

Psychosocial Dimensions Of Beedi Work: Mapping The Invisible Pressures On Women Workers

Karunya Gunavathy K¹, Dr. N. Manikandan²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education (Deemed to be University), Krishnankoil – 626126 Tamil Nadu, India, Corresponding

Author, Email: karunyagunavathy@gmail.com

²Co-Author, ICSSR Post Doctoral Fellow

Abstract

Background: This systematic literature review explores the transitions of women beedi workers from informal tobacco-based labor to sustainable livelihoods through social entrepreneurship. **Methods:** The review followed PRISMA guidelines and included peer-reviewed studies, government reports, and NGO publications from 2000–2024. **Results:** Findings show limited research on ecosystem-level support, digital enablement, psychological barriers, and regional comparative transitions. **Conclusions:** Significant gaps remain in designing scalable, evidence-based livelihood transition models for women beedi workers.

This systematic literature review explores the contributes to role of women's social entrepreneurship in improving the lives of beedi workers — a marginalized and often overlooked labor group in India. The review synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed journals, reports, and case studies that highlight how women-led enterprises contribute to economic empowerment, social inclusion, and alternative livelihood opportunities for beedi workers. The study follows a structured methodology for identifying, screening, and analyzing relevant literature, with a focus on small-scale entrepreneurship models that have shown potential for scalability and sustainability. Findings indicate that women's social entrepreneurship not only offers a viable exit path from exploitative labor conditions but also facilitates community development, self-reliance, and intergenerational progress. This review identifies key gaps in current research and suggests directions for future inquiry and policy intervention aimed at improving beedi laborers through inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Women Entrepreneurs, Beedi Workers, Livelihood Transformation, Systematic Literature Review, Alternative Employment

1. Introduction

The beedi industry, a significant segment of India's informal economy, employs millions of workers, the majority of whom are women from marginalized backgrounds. These women often work in unsafe, exploitative, and poorly compensated environments, with little access to social protection or alternative livelihood options. Despite numerous welfare programs introduced by the government, the structural issues within the beedi sector—such as home-based subcontracting, lack of education, occupational health hazards, and social invisibility—continue to trap women in cycles of poverty.

In recent years, social entrepreneurship has emerged as a powerful tool to address such deeply rooted socio-economic problems. Social entrepreneurs, particularly women, are leading innovative, community-rooted enterprises that not only generate income but also create social value by promoting dignity, inclusion, and empowerment. These initiatives, often supported by NGOs, self-help groups (SHGs), or government schemes, are showing potential in

transforming the lives of women beedi workers—offering them new identities as micro-entrepreneurs in tailoring, food processing, handicrafts, and other small-scale businesses. However, while there is growing discourse around women-led social entrepreneurship in India, there is limited consolidated academic analysis focusing on how these ventures specifically impact beedi workers. This systematic literature review (SLR) seeks to bridge that gap by analyzing scholarly and empirical evidence on how women's social entrepreneurship contributes to reshaping the lives of beedi laborer's and offering pathways to alternative, dignified livelihoods.

2. Research Questions

The following research questions guide this systematic review:

1. What are the socio-economic challenges faced by women beedi workers in India?
2. What role has women-led social entrepreneurship played in creating alternative livelihood opportunities for beedi workers?
3. What models or interventions have proven effective in transitioning women out of beedi labor into sustainable micro-enterprises?
4. What are the major gaps, barriers, and enablers in implementing social entrepreneurial initiatives among beedi workers?
5. What directions can future policy, training, and grassroots efforts take to enhance the impact of social entrepreneurship in this context?

3. Methodology

This systematic literature review (SLR) follows a structured and replicable approach to identify, select, and analyze relevant academic and empirical studies that examine the intersection of women's social entrepreneurship and the socio-economic upliftment of beedi workers in India.

3.1 Search Strategy

To ensure comprehensive coverage, a wide range of databases and platforms were searched between June 20, 2025 – June 24, 2025. These included:

- Google Scholar
- ResearchGate
- JSTOR
- SpringerLink
- Taylor & Francis
- Semantic Scholar
- Government and NGO reports (e.g., NITI Aayog, Gaon Connection, Ministry of Labor, IHD)

Keywords Used (combined using Boolean operators):

- "Beedi workers" AND "women"
- "Social entrepreneurship" AND "India"
- "Alternative livelihood" AND "beedi industry"
- "Informal sector" AND "women entrepreneurs"
- "self-help groups" OR "SHG empowerment"
- "Microbusiness transition from beedi rolling"

Searches were limited to English-language documents published between 2010 and 2025, with a focus on Indian contexts.

3.2 Inclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing on women beedi workers in India.
- Papers discussing women-led social entrepreneurship or small business models relevant to informal workers.
- Case studies or field research involving SHGs, NGOs, or government entrepreneurship initiatives targeting low-income women.
- Reports from credible institutions (academic journals, NGOs, government bodies).

3.3 Exclusion Criteria

- Articles that focus solely on health outcomes without socio-economic context.
- Studies unrelated to entrepreneurship or livelihood transitions.
- Non-India-based case studies unless methodologically transferable.
- Opinion pieces, blogs, or unverified sources.

3.4 Screening and Selection Process

A total of 98 records were identified during the initial search. After removing duplicates and screening abstracts, 24 articles were selected for full-text review. Based on inclusion criteria and relevance to the research questions, 8 primary academic articles and 2 field reports were included in the final review set.

The final selection of articles was based on PRISMA guidelines, and the complete flow of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion is shown in Figure 1.

3.5 Data Extraction and Synthesis

A data extraction table was used to categorize:

- Authors, year, and study location
- Objectives and research methods
- Key findings
- Implications for women-led social entrepreneurship and beedi labor transition

Themes were then synthesized under three categories:

1. Socio-economic challenges of beedi workers
2. Entrepreneurial interventions and outcomes
3. Barriers and enablers to scaling women-led ventures

4. Results

This section presents a synthesis of the findings from the ten selected studies, categorized into three thematic areas that align with the research questions: (1) socio-economic challenges of women beedi workers, (2) role of women-led social entrepreneurship, and (3) barriers and enablers in implementing entrepreneurial transitions.

4.1 Socio-Economic Challenges Faced by Women Beedi Workers

The reviewed literature consistently highlights the precarious conditions under which women beedi workers operate. These include:

- Extremely low wages, often calculated per 1,000 beedis rolled (Selvi & Rajaprabha, 2020; Khanam, 2024).
- Lack of legal and social protection, including exclusion from labor unions and inadequate awareness of welfare schemes (IHD Report, 2020).
- Severe health issues, such as musculoskeletal disorders, eye strain, and respiratory ailments, resulting from long hours of sitting and exposure to tobacco dust (Nafees et al., 2021; Journal of Occupational Medicine, 2020).

- Limited mobility and decision-making power, due to cultural norms and unpaid household responsibilities (Pande, 2019).
 - Intergenerational dependency, where daughters are introduced to beedi work early, perpetuating poverty cycles (Taylor & Francis).
- These challenges form the backdrop against which the need for alternative livelihood pathways becomes urgent and evident.

4.2 Impact of Women-Led Social Entrepreneurship on Beedi Workers

Several studies demonstrate how women's social entrepreneurship offers meaningful alternatives for exiting the exploitative beedi industry:

- SHG-led microenterprises in tailoring, food processing, soap making, and agarbatti rolling have helped former beedi workers become self-reliant (Gaon Connection, 2023; Bhatli et al.).
- Initiatives led by local women leaders or NGOs have built not just income, but also community solidarity, skill development, and self-worth (Khanam, 2024).
- Women's involvement in social entrepreneurship correlates with increased autonomy, better access to financial services, and reduced reliance on middlemen (Pande, 2019).
- Successful ventures often prioritize low-investment, skill-based models rooted in the community's existing cultural and economic landscape.

Notably, the shift toward entrepreneurship is more sustainable when it is:

- locally relevant,
- supported by ongoing training and market access,
- and backed by women's collectives or institutional enablers.

4.3 Barriers and Enablers for Transition to Sustainable Entrepreneurship

Barriers Identified:

- Lack of initial capital or access to credit, especially among women without collateral or financial literacy (Selvi & Rajaprabha, 2020).
- Limited exposure to markets and customers beyond local communities.
- Insufficient formal training programs tailored for beedi workers' needs and contexts.
- Gender norms that restrict travel or public presence, affecting business scalability.

Enablers Identified:

- Strong community-based SHGs that provide social and financial backing.
- Government schemes like NRLM and state-specific entrepreneurship support missions.
- NGOs and local women leaders acting as bridges between training and enterprise creation.
- Public recognition and visibility for women entrepreneurs in rural and semi-urban settings.

Studies conclude that multi-stakeholder collaboration—involving government, civil society, and private sector players—is critical to ensure long-term success of women-led entrepreneurial initiatives for former beedi workers.

The consolidated SWOT analysis summarizing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats is presented in Table 1.

The thematic framework illustrating the multidimensional factors influencing livelihood transitions is presented in Figure 2.

5. Discussion

This review reveals that women-led social entrepreneurship holds contributes to potential for improving the lives of beedi workers, who are often trapped in cycles of poverty, health risks, and socio-economic invisibility. While beedi rolling has long been one of the few accessible income sources for women in marginalized communities, it has also contributed to chronic exploitation due to the lack of formal contracts, fixed wages, or recognition.

The reviewed studies confirm that alternative livelihood models, particularly those initiated and managed by women, have created tangible improvements in income security, autonomy, and social mobility. Microenterprises rooted in tailoring, food preparation, handmade products, and agribusiness have enabled many women to shift away from tobacco-based labor. These interventions have not only provided income but have also enhanced collective identity, self-confidence, and skill development.

5.1 Expanded Thematic Interpretation

The interconnected nature of socio-economic constraints and entrepreneurial opportunities demands deeper exploration. Current studies largely address each constraint in isolation. However, livelihood transition is a composite process influenced simultaneously by:

- household bargaining power,
- community norms,
- access to markets,
- financial literacy,
- psychological readiness for entrepreneurship,
- and exposure to digital tools.

A multi-layered understanding reveals that shifting from beedi rolling to an alternative livelihood is not merely an economic decision but also a socio-cultural and identity-based transformation. Women who have internalized beedi work as the only accessible livelihood require sustained behavioral change, mentorship, and confidence-building interventions. These aspects are rarely studied but are crucial for sustainable transition.

However, the review also highlights persistent challenges:

- Capital constraints prevent scalability.
- Lack of formal business training limits operational efficiency.
- Patriarchal norms restrict women's ability to travel, network, or expand.
- Poor market linkage and branding knowledge hinder profitability.

5.2 Social Capital Formation Among Beedi Worker Communities

Social capital—especially collective solidarity emerging from SHGs—plays a pivotal role in enabling women to take entrepreneurial risks. However, existing studies seldom explore how bonding, bridging, and linking capital shape outcomes:

Bonding capital: peer support networks help women share risks and pool resources.

Bridging capital: connections with NGOs provide access to markets and training.

Linking capital: relationships with institutions enable access to schemes, credit, and recognition.

Understanding these layers of social capital is essential for designing interventions that support long-term livelihood shifts.

5.3 Psychological and Behavioral Dimensions

Existing literature overwhelmingly focuses on external constraints but provides little insight into psychological barriers that influence livelihood decision-making. Unexplored factors include:

- fear of economic instability during transition,
- low self-efficacy due to years of repetitive labor,
- hesitation to adopt visible public-facing roles,
- internalized norms limiting financial decision-making.

Integrating behavioral science perspectives would significantly improve the design of entrepreneurship programs for beedi workers.

5.4 Regional Comparative Insights

The experiences of women beedi workers vary widely across states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, West Bengal, Telangana, and Odisha. Regional differences in SHG density, NGO presence, state-level welfare boards, and market access profoundly shape livelihood opportunities.

Yet comparative regional studies are nearly non-existent. Such research would clarify:

- why certain states transition better into entrepreneurship,
- what role state missions play,
- how cultural norms affect mobility and training access.

This regional gap is one of the biggest limitations in current literature.

Interestingly, successful cases frequently featured NGO or SHG support, continuous mentoring, and a community-centric approach. Government schemes also played a significant role, although gaps in awareness and accessibility remained. The SWOT analysis and thematic map reinforce the idea that multidimensional support systems—financial, social, educational, and institutional—are necessary to ensure lasting transformation.

Future efforts must focus not only on individual entrepreneurship but also on ecosystem development that includes:

- Digital literacy
- Access to microfinance
- Market linkage platforms
- Mental and physical health support
- Gender sensitization at the community level

5.5 Expanded SWOT Interpretation

While the SWOT matrix identifies strengths and vulnerabilities, each component warrants deeper reflection:

- **Strengths:** Women's resilience emerges from decades of combining domestic labor with piece-rate tasks. This adaptability is a foundation for entrepreneurial skill-building.
- **Weaknesses:** Limited mobility affects market exposure, training attendance, branding options, and negotiation capacity.
- **Opportunities:** Digital tools (UPI, WhatsApp Business, e-commerce) can redefine rural enterprise, yet structured programs are absent in beedi clusters.
- **Threats:** Market saturation in low-skill microenterprises increases the need to diversify toward areas like organic value chains, rural logistics, or digital microwork.

This analysis highlights how micro-level realities influence livelihood diversification.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Strengthening the Microenterprise Ecosystem

A strong livelihood transition ecosystem must include:

- tailored business training,

- continuous mentoring,
- digital onboarding,
- packaging and branding support,
- linkages with wholesalers and e-commerce platforms.

These components determine whether women sustain new livelihoods or return to beedi rolling. This systematic literature review underscores the critical role of women's social entrepreneurship in reshaping the lives of beedi workers. From oppressive and health-damaging work to self-driven microenterprises, this shift represents not just an economic transition but a broader social empowerment journey.

6.2 Proposed Integrated Livelihood Transition Model

Based on gaps identified in the literature, a four-tier model is proposed:

- Tier1: Foundational Support : Digital literacy, financial literacy, ID documentation.
- Tier2: Skill Development : Demand-driven vocational training aligned with local markets.
- Tier3: Enterprise Enablement : Mentoring, SHG-led credit, product development assistance.
- Tier4: Market Integration : Support for e-commerce, procurement linkages, cluster branding.

This structured model is currently missing in academic research but critical for scalable impact. While women entrepreneurs from the beedi sector demonstrate resilience and leadership, their success is highly dependent on the strength of the support ecosystem—including training, funding, awareness, and policy backing. The findings also emphasize the need for inclusive interventions tailored to their unique challenges, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas.

As India aims for inclusive growth and gender-responsive development, investing in women-led social entrepreneurship is not just beneficial—it is essential.

6.3 Policy Recommendations

- Conduct state-level tracking of beedi worker transitions each year.
- Create digital livelihood centers inside beedi clusters.
- Simplify MUDRA loan access for women with zero collateral.
- Institutionalize SHG performance monitoring systems.
- Incentivize state procurement from women-led enterprises.

Future research should explore longitudinal studies to track impact over time and develop scalable, replicable models that can uplift millions of women currently entrenched in the informal labor sector.

6.4 Future Research Directions

Future studies must prioritize:

- longitudinal tracking for 5–10 years,
- comparative studies across states and districts,
- gendered constraints on enterprise scaling,
- role of mobile technology in livelihood transitions,
- SHG-led enterprise sustainability factors,
- family dynamics influencing women's business mobility.

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1. TABLE

Table 1. SWOT Matrix for Women Social Entrepreneurs from the Beedi Sector.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Deep understanding of local community needs	Limited formal education and business training
Strong peer support through SHGs and women's groups	Low access to financial credit or seed capital
High resilience and adaptability from informal work experience	Limited mobility due to social/cultural norms
Embedded in existing community networks for outreach	Lack of exposure to broader markets and digital tools
Opportunities	Threats
Government support schemes (NRLM, PMEGP)	Market saturation in low-skill microbusinesses
Digital inclusion for skill-building & e-commerce	Exploitative intermediaries & informal loan sharks
NGO support for training, branding, and marketing	Gender-based discrimination in economic spaces
Growing public demand for ethical, handmade goods	Health issues due to years of beedi exposure

2. FIGURES

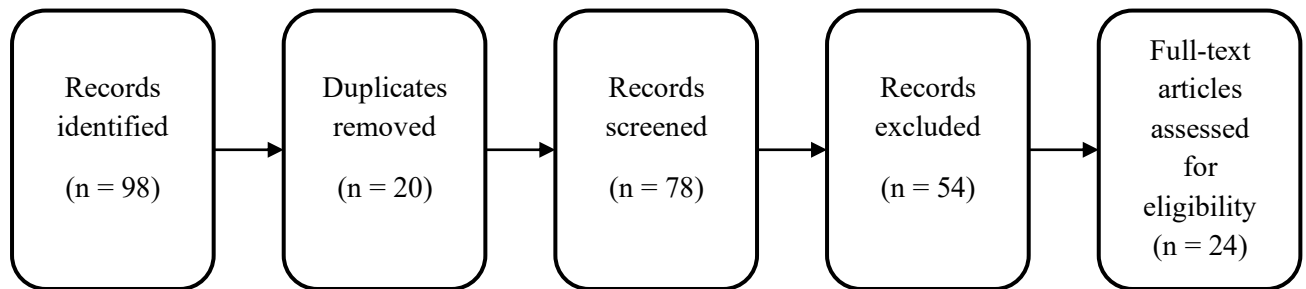


Figure 1. PRISMA Screening and Selection Process Flowchart.

This figure illustrates the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion of studies for the systematic review according to PRISMA guidelines. Rectangular boxes represent each stage of the review process, while arrows indicate the direction of flow from initial search to final study selection. Numbers within the boxes denote the count of records at each stage.

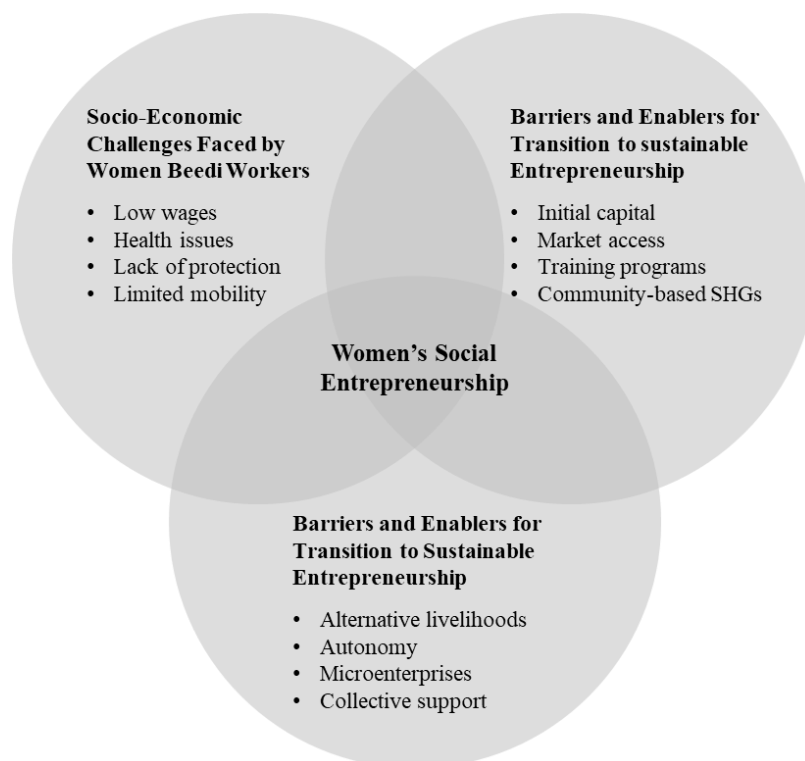


Figure 2. Barriers and Enablers Model for Livelihood Transition Among Women Beedi Workers.

This Venn diagram illustrates the intersection of three thematic domains influencing livelihood transitions for women beedi workers: (1) socio-economic challenges such as low wages, health issues, limited mobility, and lack of protection; (2) barriers and enablers for sustainable entrepreneurship including initial capital, market access, training programs, and community-

based SHGs; and (3) outcomes associated with women's social entrepreneurship such as autonomy, alternative livelihoods, microenterprise creation, and collective support. The overlapping regions highlight how these factors interact to shape the entrepreneurial pathways available to women transitioning from beedi work.