

Case Study: Enabling rural women to enter the formal workforce through sewing skills training

Promoting Responsible Value Chains in India for an Effective Contribution of the Private Sector to the SDGs
(PROGRESS Project)

Sector: Apparel and Textile

Organization: Shahi Exports



Centre for Responsible Business (CRB) and Aston India Centre for Applied Research (AICAR), Aston University, UK have teamed up to explore and investigate *how private sector companies - as part of Global Value Chains (GVCs), production networks and FDI in India have/could better contribute towards achievement of specific SDGs, particularly inclusive education and life-long learning (SDG4), employment and decent work for the youth (SDG 8), women's social and economic empowerment (SDG 5) and sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12)*. The generated evidence would be used to influence and support policy and practice (industry) level discussions and actions through multi-stakeholder processes in India, with various industry sectors that are part of GVCs, production networks and foreign investments, but continue to be vulnerable. The project is being undertaken with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada.

This case study has been developed as an example from the Indian apparel and textile sector on the contribution of industry-led initiatives towards some of the SDGs (indicated above).

SHAHI

Shahi Exports is one of the largest apparel manufacturer and exporter in India. Shahi runs a number of initiatives in its factories to improve the lives and livelihoods of its workers, especially women. This case study on Shahi's Skill Development Program provides insights on how the garment industry can contribute to skill acquisition and employability for women from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Enabling rural women to enter the formal workforce through sewing skills training

Introduction

Shahi Exports

Shahi was established in 1974 by Mrs. Sarla Ahuja, who started her journey as a sewing machine operator. From its humble origins, the family-owned business has grown to become India's largest apparel manufacturer and exporter. Shahi has 50+ state-of-the-art manufacturing facilities across 7 states in India with a diverse workforce of over 115,000 people. Vertically integrated operations, a diversified product range, and a strong commitment to ethical operations and environmental sustainability have established Shahi as one of the most preferred garment manufacturers in the world.

Nature of Organization: Manufacturer and exporter of apparel to global fashion brands and retailers

Sector Covered: Textile and apparel manufacturing

Relevant SDGs: SDG 5 - Gender Equality, SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth

The objective of the Case Study: To provide insights on how the garment industry can contribute to skill acquisition and employability for women from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Context:

The textile industry is the [second-largest employer](#) in India after agriculture with over [45 million people and another 60 million people](#) in allied sectors, including a large number of women from rural areas. While women, [making 60% of the Indian apparel and textile workforce](#), dominate the industry, they have been dropping out of India's formal workforce in large numbers. India's Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) has slipped from a high of [32.2% in 2005 to a low of 23.4% in 2019](#).

A [range of challenges](#) prevents young girls and women from entering the formal workforce including conservative social norms, gender biases, unsafe working environments, and public spaces, and a lack of low-skill jobs for those transitioning out of agriculture. While some of these barriers are societal and cultural in nature, the apparel industry, as a majority female employer, holds the power to break some of these barriers by providing access to skill-building and employment opportunities to rural women.

Our approach

As India's largest apparel manufacturer and exporter, Shahi believes that it's our responsibility to bridge the existing skill gap – for our business, the industry, and the women that are being left out of the workforce. This is why we have been working with several ministries and departments of the Government of India (GoI) to establish sewing skill training centers across the country. Skill development initiatives led by the private sector are also gaining momentum in India. This is evident from the 50% increase in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or corporate philanthropy investment in India [for education and skill development](#) between 2015-16 and 2017-18. To expand our skill development program (referred to as program hereafter), we have tapped into this growing investment by partnering with India's leading companies to set up skill training centers. These win-win partnerships create a skilled workforce for the apparel industry while supporting companies' community development programs.

With 50+ factories across 7 states of India, we have a continuous demand for a skilled workforce. Through our program, trainees get guaranteed placement in our factories. We also collaborate with our industry peers and place the trainees in their factories if required.

Details of the initiative

We started our journey in the state of Haryana in 2013 and now operate 117 sewing skill training centers across 14 states in India.

Skill Development Team at Shahi

The program is managed by a dedicated team of over 200 people at Shahi. Our team actively identifies collaboration opportunities with private sector partners and various flagship government schemes.

Table 1: Skill Development Team at Shahi

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| National Level | Operations Head, Finance Head, Management Information System (MIS) Head |
| State Level | State Head, Quality, MIS, Accounts, Placement and Post-placement executives |
| Training Center Level | Center Manager, Trainers (Sewing skills, Information Technology, Soft Skills, and English), Machine Mechanics, Warden, Block, and Village-level mobilizers |

Partnerships

Government Partnership

As the Project Implementing Agency (PIA) under various government schemes, we take complete responsibility for the establishment of the training centers, mobilization of trainees, skill development course, certification, and placement of candidates in accordance with the guidelines of the respective schemes. We have worked under the following schemes:

- [Integrated Skill Development Scheme](#), Ministry of Textiles (MoT), GoI
- [Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana](#) (DDU GKY), Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), GoI
 - 21 training centers
- [Scheme for Capacity Building in Textile Sector, \(SAMARTH\)](#), MoT, GoI
 - 45 training centers
- Upskilling project for skill up-gradation/multi-skilling for sewing machine operators, MoT, GoI
 - 32 training centers
- Central Government schemes like [Swarna Jayanti Shahari Rozgar Yojana](#); [Aajeevika](#); and [Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana- Recognition of Prior Learning](#) (RPL)

Private Partnership

We have established 19 training centers across Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal with our private sector partners including:

- Tata Steel Foundation
- ACC Trust
- Spark Minda
- SAIL
- Nuvoco- Vistas
- M.G.M Minerals
- Madura COATS

CSR funds from the private sector partner are contributed to sponsor the training of candidates in the communities where the partner operates. This fund is utilized to cover costs for infrastructural needs, staff salaries, and training materials. Shahi leads the training program and supports the placement of candidates in our nearest factories.

Mobilization Model

Our program is focused on rural below poverty line women and girls from Scheduled Caste & Scheduled Tribe (approx. 65% of the candidates), and minority communities (approx. 10-15% of the candidates). We also support women candidates from Left-Wing Extremist districts under the DDU GKY scheme in Odisha and Jharkhand. Various mobilization techniques are used to encourage candidates nearby the training centers to take-up the training program. As the first step, our training center staff meets the Gram Panchayat body (village-level local self-government) and introduces the program to them. Next, our staff talks to the community workers from the village (Asha workers, Anganwadi workers, and/or self-help group leaders) and identifies a candidate among them who is best suited to mobilize women from that village. If the mobilizer is interested, then they would be invited to the center for training on best practices for effective mobilization, and familiarization with the program details through a visit to the training center, discussion with the instructors, center head, and existing trainees. The mobilizer after getting hired has one month to create awareness about the program and onboard women in the villages to join the training center.

Course Curriculum

Each training batch has around 30 candidates and runs for a duration of 45-60 days. To build a strong learning system, we follow a well-developed and comprehensive course curriculum developed by the Sector Skill Council (SSC) which includes the following modules:

- Technical training on industrial sewing machine operations
- English training
- Information Technology training
- Life skills training (P.A.C.E.)

This curriculum is continuously updated to cater to the industry and business requirements, ensuring that the candidates are job-ready after the training. The traditional training program is also supplemented with life skills training through Gap Inc.'s proprietary program – [Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement](#) (P.A.C.E.). At our skill training centers in Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Odisha, and Punjab, we have more than 20 P.A.C.E. trainers who have trained over 8000 women.

Impacts

More than **25,000 women have been trained** and around **22,000 have been placed** since 2013.

Access to skill-building opportunities in rural areas is very crucial for women who want to stand on their own feet and support their family income. Our training curriculum not only prepares the women to excel in their job skills but also for continuous growth and the ability to self-organize in a professional working environment. At a Shahi training center, a woman who has never used a sewing machine can be trained and employed within 60 days. These are often their first formal and stable employment opportunities which provide a stepping stone for their economic advancement. Financial independence also raises their confidence and share of voice in the family decision-making process.

Our role as an employer is not just skilling and employing people, but also retaining the productive workforce. Beyond our program, we also provide extensive on-the-job training of 1 month to our workforce. We track retention rates for 6-12 months after joining and frame policies and programs to retain the trained candidates.

Success Stories

Anecdotally we have heard many inspiring stories from women who have completed training at our centers and are now placed at one of our factories.

Story of a girl from Jharkhand who found a way to pull her out of an abusive marriage



Rudrani belongs to a poor family from Jharkhand. Her parents are daily wage laborers who go through hardships every day to meet the household expenses. Soon after she completed her intermediate education, her parents got her married. In no time, she realized that she has entered into an abusive marriage with an alcoholic man. The abuse became more intense with each passing year of her three-year-long marriage. She started believing that it was her destiny until her sister informed her about the skill training center by Shahi under the DDU GKY scheme. It was a turning point in her life. She gathered the courage to come out of her abusive marriage and become independent. After the 45-day training program, she joined one of Shahi's factories in Bangalore as a sewing machine operator. With her savings, she could also sponsor the college education of her two younger sisters. Both of them are now working as data entry operators at local medical shops in her native district.

From a victim of domestic violence to an independent working woman in a metropolitan city, Rudrani knows no fear. She happily recalls the excellent support she had received from her family and the training center staff. When asked about her career goals, an excited Rudrani says- ***"I want to become a supervisor in the factory which feels like family to me"***. A safe working environment and supportive factory staff have been the key contributors in boosting her confidence.

"Every woman must know that her success depends on her skill set and knowledge and not on her economic, geographical, or cultural background."

- Rudrani Kumari, Sewing Machine Operator, Unit-8, Bangalore, Shahi Exports

Success is the result of hard work and dedication



The adage holds true for Gurpreet who started her journey as a sewing machine operator at Shahi. Most women in her village in Punjab are not allowed to work due to the deeply entrenched gendered norms requiring women to take care of household chores and children. Despite these expectations, Gurpreet's interest in sewing and commitment to work enabled her to enroll in Shahi's training center in her village. She completed the three-month training and got her first job at Shahi after an 11-year sabbatical. This courageous young mother of two wants to become independent and augment her family income with her earnings.

"The continuous support from my husband and mother-in-law inspired me to take up this opportunity. I now believe that I can save some money for my children's education and future. Favorable policies at Shahi are helping me to thrive in the workplace."

Within three months of joining Shahi, Gurpreet was promoted from sewing machine operator to post-placement officer in the skill development team at Bangalore, inspiring hundreds of women and girls from her village. She believes that much of her success can be attributed to P.A.C.E., the soft skills training program by Gap Inc. that she attended while working at Shahi.

"P.A.C.E. training at Shahi has given me the confidence to communicate my problems effectively. I also encourage other girls and women from my village to enroll in the skill training course to get a formal job and fulfill their dreams."

- Gurpreet, Placement Officer, Unit -7, Bangalore, Shahi Exports

Research Study

In 2017, we collaborated with the MoRD, GoI, and [Good Business Lab](#), a labor innovation research organization incubated at Shahi, to [study the drivers and consequences](#) of internal migration of women in rural India. The research study is designed for selected training centers in Karnataka under the DDU GKY scheme. It will analyze how access to technical skills and employment opportunities for internal migrants increases FLFP and impacts the overall welfare and empowerment of women, both in the household and at the workplace. The final outcomes will be widely disseminated to present a strong case for continued investment in effective skilling programs, particularly in the apparel industry.

Below is a summary of the findings from the preliminary assessment by GBL at four training centers. This is an important observation for Shahi and for other labor-intensive industries investing in skill development programs to better understand:

- Household and village-level characteristics that determine the take-up of skill training programs
- Techniques of community engagement and mobilization required as per the household and village-level characteristics

Table 3: Factors deciding the likelihood of participation in the skill training program

| Household-level | Village-level |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● More prime-age women, especially those with more unmarried women● The urgent demand for money● Less competing demand for women's time, for example, those who do not need women to fetch water | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Low female literacy rate with the involvement of women in marginal economic activities● Favorable gender norms, as measured by a greater share of female household heads● Better infrastructure, particularly public transport |

Surprisingly, villages with greater exposure to past skill development activities as well as villages in which a greater share of women who have historically migrated to the cities, are less likely to take up the program now. The research study will explore this more going ahead.

Challenges and Opportunities

COVID-19

The nation-wide COVID-19 lockdown imposed on March 24, 2020, led to a temporary pause in all operations, and training centers were closed down. To keep the enrolled candidates motivated, our staff in Bangalore training centers used WhatsApp to share short videos and lessons, consistently throughout the lockdown period. Our skill training centers under private-sector partnerships were re-purposed to produce 130,000 face masks. This served the twin purpose of providing skill development opportunities to over 200 candidates across 8 states in India while also catering to the local demand for face masks.

Migrant workers

Migrant workers employed in our factories are given accommodation at the residential facilities (RF) managed by a Non-Governmental Organization - Janodaya Trust. Under the aegis of “Migrant Workers Livelihood Project” started by Shahi in 2016, we are working closely with Janodaya to develop a model and ecosystem of support for migrant workers at Shahi. We are continuously working towards improving the safety standards, grievance redressal systems, healthcare, counseling, and recreational facilities for all the residents. As a result of these efforts and effective partnership with Janodaya, a majority of our workers at the RFs felt safe and comfortable to remain in Bangalore and continue working during the COVID-19 lockdown. As compared to overall migrant workers’ issues across the country, Shahi had only 3% of its migrant workforce leaving us during the pandemic. The exit and transportation of the workers were also carefully handled by Shahi and Janodaya staff.

Societal Norms

The Take-up of skills training at the village-level largely depends on the viewpoints of families. Safety concerns in urban areas and workplaces prevent families from sending women to work. Our focused household and community-level mobilization activities provide proper counseling and information on the benefits of the program and thus encourage households to send women for work. The first three months after the placement is very crucial, especially for the migrant workers.

Attrition

Dropouts are observed when the skilled candidates are not able to adjust to the new environment. To counter this, we are also continuously developing [new programs and policies](#) to ensure women continue to work and thrive in the workplace. An average retention rate of 75% after 6 months of employment has been observed so far and the P.A.C.E. program has been instrumental in further boosting the retention rate.

Communication

Mr. Jalandhar Giri, Director at Shahi Exports has been spearheading the program since 2013. At various platforms, Mr. Giri has shared Shahi's experiences, success stories, highlighted challenges, and provided insights on how the private sector could contribute even more to bridge the existing skill gap for the garment industry. He has extensively worked with various ministries and government departments for high impact research and policy advocacy on skill development for the garment sector.

Being one of the largest employers in India under the DDU GKY program, we were invited to share our experiences at the "Antyodaya Diwas" celebration on September 25, 2020, by the MoRD through a [webcast](#). Three of our trained candidates under the program who are now placed at Shahi also shared their experiences and the impact of skill training on their personal and professional lives.

Other communication channels include:

1. Regular sustainability updates on our website blog "[From the shopfloor and beyond](#)"
2. Quarterly newsletters which are shared with our partners and key stakeholders
3. "Internal Annual Review Meet" with the Skill Development Team to share experiences, progress, and expansion strategies
4. A dedicated MIS platform is available for uploading the data on trained and placed candidates (with 1-year placement tracking). This is regularly monitored by the concerned government agencies

Recent Awards and Recognition

1. DDU GKY - "Best Performer Employer - Rank-1"- National Award by MoRD, GoI, for three consecutive years -2018 and 2019
2. "Best Performer Project Implementation Agency" by the Jharkhand Livelihood Promotion Society, Government of Jharkhand in 2019
3. "Best Performing Training Partner (Category - B) Rank-1" - National Award by MoRD, GoI in 2018

Expansion plan

To benefit more and more women, we are continuously exploring collaboration opportunities with the government and private sector partners. **Our goal is to train 15,000 more women by 2022.** As a step in this direction, in 2020, we have partnered with the MoT, GoI on two new projects. First, under the SAMARTH scheme, 35 training centers have been established to provide placement-linked sewing skills training to 8000 women. Second, an Up-skilling training program

of 240 hours will be implemented for 3500 sewing machine operators across 43 factories of Shahi.

We are also planning to establish an internal Training of Trainers (ToT) Academy by December 2020 to train the trainers and build comprehensive action plans and activities for our program.

Conclusion

The role of the apparel industry

A [2018 article](#) by Arvind Panagariya, former NITI Aayog Chairman, has highlighted the cost-efficiency of job creation in the apparel sector versus other industries. Comparing Shahi with Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) – a large conglomerate with operations in energy, petrochemicals, textiles, natural resources, retail, and telecommunications, etc. – he found that Shahi creates 252 times the number of jobs of RIL with a similar amount of assets. This comparison highlights our belief that the apparel industry has a huge potential to create formal and high-quality employment, especially for women. Skill development is a crucial strategy to help the industry meet this potential.

The requirement of a collaboration-based model

As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18, around [33% of the formally trained youth in India were unemployed](#). A collaborative effort between the private sector and the government for skill development initiatives has the potential to create guaranteed employment opportunities for the apparel industry. The private sector can channelize the CSR funds for developing new programs and supporting the existing government programs on skill development to bridge the gap between formal technical training and the employment rate in India.

Comprehensive learning system for job-readiness

Continuous organizational efforts are required by the program partners to maintain the quality and efficiency of the training program to ascertain the job-readiness of candidates after program completion. A key factor contributing to the success of this program at Shahi is the commitment of the Skill Development Team.

Retaining the productive workforce

A retention strategy is as important as skill development and placement strategy. With our worker wellbeing initiatives, we strive to create an enabling environment for our workforce to

survive and thrive in the workplace. The trained candidates also undergo extensive on-job-training and robust practical knowledge. With that said, the personal and professional growth of our workforce will remain a prime focus in our future endeavors also.