

Draft Policy for Inclusive Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Social Business

IT for Change

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How digital policies can support women's enterprises and social business.

The long standing demands of gender equality advocates that economic and social policy are two sides of the same coin needs to be the central principle to give a fillip to inclusive entrepreneurship and enable small economic actors, especially women traders, women in tech startups, women artisans, and women-led cooperatives - to claim opportunities in the digital economy.

The pandemic is often seen as opening up opportunities for platform businesses, but women have high barriers to entry - lacking the necessary access to finance and collateral, digital assets, required fluency in technology use etc. They are also unable to pay the steep commissions on mainstream platforms who seem to have profited thanks to the pandemic.

Below are some recommendations on how policy support can deliver the benefits of digital technologies to women's enterprises:

1. Women in digitalising agriculture value chains

Women farmers' organisations require support to increase their membership, bargaining power and market linkages. Irrespective of the future of eNAM (the online national agriculture market), it is imperative to ensure women Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) can adopt digital strategies such as developing farmer owned platforms for market transactions, training and input procurement and advisory. Platform cooperatives led by women requires policy support and an enabling environment, including public investment in supply chain logistics, public digital infrastructure (cloud and analytics, for example) and simultaneous efforts to strengthen and digitally enable women's farm enterprises. Federated platform business models (for eg. a state wide network of women run cooperatives supported by key social enterprises that provide expertise) can be piloted through a special fund and state governments incentivised to take on such pilots.

2. Public procurement can give women's economic activity a boost

The Commerce Ministry's public procurement portal GeM has started an initiative -- The Saras Collection -- for rural self-help groups (SHGs), wherein they can display their products on the platform for government buyers. The structure of such public procurement for services needs to be geared to favour SHGs and women's enterprises. Tendering rules in bidding for services need to prioritise women's enterprises.

3. Bringing in social enterprises as trusted intermediaries

Digital capabilities for women run businesses and enterprises can be built through partnerships with social intermediary organisations. There are some excellent models on the ground that act as enterprise accelerators providing mentoring and support.

4. Credit to revive local economies and quotas for women's businesses

SHG loans have the potential to facilitate and boost investment or spending. They also provide a safety net to improve resilience during a critical time of need. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the SHGs solvent and recapitalise them - especially so that they can invest in appropriate ICT infrastructure. Working capital enhancements and MSME credit should not end up favouring only the bigger enterprises managed by men. Quotas for women MSMEs are important and can be taken up at the state level. Working capital loans to cover rentals and employee salaries may be necessary for women's startups to transition through the economic slowdown.

5. Data subsidy

The pre-requisites to participate in the digital economy include access to technology such as mobile phones, internet connectivity as well as the digital skills and social freedom. A data subsidy can ensure universal access to the internet which can in-turn improve access to economic opportunities particularly in the context of rapid platformization of work. As government entitlements and benefits are also moving to digital modes of delivery, such as Direct Benefit Transfer or e-services, a data subsidy will also embed citizen's rights into the objective of digital inclusion.

6. Public data ecosystems for effective service delivery

From integrated disease surveillance to support for migrant workers, COVID-19 has demonstrated the urgent imperative to invest in an integrated, interoperable public data backbone that can aid effective last-mile public service delivery. This will also allow effective targeting of women beneficiaries across a range of interventions - livelihoods schemes (farm and non-farm), training and skill development, MSME development, social protection and health. The National Data Analytics Platform (NDAP) for India – an initiative to make data sets across ministries available – has considerable potential for addressing issues across silos and in their actual interconnectedness. It should be possible for state governments to enhance the functionalities of this platform to design and implement gender responsive services and engage civil society organisations committed to working on women's rights in service delivery. Public data sets need accountable and people-centric governance frameworks and must be rooted in individual and group privacy rights and ensure that the benefits of publicly generated data commons privilege creation of social and public value for gender equality and social justice.

7. Safeguarding against private capture of public data

The MOUs for creation, maintenance and Big Data analytics in public digital systems need to ensure that commercial interests do not have access to/ ownership over the data and that the code for the system is made open to the public. The architecture of these data systems needs to be conceived carefully for decision making to be agile and responsive at the edges of the system.

8. Safeguarding data rights of women beneficiaries

A skills registry is being proposed by some state governments. It would be very important that such efforts are based on privacy-compliant techno-systems and anchored by local government /panchayat system for greater accountability and responsiveness.

9. Social provision of care and commitment to women's safety

Universalisation of social security can be an antidote to precarity. Recognised as a human right, social protection - including pension and child, disability and maternity benefits - can also improve labour productivity. Considering that care work burdens continue to be a prominent impediment to women's economic participation, investing in social infrastructures for care work could significantly increase their access to paid work. A dynamic framework of labour policies, care policies, and social protection can together provide an alternative to sexual division of labour which demands women to be the primary caregivers. Ensuring portability of social protection measures under the proposed 'one nation, one ration card' initiative is vital.

Women's safety and wellbeing in the workplace is a vital aspect of their ability to participate in the work force. A new cadre of female labour inspectors could be created at district levels for closer scrutiny of women workers' conditions and wellbeing (especially women who work in small home-based enterprises)