

Corporate Social Responsibility: A way towards Women Empowerment

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A stark urban and rural divide is still one of the major issues in our country despite a significant improvement in the business environment post globalization and liberalization. To bridge this gap and to make the corporate sector more involved with the development sector, the government came up with statutory obligations under Corporate Social Responsibility in Section 135 of the Companies Act in 2013. India also earned the label of the first country to formalize the role of CSR and make it mandatory for eligible companies to spend 2 percent of their net profits on social development. This new bill with specific recommendations for CSR spending took many companies by surprise. Seen as corporate philanthropy till 1990s, CSR is now considered as a source of innovation as well as management strategy to gain competitive advantage. As a concept it has been the focus of various deliberations and research over the years and has evolved through different stages, like community engagement, socially responsible production and socially responsible employee relations. Today, it is no longer a sporadic corporate philanthropic activity but an area of regular spending linked with definite budgets. So where should the spending go to and how should it benefit society and the company itself?

Hon'ble Finance Minister Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman, in her maiden speech on Budget 2019-20, quoted Swami Vivekananda's letter

to Swami Ramakrishna, "there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly with one wing" [1] stating that India can make significant progress with greater participation of women by encouraging and facilitating the role of women in India's growth story.

Schedule VII of the Act defines 'promoting gender equality and empowering women' as a key area for corporate investment. The reason for this is simple: despite significant steps in economic growth and social development, India ranks 112 out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2020. Since 2006, the gap has gotten significantly wider. [2]

Women are central to the entire development process. The economic empowerment of women is an essential prerequisite for social and economic development of a country. Yet, India's declining female labor force participation has been the subject of discussion for years. According to McKinsey Global Institute, progress towards gender parity in economic participation could boost India's GDP by 16 per cent by 2025 [3], not to mention the human and social gains that are incalculable. The corporate world is a key partner to India's journey towards this goal. The global consensus is clear: When

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we support women, we support growth and prosperity for all. Some of India's largest companies have been supporting this movement.

Project Shakti: Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL)

Project Shakti is HUL's initiative which aims to financially empower women in rural India. These women entrepreneurs (called Shakti Ammas) learn several aspects of running a retail business, from inventory to distribution management. They are also introduced to HUL products, which they sell. The company has a team of rural sales promoters who help Shakti Ammas in managing their business. This includes help in business basics, troubleshooting and training in negotiation and communication skills. The model has also been adapted and evolved in other countries such as Vietnam, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and has created livelihood opportunities for more than 80,000 women across India. It has helped Shakti Entrepreneurs gain selling skills, become self-confident and learn how to run a business effectively. Most importantly, their interventions have helped in building and fostering an entrepreneurial mindset amongst Shakti Entrepreneurs. [4]

Project Sakhi: Hindustan Zinc (HZL)

Sakhi- Women's Empowerment program is a flagship CSR initiative of HZL which is geared towards mobilizing rural women into self-help groups (SHGs), developing their capacities around leadership, skill development, savings, entrepreneurship and contributing to women's socio-economic empowerment. Some of these

groups are also being trained in various skills such as tailoring, embroidery etc. The idea is to mobilize rural women into SHGs, promoting women run federations and developing their capabilities regarding governance, fiscal management, running micro-enterprises, etc. The program aims to set up more than 2,000 SHGs over the next 5 years, across 174 villages. [5]

Project Prerna: Mahindra & Mahindra

Project Prerna aims to empower women working in the agriculture sector. It is based on the insight that women are often the invisible face of agriculture in India. There are 100 million women many of whom work long hours in back-breaking tasks in the fields, often with tools and equipment not suited for them. Despite these challenges, they are usually paid less than their male counterparts. It aims to address these issues with the promotion of women-friendly, efficient and ergonomic farm tools and equipment through well-designed and targeted interventions. The project aims to increase efficiency and productivity of farm women, which will, in turn, lead to sustainable development in the agricultural sector. Mahindra has collaborated with Central Institute of Women in Agriculture (ICAR-CIWA) and PRADAN for effective implementation and outreach of the program. ICAR-CIWA is at the core of Prerna, providing technical support and essential skills training in the efficient use of women-friendly farm tools. [6]

Women economic empowerment programme: ITC

ITC believes that economic empowerment of women transforms

them into powerful agents of change. This programme aims to provide women with opportunities to earn independent incomes, strengthening their position as decision-makers in their families and in their communities. It has forged an empowering partnership with rural women - those living in extreme poverty and are the only earning members of their families and having no assets or regular incomes. With training and financial support, these women who remain the invisible backbone of their households and communities can take-up self-employment activities, set up small businesses or join together to form self-help groups or micro-enterprises. Their earnings and savings mean better education, nutrition and health for their children - a vital investment in the future of their communities. This initiative has provided a range of gainful employment opportunities to over 64,000 poor women cumulatively, supported with capacity building, financial assistance by way of loans and grants and access to sustainable sources of income through non-farm livelihood opportunities. [7]

Swayam: CEAT Tyres

Swayam, a first of its kind Women Empowerment Program, launched in 2014, looks beyond the conventional livelihood training. Instead, it focuses on promoting Gender Equality by encouraging women to pursue a career in driving, an otherwise male dominated industry. The training focuses not only on driving skills but also self-defense, which lends the drivers confidence to handle potentially unsafe scenarios. They also undergo training in allied skills like spoken English, customer

service skills, first aid and training in mechanics to help them stand out as professional drivers. The program has got immense support from the Transport Sector, encouraging these women to work as taxi drivers, in valet parking services, in driver-on-call services, school van drivers, as instructors, auto rickshaw drivers and two-wheeler delivery personnel, amongst others. [8]

It is safe to say that CSR has been hailed as new means to address gender inequality, particularly by facilitating women's empowerment. It provides an opportunity of great significance in India, given that it's one of the first in the world to make it compulsory for companies to invest their profits in CSR initiatives. While there are still many obstacles to equality, corporate India is starting to show greater sensitivity to the fact that companies need to recognize women as legitimate employees, supply chain members, and customer segments. With a majority of BSE 100 companies reporting CSR initiatives for promoting women's economic empowerment, there is an obvious interest in and commitment to this issue. However, the quantum of spending still remains relatively low. According to the new report by UNDP (2009) [9] the top 100 companies in the country spend only 4 % of their total expenditure on CSR activities on women's economic empowerment. Most of the CSR spending goes to complimentary development activities like hunger, education, poverty, environment sustainability and rural development.

The misconception with women empowerment schemes is the perception

that any action done for them will be empowering. Among several other gaps, there is a lack of focus on critical aspects of women's economic empowerment life cycle. Most programmes are focused on "prepare and enter" stage through career counselling, self-help groups, and vocational training. But a lack of support during the later stages through financial and digital literacy is missing. Since there is growing awareness and criticism about gender washing, companies need to ensure that efforts are directed towards addressing the real needs. It's important for various stakeholders to work together so that various CSR initiatives can focus on the entire life cycle of women's economic empowerment and also address attitudes of community members, collaborate with schools, colleges, workplace to provide a conducive ecosystem for women.

Conclusion

Six years after the Companies Act, 2013 made it compulsory for eligible companies to contribute their profits to social development, talk of CSR, is everywhere. The amendment must be given some credit if the intention of the government was to transfer resources from the corporate sector to augment its own social development goals and programmes. But if the aim was to generate business responsibility towards all stakeholders, there might be a long way to go. By equating money with responsibility, the act seemed to imply that all that was needed to be socially responsible was a contribution. The whole issue is whether making CSR a legal compulsion to ensure that a corporate

does its duty towards the society in which it lives, its ultimate stakeholder, is working or corporates are just treating it as a "check the box" exercise rather than looking at innovative ways to generate a return from doing social good?

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