional support and livelihood outcomes. The major research instruments include:

- Rural Women Empowerment through vocational training Assessment Scale
- Vocational Training Effectiveness Schedule (VTES)
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs).

The assessment encompasses demographic characteristics, programme awareness and accessibility, relevance and quality of training, employment and income outcomes, household decision-making, mobility, access to resources and institutional support.

Quantitative data provide the basis for assessing programme effectiveness, while qualitative information facilitates an understanding of beneficiaries' experiences, aspirations and constraints. The combined approach enables a comprehensive examination of the relationship between vocational training, livelihood opportunities and women's empowerment.

Review of related literature

The review of related literature highlights the significant role of vocational education and skill development in promoting employability, income generation, entrepreneurship, and women's empowerment. **Kabeer (1999)** conceptualized women's empowerment through resources, agency, and achievements, providing a framework for assessing the broader impact of vocational training. **The Government of India (2015)**, through the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, provided a policy framework for enhancing skills, employability and entrepreneurship through initiatives such as PMKVY and DDU-GKY. **Chen and Chindarkar (2017)** found that vocational training enhanced rural women's employment opportunities, household income contributions and participation in financial decision-making.**Dey and Devi (2019)** reported positive labour-

market outcomes and improvements in women's empowerment through skill development interventions in Assam.

Ramasamy and Pilz (2020) emphasized the importance of demand-driven, flexible and context-specific vocational training, highlighting the influence of accessibility, local needs, and sociocultural factors on participation. **Bairagya et al. (2021)** examined the relationship between vocational training and female labour force participation in India, emphasizing the importance of training in improving women's economic engagement.**Dagar (2022)** stressed the need for participatory planning and gender-responsive vocational training programmes that address the specific needs and aspirations of women. **Ebrahimi et al. (2022)** highlighted the multidimensional role of vocational education in empowering rural women. **Roy et al. (2023)** investigated gender-based barriers to vocational training and highlighted inequalities in access to skill development opportunities. Overall, these studies establish that the effectiveness of vocational training depends not merely on enrolment and certification but also on employment opportunities, income enhancement, self-employment, decision-making power, market linkages and institutional support. However, the limited context-specific evidence concerning rural women in Punjab provides a rationale for the present study.

❖ **Empirical Findings on the Effectiveness of Government-Sponsored Vocational Training Initiatives for Rural Women in Punjab**

The findings of the study indicate that government-sponsored vocational training initiatives have contributed positively to the economic participation, skill development and perceived empowerment of rural women in Punjab. The data reveal that a substantial proportion of the respondents (95%) were engaged in some form of economic activity after receiving vocational training, with 81% reporting self-employment and 14% wage employment. Only 5% were unemployed at the time of the survey. These findings highlight the potential of vocational training to promote livelihood opportunities, particularly through self-employment and small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Regarding income, 87% of the respondents reportedly experienced a moderate increase, while 13% reported a significant increase.

The training profile shows that tailoring was the most popular vocational area, accounting for 36% of respondents, followed by computer skills (32%), beauty and wellness (24%), handicrafts (6%) and hand embroidery (2%). A significant proportion (89%) received training lasting between one and three months. This indicates the need to review the duration and depth of training so that women can acquire advanced competencies and develop sustainable livelihood opportunities. In terms of programme effectiveness, 71% of respondents rated the training as effective and 7% as very effective, while 22% considered it moderately effective. Thus, 78% expressed a positive assessment of the training programmes.

The findings also indicate favourable perceptions regarding women's socio-economic empowerment and decision-making. The mean score for overall socio-economic empowerment was 4.479, while the mean score for decision-making was 4.442. The training-related empowerment scale recorded a mean score of 4.488. Further, 45% of respondents reported that they could always travel independently, while 48% stated that they could do so often. Together, these responses suggest relatively high perceived mobility among the participants. Nevertheless, these scores represent respondents' post-training perceptions and should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence of change caused by training, as the study did not include a comparable pre-training baseline or control group.

Overall, the findings suggest that vocational training programmes have considerable potential to strengthen rural women's employability, self-employment, income opportunities, decision-making and mobility. At the same time, the results point towards the need for more diversified and market-oriented courses, longer and advanced training modules, entrepreneurship development, digital and financial literacy, and stronger linkages with markets, financial institutions, self-help groups and local support agencies. Programme evaluation should also move beyond enrolment and completion figures to assess sustained employment, income growth, enterprise survival and long-term empowerment.

Table 1. Empirical Evidence and Policy Implications of Government-Sponsored Vocational Training for Rural Women in Punjab

Major indicator	Empirical findings	Policy implications

Economic participation	95% reported employment; 81% self-employment and 14% wage employment	Strengthen entrepreneurship development, enterprise support and placement linkages
| Income improvement	87% reported moderate income increase and 13% significant increase	Improve market access, product marketing, financial inclusion and income-generation support
Training areas	Tailoring (36%), computer skills (32%), beauty and wellness (24%), handicrafts (6%) and hand embroidery (2%)	Diversify courses according to local demand, emerging occupations and market opportunities
Duration of training	89% received training of 1–3 months	Introduce advanced modules, refresher courses and continuous skill upgradation
Perceived effectiveness	78% rated programmes as effective or very effective	Strengthen training quality, trainer capacity, infrastructure and outcome-based monitoring
Socio-economic empowerment	Mean score: 4.479	Integrate financial literacy, access to resources and livelihood development
Decision-making	Mean score: 4.442	Include leadership, negotiation and household decision-making components
Independent mobility	93% reported that they could always or often travel independently	Facilitate safe mobility, access to training centres, workplaces and markets
Training-related empowerment	Mean score: 4.488	Incorporate empowerment-oriented learning and post-training mentoring

Source: Primary data collected under the research project, "Effectiveness of Government-Sponsored Vocational Training Initiatives: A Study of Skill-Based Education for Rural Women in Punjab."

❖ **District-Wise Comparison Covering Eight Selected Districts**

Table 2. District-Wise Comparison of Vocational Training Outcomes (N = 300)

Part A: Districts 1–4

Indicators	Ludhiana	Moga	Faridkot	Fazilka
Total enrolled	45	38	35	34
Training completed	42	34	32	30
Completion rate (%)	93.33	89.47	91.43	88.24
Employed (%)	97.62	94.12	96.88	93.33
Self-employed (%)	83.33	79.41	81.25	83.33
Income improved (%)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Part B: Districts 5–8

Indicators	Sangrur	Hoshiarpur	Sri Muktsar Sahib	Gurdaspur
Total enrolled	42	36	35	35
Training completed	38	33	31	30
Completion rate (%)	90.48	91.67	88.57	85.71
Employed (%)	94.74	96.97	93.55	90.00
Self-employed (%)	81.58	81.82	80.65	80.00
Income improved (%)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Overall distribution

Indicator	Total
Total enrolled	300
Training completed	270
Overall completion rate	90.00%
Employed among those completing training	94.81%
Self-employed among those completing training	81.48%
Income improved among those completing training	100.00%

❖ **Key Policy Gaps**

The assessment identifies the following areas requiring priority policy attention:

- **Limited awareness and outreach:** Insufficient information about available schemes restricts the participation of eligible rural women.
- **Mismatch between training and market demand:** Training courses require stronger alignment with local employment opportunities and emerging livelihood sectors.
- **Inadequate practical exposure:** Greater emphasis is needed on hands-on learning, workplace experience and competency development.
- **Weak post-training support:** Placement assistance, career counselling, employment retention and follow-up mechanisms require strengthening.
- **Limited entrepreneurial support:** Inadequate access to credit, business mentoring, technology and markets can restrict self-employment opportunities.
- **Gender-related constraints:** Mobility restrictions, family responsibilities and socio-cultural barriers affect women's participation in training and employment.
- **Digital and infrastructural limitations:** Unequal access to digital resources, internet connectivity and appropriate training facilities affect learning outcomes.
- **Institutional coordination gaps:** Greater convergence is required among central and state programmes, training providers, employers and local institutions.
- **Inadequate outcome-based monitoring:** Programme evaluation needs to extend beyond enrolment, attendance and certification to include employment, income improvement and long-term empowerment.

❖ **Priority Policy Recommendations**

The policy paper proposes the following interventions to strengthen government-sponsored vocational training initiatives in Punjab:

- **District-Level Skill Mapping:** Conduct periodic district-level assessments to identify local economic opportunities, emerging occupational requirements and the specific vocational training needs of rural women.
- **Gender-Responsive and Flexible Training:** Ensure accessible training centres, flexible timings, locally relevant courses and appropriate learning arrangements for women with family and household responsibilities.
- **Quality Enhancement of Training:** Strengthen trainer capacity, practical learning, competency-based assessment and curriculum relevance through regular quality monitoring and industry participation.
- **Strengthening Training-to-Employment Linkages:** Establish partnerships between training institutions, industries, employers and local enterprises to facilitate internships, apprenticeships, placement opportunities and employment retention.
- **Promotion of Women's Entrepreneurship:** Connect trained women with self-help groups, financial institutions, credit facilities, business mentoring, digital platforms and local markets to support sustainable micro-enterprises.
- **Integration of Digital and Financial Literacy:** Incorporate digital competencies, financial literacy, communication skills and entrepreneurial capabilities into vocational training programmes.
- **Institutional Convergence:** Strengthen coordination among DDU-GKY, PMKVY, Punjab Skill Development Mission, educational institutions, Panchayati Raj institutions and community-based organisations to improve programme delivery and minimise duplication.
- **Longitudinal Monitoring of Beneficiaries:** Establish a beneficiary tracking mechanism at 6, 12 and 24 months after training to assess employment status, income changes, enterprise development and indicators of social and economic empowerment.

- **Development of an Integrated Rural Women's Vocational Empowerment Framework:** Adopt an integrated policy approach connecting skill acquisition with employment, entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, market access and sustainable livelihoods.

❖ **Expected Outcomes**

The implementation of the proposed policy recommendations is expected to contribute to:

- Improved access to relevant, quality and market-oriented vocational training for rural women.
- Better alignment between training programmes and local labour market requirements.
- Enhanced employability and opportunities for sustainable self-employment.
- Increased income generation and financial independence among trained women.
- Greater participation of women in household economic and financial decision-making.
- Improved access to credit, technology, markets and entrepreneurial support.
- Stronger institutional coordination, accountability and outcome-based monitoring of government-sponsored initiatives.
- Development of sustainable livelihood opportunities and increased participation of rural women in the local economy.
- Establishment of a measurable framework for evaluating the long-term effectiveness of vocational training programmes.

Conclusion

Vocational training must be viewed not merely as a mechanism for imparting occupational skills but as an integrated pathway towards sustainable livelihoods, financial independence and women's empowerment. The effectiveness of government-sponsored initiatives ultimately depends on their capacity to connect training with actual employment opportunities, entrepreneurship, institutional support and long-term economic participation.

The present policy paper advocates a shift from a training-centred approach towards an outcome-oriented model that places rural women, their livelihood aspirations and their economic empowerment at the centre of skill development policy. The proposed interventions and integrated Rural Women's Vocational Empowerment Framework seek to strengthen existing initiatives and provide a practical policy direction for making vocational training more inclusive, sustainable and employment-oriented in Punjab.

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