

Dreaming the Impossible: Insights from an Innovative Job Skills Training Program for Women in India



3D Program
FOR GIRLS & WOMEN

Case Studies in Convergence Series, No. 1

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Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM) works with rural women in perennially drought-prone areas of Pune and Ahmednagar districts of Maharashtra state, and activities include women's right to health, confronting gender-based violence, building a progressive perspective among young people and enhancing women's rights in all areas of life.

Website: www.masum-india.org.in



SNDT Women's University is the first Women's university in India as well as in Southeast Asia. The University is committed to the cause of women's empowerment through access to education, particularly higher education, through relevant courses in the formal and non-formal streams.

Website: <https://sndt.ac.in/>



Tech Mahindra Foundation is the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) arm of Tech Mahindra. It was set up in 2007 with a vision of empowering through education: educated, skilled and able women and men are a country's true strength.

Website: <https://techmahindrafoundation.org/>



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The **3D Program for Girls and Women** advances gender equality and girls and women's empowerment by helping local governments work more efficiently across departments, and with civil society and the private sector, to increase economic opportunities for girls and women and address their health, education and safety needs.

Website: <https://the3dprogram.org/>

This report is part of the 3D Program's *Case Studies in Convergence Series* which documents insights and lessons learned from pilot initiatives implemented by the program and our partners to demonstrate convergent solutions to advance gender equality and generate recommendations for stakeholders in government, civil society and the private sector. Pilot initiatives are being implemented in response to priority issues raised by girls and women through collective platforms in Pune City and District, Maharashtra, India.

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Geeta Rao Gupta
Executive Director, 3D Program for Girls and Women

INTRODUCTION

Rural young women continue to be excluded from educational and economic opportunities in the formal service economy in India. Although there are several skill-building programs run by the government, NGOs and corporate initiatives in India, they are mostly located in cities and typically recruit young women from low-income urban communities. Job skills training programs in rural areas are usually run by private institutions or the government. Private courses are too expensive for young women from low-income families and do not provide the necessary networks and support to help them find jobs. Government courses are often of poor quality, do not link to market realities, and do not provide support with job placement.

To address these gaps, an innovative residential job skills and placement program was implemented in Pune City, Maharashtra, India for rural young women from Purandar block, Pune District.¹ The program was developed through a unique, multi-sectoral partnership facilitated by the 3D Program for Girls and Women, and implemented as a demonstration project to derive recommendations on how to increase and strengthen job skills training and placement opportunities for young women from rural areas.

The program provided an opportunity to test how an urban job skills and placement program run by a private corporation could be modified to address the needs of rural young women. The courses were offered free of charge and all related expenses, including

travel, lodging, food and training were jointly covered by the partners. The program also provided an opportunity to form partnerships between sectors that had not converged before to create new opportunities for young rural women.

This report describes the experiences of the young women, as well as the experiences of the implementing partners. It provides insights, lessons learned and recommendations on what it takes to structure accessible and effective job skills training and placement programs for young women who live in rural areas.

PROGRAM MODEL

Modifying an urban program for rural young women

In response to a need expressed by rural young women in Pune district to find gainful employment in the service sector, the 3D Program for Girls and Women proposed the inclusion of young rural women in an existing job skills training program organized by Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNDT) Women's University² and the Tech Mahindra Foundation.

The existing course recruited urban women who were trained for four hours each work-day evening at the SNDT, Pune campus over a four-month period. Including young women from rural areas was a challenge because of the distance they would have to travel each day from their villages to attend the course.

¹ The program was implemented from May to August 2019.

² SNDT Women's University was the first women's university in India, founded by Dr. Dhondo Keshav Karve in 1916.

To resolve the challenges posed by location and distance, SNTD Women's University and Tech Mahindra Foundation converted the part-time course into a full-time residential course offered over the summer holidays, when the University's dormitories and dining facilities were available. The number of hours of the course and the syllabus remained the same as the regular part-time program, but the teaching hours per day were increased to allow for the shorter timeframe.

Curriculum and training

Two courses were offered: Office Administration and Goods and Services Tax and Accounting (GST Accounting). In addition to these courses, Tech Mahindra Foundation included workplace readiness sessions and organised exposure visits to companies and potential employers. SNTD Women's University provided instruction in spoken English, information technology and computers, typing and office etiquette. Non-governmental organization (NGO) Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM), which works in rural Pune District, complemented that training with sessions during the weekends on gender-related issues, such as gender-based violence, menstrual hygiene and sexual harassment in the workplace. MASUM also organised a field trip to give the students some exposure to life outside the campus.

A unique partnership

The program was developed through a unique, multi-sectoral partnership facilitated by the 3D Program for Girls and Women between MASUM, the Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension of SNTD Women's University,

Pune and the Tech Mahindra Foundation, a corporate social responsibility initiative. Each partner brought unique resources, perspectives and objectives to the partnership.

Tech Mahindra Foundation provided the courses free of charge, as they usually do, and the 3D Program covered the costs of lodging and food for the students.³ SNTD Women's University and the Tech Mahindra Foundation provided the infrastructure and trained personnel of their tested job skills and training program. To-date, the program has a 70-75 per cent placement rate for their graduates, into jobs that paid at least INR 10,000 (USD 130-140) a month. At the beginning of the program, the team at SNTD Women's University and Tech Mahindra Foundation expressed some concerns about the feasibility of convincing the parents of rural young women to send their daughters to the city. They also doubted the ability of young rural women to get jobs in the service sector in the city. This posed a problem because the proportion of students who get jobs is the most widely accepted indicator of the success of job skills training programs.

MASUM designated a seven-member team to manage and coordinate the program and provide support to the students. Two team members visited SNTD, at least weekly, to check in and take care of the young women and to resolve issues that the young women were facing regarding food and water supply at the hostel and leave and other disciplinary issues. MASUM was also responsible for encouraging parents, mobilizing community support, orientating the new recruits, organising logistics and hiring a placement officer to place graduates from the course in jobs in both Pune

³ At a daily cost of INR 217 (under USD 3) per student



My husband visited SNTD twice. He liked the place, he found it safe. Earlier he was against sending our daughter for the course but now he is happy. He is proactively recommending others to send their daughters for the course.

– Mother of a course participant

City and semi-rural towns in Purandar. With decades of experience in community mobilization, MASUM brought valuable community networks and trust to the program. In addition to increasing job skills and placement opportunities for young rural women, they had an additional objective. They wanted to prevent child marriages and to encourage young women to continue their education while working. By keeping the young women away from home for the summer, MASUM knew that they would be protected from marriage proposals, which typically occur in the summer months. To both avoid early marriages and prevent the young women from dropping out of the training program, MASUM asked each set of parents to sign an agreement to support their daughters in completing the course. MASUM also insisted on admitting six girls under the age of 18 for the Office Administration course to provide an alternative to early marriage for them and their parents.

Targeted recruitment and orientation for young women and parents

MASUM diligently mobilised young women through campus and door-to-door meetings across 22 villages in Purandar block over a period of four months, with a focus on reaching young women from marginalized and low-income communities, as well as from single-mother households. They engaged the young women and their parents whenever they met them and during monthly community meetings and distributed pamphlets about the training program. Field workers also visited individual homes to convince parents to enrol their daughters in the course.

As many as 85 young women expressed interest in joining the course. Through a rigorous selection process, a total of 45 were selected,

with preference given to those from vulnerable families.

An orientation session was organised in Purandar by MASUM to disseminate the information about various job skills courses, including the one at SNT Women's University. A second orientation session for young women and their parents was held by Tech Mahindra Foundation in Saswad, a town in Purandar. At that session, the SNT Women's University team stressed the importance of job placement and MASUM explained its objectives for the initiative.

Initially, many parents were reluctant to send their daughters to the city for the program because they were apprehensive about the living arrangements. To put them at ease, MASUM organized a special bus to bring the parents and the young women to the SNT campus. The parents were reassured once they saw the campus and the boarding arrangements.

During the campus visit, the young women openly expressed their anguish over the restrictions imposed upon them by their families and how those restrictions deter their dreams. They all expressed a desire to be employed. Several shared that continuing their education in college was still a challenge for them, due to the cost of tuition and distance to colleges. Both parents and young women expressed an interest in combining employment with education.

Enrolment in classes

A total of 45 young women, aged 16-26, from 22 villages in Purandar block enrolled in the two courses: 36 young women chose Office Administration and 9 of them chose GST Accounting.



We will be happy if girls can continue their education while working as that will enable them to share the financial responsibility of their education which we are unable to afford due to limited resources and uncertain income from farming.

- Father of a course participant

The young women who enrolled in the Office Administration course were younger than the students in the GST Accounting class. Many of them were taking the 12th grade exams this year and this was the first time they were living independently for such a long span of time (50 days). Three women who were studying in the third year of a Bachelors' degree course in Commerce and working in jobs joined the program with the hope of improving their chances of getting better paying jobs. Others who were in college joined the course because they felt that a college degree alone was not sufficient to get a good job.

FINDINGS

Course outcomes

All 45 young women completed the training program successfully. Of these, 21 women were placed in jobs after the course but 5 dropped out and 16 are currently employed, 9 in jobs in Pune city. The 5 who dropped out decided to continue their education, while also continuing to look for another job. The remaining 22 young women all chose to go back to school or college to complete their higher education rather than finding a job. Four of them chose to continue their education in Pune city, of which 3 are enrolled in a course on interior design and one was admitted to SNTD Women's University! It is interesting to note that despite the initial apprehension of living in the city, a large proportion of the young women chose to stay on in the city either to study or work.

All students who successfully completed the final exam at the end of the course received a course completion certificate from MASUM, SNTD Women's University and the 3D Program

for Girls and Women. Those who stayed in a job for one and a half months after completing the course also received a course completion certificate from Tech Mahindra Foundation.

Job placement

In addition to the job placement role played by Tech Mahindra Foundation in Pune city, MASUM hired a placement officer to identify jobs for the young women returning to their villages in semi-rural towns in Purandar, such as Saswad. At the beginning of the course, each student filled out a form in which they stated their choice of job and place of work. Upon completing the course, the women were interviewed again by MASUM staff to find out their job preferences and expectations with regard to locality, payment, field of work and type of job. The placement officer was able to place 11 women in jobs and MASUM continues to help the women who are currently unemployed find suitable jobs.

To date, the job placement rate is 35 per cent, considerably lower than what Tech Mahindra Foundation and SNTD Women's University have achieved with urban women in the past.

Growing aspirations and other impacts

It is important to note that an additional 60 per cent of women chose to pursue higher education after completing the course, which is a significant outcome for rural women.

Other indicators that show the success of the program but are difficult to quantify are the number of early marriages prevented. Of the 45 young women, only one reported that getting her married was still a priority for her family; the others confirmed that any discussion of marriage was now delayed.

Your Joy Would Lie in our Becoming Self-Reliant

Selflessly you gave us so much, that
None can henceforth call these daughters of yours helpless.
We've realized that your joy would lie in our becoming self-reliant!

Our parents must be grappling with predicaments:
"Can we hinder our girls now, after having traversed so far?"

We will not burn out like lamps, merely as extensions of anyone's family line
But we'll cherish the flame that enlightens our own being.
Thus empowered, we will respond to our parents' dilemma.
We've realized that your joy would lie in our becoming self-reliant!

We'll continue teaching ourselves abundantly
Now that MASUM is our companion.
Never ever will we belittle ourselves because
We've realized that your joy would lie in our becoming self-reliant!

Never was I aware of the self-interests of this world and its designs,
Nor mindful of the extent to which MASUM was a blessing for Purandar taluka.
Society has no agenda except to put women down!
However, we're becoming conscious of MASUM's existence for women's rights.
We've realized that your joy would lie in our becoming self-reliant!

Our yearning and determination to study are now known to one and all,
And so, we'll never give anyone the power to demean women anymore.
We've realized that your joy would lie in our becoming self-reliant!

Not only have you shown everyone the path ahead;
You've placed us one step above, closer to success.
From now on, we'll prove our self-determination to ourselves!
We've realized that your joy would lie in our becoming self-reliant!

By Reshma Khaladkar, a 20-year old graduate of the program. Reshma is currently studying at Waghire College in Purandar.

Translated from Marathi by Dr. Manisha Gupte, MASUM



In villages girls don't have any value, they are expected to get married, have children and look after the home. My mother-in-law is after me to marry my daughter after 12 and suggested a groom for my daughter but both of us want to educate our daughter. She should do a job after completion.

- Mother of a course participant

The increase in the young women's level of self-confidence as evidenced in the remarks made at the graduation ceremony and in interviews at the end of the course is a strong indicator of success of the program. Another indicator is the shift in aspirations of their parents, who agreed that their daughters' level of confidence had increased, as had their computer and English-language skills. They now want their daughters to work and be financially independent.

Reported experiences and feedback

After the first week of the program, the young women reported being happy, positive, filled with hope, eager to learn more and excited to share their new experience of independence and new friendships.

They were excited to share that they were becoming more confident to speak in front of the class, and that their English and typing skills were improving. Only two young women reported missing home.

Very few of the women knew each other before they joined the course but living together built strong bonds of friendship. Although four women were allotted to each room, they chose to live in groups of five to seven per room. They were willing to sleep on the floor in order to stay together and enjoy late-night chats with their friends.

A week before the course ended many of the young women wondered how much they would miss staying together in the hostel. They had enjoyed classes, studies, and the field trip and were eager to work in Pune and to find ways to live together with their friends.

Challenges of implementation

The program faced many challenges in both implementation and in achieving its outcomes:

- **Rural young women needed additional training:** The curriculum and number of teaching hours for the rural young women were the same as the regular skills training for urban women, as were the expectations of placement rates and salary standards. However, the teaching staff expressed their concern about meeting those standards because they felt that the rural women in the program were relatively naïve and unexposed. As a result, the teachers were skeptical that the rural women could be trained to secure well-paying jobs in a two-month period. This concern was proved correct in some cases.
- **Rural young women earned lower salaries:** Tech Mahindra Foundation wanted students to secure jobs with a monthly salary of at least INR 10,000 (USD 132). However, the average salary they received was significantly lower, at INR 7,000 per month (USD 92). This neither met Tech Mahindra Foundation's standard nor was it adequate to cover monthly expenses of rent, travel and food, and the tuition for higher education classes that the participants wanted to pursue. The lower average salary for the rural women was attributed to their skills being lower than the expected standard. For rural women to reach that standard would require more intensive and perhaps, longer job training programs.
- **Expectations were not always met:** There was sometimes misalignment between what the students wanted and what some of the teachers provided. For example, the



Earlier I was hesitant to send my daughter far away, but this course has changed my view. Now I am confident that my daughter can live in a city and can take care of herself well. We talk to each other through video calls every day so there is no anxiety of not seeing her.

- Mother of a course participant



We were a little apprehensive in the beginning. How will our teachers teach? Will they teach whatever they have promised? All those apprehensions went away once the course started and our teachers were good. They not only taught us what they have promised...they are encouraging us, making everything simple for us.

- A course participant

students wanted to focus on their English language speaking skills and the English teacher focused more on written assignments, creating frustrations on both sides.

- **Early job placements were not helpful:** The pressure felt by Tech Mahindra Foundation and SNTD Women's University to attain a high job placement rate resulted in undue pressure being placed on the students. Just a month after the program began, even though they had not yet mastered the necessary technical skills or gained sufficient confidence, the students were sent out for job interviews. The intent was for them to get exposure to interview settings and on-the-job experience. Instead, this premature placement led to some important aspects of the training curriculum being reduced in order to accommodate the job placements and contributed to a loss of confidence and increased frustration among the students.
- **Work conditions were not always acceptable:** Several young women were successful in getting jobs. However, in many instances, the work conditions were unacceptable. For example, the women were uncomfortable working in jobs that required them to work late hours or in night shifts, where the equipment was substandard, or where the toilet facilities were unsanitary and unsafe. Additionally, some of the women complained of inappropriate behaviour by colleagues and a lack of clarity about the job description and compensation structure. Additionally, in some institutions, compliance with the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) or POSH Act of 2013, was not adequate. These disappointments led to some young women leaving those positions.

- **Interruptions impacted outcomes:** Several participants had to leave Pune for a while during the two-month course to complete admission processes for the next year of higher education. That interruption affected the level of competency achieved by the students.

INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED

There were several insights and lessons learned from this demonstration program:

- **There are risks and rewards in multi-sectoral partnerships:** Multi-sectoral programs can successfully bring together the relative advantages and resources of multiple stakeholders to create innovative and life-changing programs. However, shared objectives and measures of success should be agreed upon in advance to avoid conflict because sometimes the objectives and markers of success of each stakeholder are oppositional rather than complementary. Recognizing this early on can result in productive outcomes rather than frustration.
- **Job training for rural young women needs greater investment but the returns are high:** Young women from rural areas need more than just technical training. They need support to adjust to an environment that is foreign to them. Rural young women who are in urban settings for the first time require hands-on support to manage the transition, their new environment and different standards for learning and work. For this reason, a job skills training program for young rural women may require more time and investments than programs for urban youth, but the returns in terms of maximizing untapped human capital are immeasurable. Rural young women want to expand their horizons. They have aspirations to enter the service sector of the formal economy and by fulfilling their aspirations, India has the opportunity to maximize the full economic potential and productivity of its people.
- **Fulfilling young women's aspirations must be the ultimate indicator of success:** Young women's aspirations must be taken into account in program outcomes and in measuring success. For some young women, skilling programs can be the critical stepping stone to further education, not job placements. Job skills programs can provide important opportunities to young women who may need to work part-time to cover the cost of their education, or are at risk of ending their education or of getting married.
- **Rural women have a right to decent and safe employment:** Gender norms and discrimination must be taken into consideration in job placements and women's right to decent and safe employment must be upheld. It is important to recognize that young women cannot take advantage of night shifts due to safety concerns and restrictions on their mobility, that they require adequate toilet and menstrual hygiene facilities and that all job placements should be vetted to assess their compliance with the POSH Act of 2013.
- **Parental support is essential for success:** Integrating parents into the recruitment, orientation and enrolment process can help with both recruitment and retention of young women, and in helping their daughters delay marriage and navigate job or educational opportunities after completing job training programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural young women in India deserve more and they deserve better when it comes to opportunities to participate in and benefit from the formal economy. They bring motivation, talent and aspirations and are currently an underutilized precious resource. By virtue of their geographic location, they find themselves not just ignored, but systematically disadvantaged. Limited educational and economic opportunities are truncating their life choices and are based on the incorrect assumptions that their aspirations remain rooted in the informal, agrarian economy and that their parents do not want them to be educated and economically independent. Like young people everywhere, the young women who participated in this program shared aspirations that were ambitious and exciting, and that spoke of creating a different world for themselves. They see a changing economy and society around them and on social media and want nothing less than a fair chance to participate in it.

For this to happen, rural young women need specially tailored, comprehensive job skills training and placement programs that take into account their realities and needs. The program clearly demonstrated that business as usual does not work for them, and that existing programs cannot simply be tweaked. Rural young women need additional and custom-made outreach, recruitment and orientation, including engaging and supporting their parents. They need more and differently paced technical instruction to make up for the gaps in their earlier education, combined with the life skill and soft skill training they need to succeed. Finally, they need support to understand their rights and to monitor work con-

ditions for their occupational safety. Paying attention to these specificities will ultimately strengthen all job skills and placement programs, particularly for young women.

Creating these programs will require the convergence of the resources and strengths of different sectors, including government, civil society and NGOs, academia and the corporate sector. The government can provide the infrastructure and networks to reach young women at scale. Corporate programs can begin to invest in rural youth. Universities can play an important role by opening up their campuses and providing non-technical courses, such as life skills and soft skills courses, and by exposing young rural women to what it might be like to attend and live on a university campus. NGOs provide critical relationships within communities and can serve as advocates for young rural women to help them succeed at understanding and acting on their aspirations. With these kinds of investments and partnerships, we anticipate that stakeholders will overcome the implementation challenges that we faced in our program, and that ultimately, job placement rates and job retention by young women will increase, as will the role of rural young women in the formal Indian economy. More importantly, rural young women will become active participants in their own futures.

Partnerships lie at the heart of the 3D Program.
We are grateful for the support we receive from
our partners to help us advance our work.

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