Over the last 70 years in India, women have made tremendous progress in every field, breaking hitherto impenetrable glass ceilings. There has also been a steady rise in women’s education levels in both rural and urban areas. However, even today in the rural areas of our country women lack financial power. They do not have a voice. To truly empower women, economic empowerment is a must. This realization is what gave birth to Women on Wings in 2007.

We are all familiar with Lijjat Papad in Mumbai and SEWA in Ahmedabad, but there are other less publicised examples of organizations across the country, that are doing a lot for women empowerment too. In textiles and soaps, Rangsutra, Banyan Roots and Mandala come to my mind immediately.

To my mind, these show the potential of women’s livelihood promotion. Individually, these women have no power; but at a collective level, they are able to empower themselves.

However, while it is commendable that women empowerment has become a priority for NGOs and the government, there are issues with the model that the NGOs tend to use.

The first missing element in the non-profit model is that they often lack a market orientation. For understandable reasons, the focus of many NGOs is on getting project funding and creating products without sensitivity to market needs. Once the project funding is over, the work of empowering women also stops. We often see products being made far beyond the demand for them. The women who make these products do not always understand why there is a particular cost price.

I strongly believe that for any women livelihood programme to be successful even after donor funding ends, it must take into account market needs. It is in this light that we at Women on Wings have a stringent criterion for choosing businesses to aid. We look at three things: the business must have scale; it must be in rural areas and aim at empowering women. We do a thorough assessment of the entrepreneur and their capability on these criteria before giving any assistance.

Second, in social enterprises generally there is a shortage of managerial capacity. This lack of capacity also adversely affects the success of rural businesses.

Third, the money that is flowing into CSR from companies and foundations is not always as well directed as it could be. While companies mean well, their efforts are limited to areas near their factories or industries and lack scale. To have bigger impact, companies need to come together and combine their efforts. Otherwise, even with huge expenditure, the impact is very limited.

When it comes to any enterprise, there are three critical elements that one needs: access to capital, access to human capital and market linkages. Any company must focus on all these aspects. These are, by and large, areas that need a lot of improvement for social enterprises and non-profits.

Despite the severe challenges outlined above, I see several big opportunities in the next 10 years or so, as far women empowerment and women entrepreneurship are concerned.

Guest article

Embrace a market oriented mindset

Non-profits must prioritise consumer needs

Shilpa Mittal Singh
local level needs to be nurtured and developed. Bright young graduates of local colleges should be groomed to hold managerial positions in NGOs and ‘Farm Producer Organisations’ FPOs, rather than importing graduates from outside. Rising educating levels of women have created an unmet desire for white collar jobs in rural areas; hence, this could be a perfect way to kill several birds with one stone.

Second, big corporates like IKEA, Amazon and Walmart have made a conscious effort to source from small-scale producers and artisans. More companies are in the pipeline. This represents a golden opportunity for women artisans and non-profits working to enhance women’s livelihoods. Of course, such producers would have to meet the exacting standards of these MNCs.

Third, the term ‘women empowerment’ has itself become a buzzword in the last 10 years, which is a positive thing. Both public and private sectors are placing emphasis on this concept. What is needed now is greater knowledge sharing within the non-profit community.

In conclusion, my extensive experience dealing with social enterprises from every corner of our country convinces me that there is a widespread and genuine desire to promote women empowerment through creation of sustainable livelihoods. There is also no shortage of funds. Non-profits and social enterprises must move away from a project driven, producer oriented mindset to one that is sustainable and consumer oriented. The future is bright for those who can pull it off.

Shilpa Mittal Singh is the Joint Managing Director of Women on Wings. She has over 20 years of experience in both the corporate and non-profit sectors, and was formerly Head (Candidate Services) for Monster India.

The textile sector is a major employer of women, especially those from poor backgrounds.