

From Caregivers to Changemakers: Advancing Women’s Agency Through Community Health Entrepreneurship in India

Ipsita Dwivedi, Pooja Kulkarni, Natasha Singh, Manisha Dutta, Nisha Sharma,, Sneha Palit, Ashwin Desmukh

CONTEXT

- Women in India's low-income urban settlements face layered inequities: poverty, insecure livelihoods, restrictive gender norms, limited mobility and poor access to healthcare.
- These inequities constrain women's agency: their ability to define goals, make meaningful choices and act on them.
- Urban health systems rely on women's unpaid care work, yet exclude them from leadership, economic participation and decision-making.
- Women-led community collectives have been shown to strengthen health access, accountability and local governance, while building women's confidence, mobility and collective voice.
- Community Health Entrepreneurship (CHE) offers a pathway to close gaps in primary healthcare and expand women's economic and social agency.

About the Sadhika-CHE

The Sadhika - Community Health Entrepreneurship Programme (CHE), led by Samyak, trains women and LGBTQIA+ individuals from underserved urban communities as CHes. Equipped with skills in preventive healthcare, screening, digital tools, referrals and entrepreneurship, Sadhikas deliver hyperlocal health services while earning an income. The model aims to strengthen agency on several fronts: confidence and identity, household decision-making, freedom of movement, and public participation. At the same time, it expands access to urban primary healthcare.



METHODOLOGY

- Qualitative study using Most Significant Change (MSC), a participatory narrative method in which participants define what change means to them, rather than measuring it against external indicators.
- Semi-structured MSC interviews in Hindi and Marathi, guided by predefined domains of change, conducted using feminist and empathetic interviewing practices.
- Analysis combined inductive codes that emerged from the narratives with deductive codes based on empowerment and agency frameworks.
- Random sampling; 15 women Sadhikas, each active in the programme for at least 6 months
- Lucknow (5) · Mumbai, Mira-Bhayandar (5) · Pune and peri-urban areas (5)

IMPLICATIONS

Sadhikas experience change at different levels: in who they are, how they relate to themselves and to their family, what they think they are capable of, and where they belong in society. However, among these, transformation of two kinds hold the most significance. One that positions them as credible, respectable members of society, beyond their identity as housewives, and one that builds confidence in themselves and broadens their aspirations.

Although their role as Sadhikas brings them greater freedom and autonomy, they are compelled to function within and navigate the patriarchal structure; this includes providing constant justification for the work they do when they leave their homes, dealing with timing restrictions on mobility and limited spending/purchasing power.

