
Cobbler Women Empowering themselves through a Social Enterprise: Case of Toehold Artisans' Collaborative

Suresh Sahu (Author)

Academic Associate

Department- Marketing Area

Indian Institute of Management Indore, Madhya Pradesh

Email- sureshs@iimdr.ac.in

Palthya Vineeth (Co-Author)

Integrated M.Sc (Chemistry)

Sardar Vallabhbhai National Institute of Technology Surat, Gujarat

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Abstract

Purpose: The paper examines the role of enterprises in empowering women from oppressed communities. It analyses the efforts taken to develop individual and collective-level assets and capabilities. It further proposes a conceptual framework explaining the empowerment process.

Design / Methodology / Approach: A critical and representative case of a social enterprise was selected for the study. The social enterprise worked with the oppressed community of cobblers in the state of Karnataka in India. The analysis focuses on resource aggregation and allocation, removal of production and transaction constraints, achievements, and mechanisms established to sustain empowerment. Secondary sources such as case studies, news articles, journal articles, inspiring stories, and official websites are used for the analysis.

Findings: Support from significant organisations, skill enhancement, remunerative market access, steady income, continuous handholding, limited role for men, developing ability to choose, and the creation of a countervailing force are factors contributing to the empowerment of women from an oppressed community.

Research Limitations: Individuals from oppressed communities are involved in a range of production- and service-related activities. The paper focuses on a success story from the cobbler community.

Originality Value: The paper describes the empowerment process of women from a socially and economically oppressed community in India. It highlights the role of a social enterprise in transforming an oppressed community into an enterprising one.

Key Words: Women entrepreneurs, Social Enterprise, Oppressed Community, Empowerment

Introduction

Scheduled castes (SC) are one of the oppressed populations in India. They constitute 16.5 per cent of India's total population. More than 75 per cent of the population is engaged in the primary sector, like agriculture. People from SC communities still face caste rigidities in India. Only 6.62 per cent of the population has access to clean drinking water, toilets, and electricity (Census, 2011). Scheduled Caste group with 33.3 per cent -- 94 million of 283 million people -- living in multidimensional poverty (The Indian Express, 2021). SCs have lower purchasing power, poor housing amenities and restricted access and entitlement to resources in India. The social structure and system prevalent in Indian society create and perpetuate abuse at the psychological and cultural levels for these communities. It is largely because of the SC population's dependence on others in society for livelihoods. In rural India, the problem gets further aggravated as people from the oppressed communities do not get access to land and may be working as bonded labourers under a landlord. A particular community named 'cobblers' are involved in a value-added activity of producing footwear and other products from leather. Though this is a value-adding activity, poverty, perpetuated by social structure and powerful middlemen who mediate market transactions, denied cobblers the recognition they deserved for their value contributions. Women occupying secondary status in the rural Indian society, especially in the lower socio-economic strata, further marginalised the cobbler women who worked along with their husbands on leather. The XIIth five-year plan report of the working group on women's agency and empowerment highlights the need to empower women from the SC community, as they face disadvantages at multiple levels, i.e., as women and as members of a particular community (GoI, 2011). It is recommended to provide land, housing, a subsidised food supply, infrastructure support for petty businesses, and interventions in education and health. The report recognises only fisheries as a profession and proposes measures to improve it. However, the significant population of cobblers is not given much emphasis. Cobblers engaged in value-added activities whose products are widely used by consumers (e.g., footwear, bags, valets) offer scope for entrepreneurship. However, the challenge is poverty and social stigma attached to the profession, especially for women. Though government policies or programmes can provide greater benefits, tackling social stigma and connecting cobblers to the remunerative market can be achieved through social enterprises. It is because social entrepreneurs or enterprises emerge to correct the unjust equilibrium in society, a situation that negatively affects members of certain communities (Martin & Osberg, 2007). Social enterprises help improve systems and devise solutions that address the problems faced by communities that do not receive government benefits. The objective of a social enterprise is to create social value, which may also result in economic value (Seelos & Mair, 2005). Toehold is one such social enterprise created by the Asian Centre for Entrepreneurial Initiatives (ASCENT) to support the cobbler women of Athani village in Belgavi district, Karnataka, India. Before the intervention, cobblers worked as bonded labourers with local traders and earned a meagre income. Toehold organised women and men producers from Athani and improved their skills in footwear-making with the support of organisations. Toehold also established channels for selling footwear in international markets, thereby improving cobblers' returns. The paper first presents literature on the role of social enterprises in collectivising people from an oppressed community and empowering them by connecting them to markets. The next section gives details of the social enterprise chosen for the study, along with the research methodology adopted. Later, the conceptual framework, adapted by the authors from the World Bank's empowerment framework (World Bank, 2001) and Morris et al.'s business model framework (2010), is presented. It is followed by an analysis of Toehold's intervention using the proposed conceptual framework. Finally, implications and conclusions are presented.

Literature Review: Empowering the Oppressed through Collectives

While economic, social, and political resources are essential, they may not be sufficient for women's empowerment. Resources alone cannot bring about empowerment unless women develop the ability to recognise appropriate resources and use them for their own interests. If women come together as a group, they can challenge the constraints imposed on them, thereby advancing egalitarianism through their collective voice (Malhotra et al., 2002). The extant literature focuses on women's entrepreneurship and self-reliance rather than on developing cooperation to challenge existing power structures. However, empowerment can also be seen in a collective form through the mobilisation of economic, social and political resources (Oxaal & Baden, 1997). Individuals and collectives can be empowered by building capacity, providing access to information, and increasing accountability within institutions such as the state and civil society. Otherwise, the NGOs working with poor people lack the transformative power to change communities and foster empowerment (Narayan et al. 2000a and 2000b). Kabeer (2001) also believes that individual action by women can help challenge existing structural inequalities, but the empowerment of women requires collective action in the public sphere.

Research Context and Methodology

Some 1600 cobbler families make the well-known Kolhapuri footwear from India (Business Standard, 2001). Kolhapuri footwear is entirely handcrafted from leather, without any other materials. Women make insoles and uppers, and men make bottom soles. Goat and bull leather is the raw material, which is dried and grazed before being cut into an established template. It is later dyed deep brown, black-maroon, or left in its natural colour. Traditional designs feature thong-like straps and toe straps, while newer designs are more like shoes, supported by wooden pieces. Designs evolved with time in the hereditary craft. Each footwear item is priced between INR 100 and INR 3000, depending on the cost of raw materials and design. Customers are increasingly preferring branded products over traditional footwear. Further, middlemen have been exploiting producers/artisans by dominating the production and marketing process. Their focus on profits had a crippling effect on footwear quality (Prakash, 2024). The artisan men spent the meagre income on alcohol, which reinforced their poverty (Kumar, 2004). With changing times, the raw material costs are also increasing. A square foot of leather used to cost about INR 70-80 earlier, but now costs INR 250-300. The final prices of the chappals have also changed from INR 150 to INR 300, and the best-quality ones are sold at around INR 2500 or above (Dubey, 2016). Though these prices indicate a great market potential for cobblers to exploit, the middlemen tend to siphon off most of the profits as they supply raw materials, extend credit, and guarantee the purchase of chappals from artisans. The government's efforts to improve the socio-economic status of such oppressed producers have yielded very limited results.

Illustrative Organisation

Social enterprises have taken a lead in helping such communities. They work with the objective of (i) creating income and reducing vices at the producers' level and (ii) reducing social biases and barriers existing in the society that affect producers. The paper examines one such organisation, demonstrating that obscure cobblers, especially women in the community, can be trained to produce footwear preferred by well-to-do customers from developed countries. These cobbler communities were interacting with markets, but were not receiving remunerative prices for their efforts. An intervention was needed to change exploitative relationships and improve market returns. The Asian Centre took up such an intervention for Entrepreneurial Initiatives (ASCENT), an organisation that supports subsistence producers. ASCENT's intervention led to the establishment of an organisation, Toehold Artisans Collaborative (referred to as Toehold), in Athani Taluk of Belgavi district, Karnataka, India. It provides training to producers, supports production and transaction-related activities, and organises producers to give voice to their concerns. All these steps help produce footwear that meets the needs of international customers.

The rationale for choosing a single case of Toehold for the paper is its uniqueness and representativeness as an intervention connecting oppressed cobblers to remunerative markets. The uniqueness of the intervention lies in the fact that Toehold (i) is an all-women member organisation where men are not given decision-making roles, (ii) established Kolhapuri footwear as a premium brand, and (iii) is largely export-driven. Toehold is also a representative case, as it is a typical social enterprise intervention, like many such interventions by third-sector organisations. The lessons learned from this case will inform the experiences of social enterprises (Yin, 2003). Content analysis was performed on the secondary data collected from the sources mentioned earlier. Themes were generated after carefully selecting data chunks. These themes have been used in the discussion, in which anecdotes from people are interwoven into the narrative. Perspectives or meanings of cobbler women about themselves and their social enterprise were brought out in the narrative.

Conceptual Framework

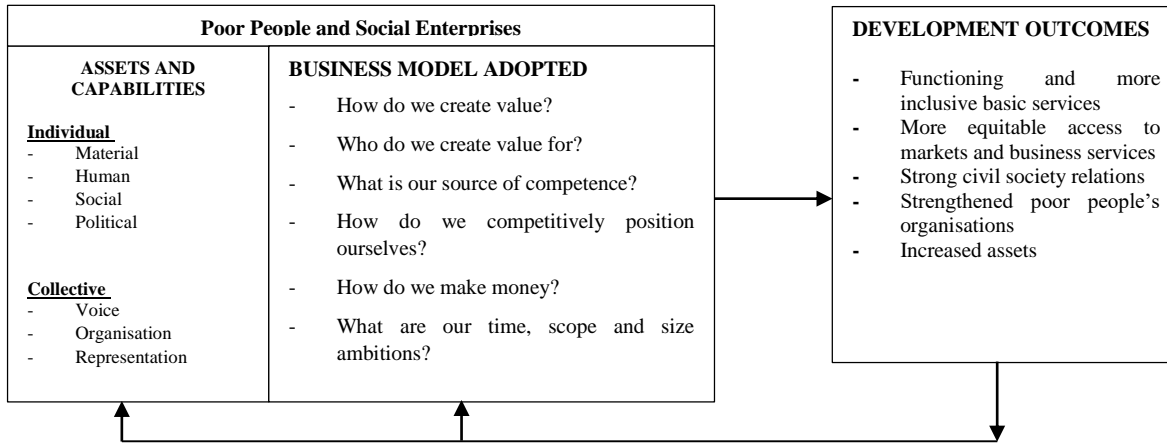
Poor people in a subsistence context depend on government support to earn a livelihood. However, government failure leads them to depend on markets. In market-based systems, governments tend to act as regulators and facilitators, expecting their poor to take up entrepreneurial / self-employment opportunities to earn a living. In such cases, people experiencing poverty who subsist in the informal economy face many challenges, as they cannot engage in entrepreneurial activity individually. It is because of limitations such as education, inability to conceptualise a business plan, resource crunch, inability to raise funds by convincing a financial institution or an angel investor, lack of understanding of the regulations governing business, and lack of government support. These limitations constrain poor artisans from participating in and benefiting from market interactions. Even when individuals attempt to connect with markets, they face problems of information asymmetry, limited access to remunerative markets, exploitative intermediaries, and low bargaining power in market transactions. Due to limitations in government and markets, the poor require support from an agency that facilitates their market interactions.

In such a setting, the situation of women from a socially and economically oppressed community becomes much more complicated as they are discriminated against and discouraged from setting up their own business enterprises. Women, especially in emerging economies, face this discrimination daily due to their religion, caste, community and class. This situation calls for organisations that can understand the needs of women, provide them with resources, build their capabilities, orient them towards markets, collectivise them, and provide them with market access so they are rightly remunerated and, in this process, gain control over their lives.

The proposed framework, adapted from a World Bank report, seeks to replace the government with a social enterprise to advance women's empowerment. Social enterprises not only create income-generating opportunities for their members but also seek to reduce the social barriers in their context. It is a gradual process which takes years to yield significant results. As social enterprises are embedded in the subsistence economy and connect their members to the formal economy, they have an edge over other institutions. These organisations focus on building individual-level assets, i.e., material resources, that can help a member take up a business or contribute their production to a larger collective business. For this, they nurture members' existing skills or impart easy-to-learn skills. As women from a subsistence background can benefit from coming together, the organisation uses the existing social capital in the context. In this process, the social enterprise also faces challenges in collectivising women from a subsistence context, mainly because these women have never come together for market-related, household, or personal transactions. It may be due to the derogatory nature of the work these communities have been involved in since time immemorial. Though these works are important, e.g. working with leather, they are considered outcasts and are not given due respect. To address this problem and build self-confidence among these members, the social enterprises encourage women to take leadership roles in their own collective and to learn to interact with government authorities, markets, fellow members, and other members of society. Such interactions give collective voice and bargaining power, enabling women to build the confidence to manage their enterprises successfully.

However, all this is possible only when the collective has a well-conceptualised business, considering the skill set, market demand, and production capability to meet it. Questions from the business model framework (Morris et al., 2005, p. 730) can be helpful here. If individual-level assets and capabilities are well identified and aligned with the business model, they can, over time, lead to positive development outcomes in a subsistence context. Such positive outcomes act as a reinforcing mechanism for the women from oppressed communities to improve their individual and collective level assets and capabilities. In addition, the outcomes will make their business model more robust, enabling them to reap continuous positive outcomes. So what cannot be achieved on an individual basis is achieved through a collective. The paper attempts to understand and analyse one such organisation working with the cobbler women and their community in Athani village, Belgavi district, Karnataka state, India. The conceptual framework is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Women's Empowerment through Social Enterprise



Source: Adapted from World Bank Chapter on Empowerment, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/486312-1095094954594/draft2.pdf>, accessed on 5.4.2017 and modified using.

Morris, M., Schindehutte, M., & Allen, J. (2005). "The entrepreneur's business model: Toward a unified perspective", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 58 No.6, pp.726-735.

Organising for Empowerment

ASCENT established Toehold to support 200 women producers from the cobbler community of Athani. Some of these families worked with traders and received meagre wages. The women were organised into 15 SHGs and were encouraged to produce footwear for the export market (Golikeri, 2011). ASCENT has organised the resources needed to support Toehold from institutions such as the Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI), the National Leather Development Programme (NLDP), and the Karnataka Leather Development Corporation (Lidkar). The skills and abilities of the cobblers have been enhanced with the support of these three organisations. Raw materials have also been organised, footwear designs have been improved, and machinery and technology have been introduced to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of production. With CLRI's support, Toehold entered the international market, where customer willingness to pay a premium price is higher. Data on the Toehold intervention is presented as follows.

Table 1 provides details on primary products, standardisation/customisation, and the product line designed to satisfy consumer needs. It also provides details on infrastructure, raw material sourcing, manufacturing, training provided, international exposure, and development of bargaining power.

Table 1: How do we create value?

Consumers	
Primary products	Kolhapuri chappals
Standardisation/customisation	Products are both standardised and customised based on the country and the customers who purchase them.
Product line	Footwear produced by Toehold uses traditional designs such as braids, teardrop-shaped toes, and closed toes, and all varieties have been following in international markets (Bangalore Mirror, 2008).
Producers	
Infrastructure	Two rooms of 5000 sq. ft. each were constructed, with a common facility centre established in one of them. A production facility was established, including a design studio, office space, record room, raw-material bank, and machines for sole cutting, stamping, stitching, and drying. It helped in process standardisation (Phatate, 2011).
Raw material sourcing	Together with ASCENT, CLRI addressed issues related to capital, markets, raw material quality, and other inputs. Raw materials are sourced from CLRI and others and distributed to artisans.
Internal manufacturing	The leather is locally tanned with vegetable dyes to soften and adhere to quality standards (Bangalore Mirror, 2008). Also, manufacturing is mostly done by hand at the artisan's home, with family members supporting the artisan. However, some of the refinements are taken up at the collective level.
Training	All women and men participated in entrepreneurship and business courses covering topics such as pricing, costing, savings, and quality (Rama & Sindhu, 2008).
International exposure	Exposure to international markets through participation in exhibitions is instilling professionalism among women artisans (Asian Development Bank, 2011).
Bargaining power	Regular income, coupled with SHG and bank linkages, has enabled artisans to gain bargaining power and maintain relations with traders (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

Table 2 provides details on markets where Toehold products are sold, targeted segments, types of transactions, and the technology used.

Table 2: Who do we create value for?

B2B / B2C	Toehold sells to institutions and also to customers directly.
Local / Regional / National / International markets	Efforts are also being made to connect artisans to markets in Bangalore, Calcutta, and Delhi as a backup. Toehold exports footwear to countries such as Japan, the US, Germany, Belgium, Australia, and Italy at remunerative prices (Rama & Sindhu, 2008). Toehold secured orders from fashion houses in Russia, Australia, and Italy. These orders from international players fetch a good price for the products. CLRI's help in exporting products made with colourful beads, Swarovski crystals, embroidery, and rich Indian designs fetches a premium price (Menon, 2007).
Where the customer is in the value chain	Customers are retail chains and final customers who use the products.
Multiple segments	Customers are broadly categorised by gender and age, but not by foot size.
Transactional	The organisation is still at a nascent stage in establishing long-term relations with its final customers.
Appreciation for Technology	Artisans understand the role technology plays in shaping their lives. They recognise the importance and convenience of computers, digital cameras, and the internet, and use them for their business (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

Table 3 provides details on production and marketing costs, artisans' creative capabilities, Toehold's networking, financial support received, resource leveraging, and mechanisms established to absorb economic shocks.

Table 3: What is the source of our competence?

Cost of production	The low cost of production, coupled with standards, gives Toehold an edge in international markets, whereas local markets continue to consider Kolhapuri footwear inferior (Bangalore Mirror, 2008).
Marketing	The objective of Toehold is to give well-known Kolhapuri footwear a distinct identity that makes it appealing to customers worldwide (Rama & Sindhu, 2008).
Creative capability	New design innovations, alternative materials, vibrant colours and new market mechanisms were introduced to make the traditional footwear contemporary.
Networking	Toehold was supported by ASCENT, CLRI, NLDP and Lidkar under a venture named 'Project Enterprise'.
Financial support	SHG membership helped artisans access bank loans with a credit limit of up to INR. 50,000. It has instilled confidence among suppliers, who can now extend a 15- to 30-day credit period to producers. Registration as a section 25 company has enabled artisans to work more effectively with suppliers, customers, and bankers (Asian Development Bank, 2011).
Resource leveraging	CLRI trained artisans on production and quality control standards. Knowledge transferred from generation to generation enables artisans to hone their skills in designing, producing, costing, pricing, and delivering high-quality products that meet the requirements of global customers. They learn to gain control of their lives and assert their position in society (David, 2003). They have come up with 450 designs so far, and more are being added as demographics, comfort, and product finish evolve. Training has resulted in a 50 per cent reduction of rejection rate (Golikeri, 2011). Through the Rotary Club of Athani, ASCENT brought together professionals such as doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and influential citizens to support Toehold artisans, giving them long-overdue recognition for their products and work in general (Phatate, 2011).
Mechanisms to Absorb Economic Shocks	Toehold organised the women into SHGs and connected them to the banks. It helped the artisans to access credit from the formal financial system. About 20 per cent of sales profits are allocated to SHGs for various activities (Kumar, 2004).

Table 4 provides details of operational excellence, achieved product quality, leadership support provided, and member focus achieved.

Table 4: How do we competitively position ourselves?

Operational excellence	There is no significant evidence of operational excellence, but the skills of artisans to save resources are encouraged.
Product quality	Computer-aided design and manufacture (CAD-CAM) is used to design and manufacture footwear with less time and effort (Business Standard, 2001). To sell in international markets, the products needed to shed their rustic, rugged image. It was achieved due to Toehold's intervention (Bangalore Mirror, 2008).
Leadership	ASCENT and Ms Madhura Chatrapaty have been providing constant guidance and leadership support to the artisan group to encourage them to connect with markets and learn to benefit from the same.
Member focus	Toehold is an independent enterprise with artisans as stakeholders, so profits remain with artisans and employees (Rama & Sindhu, 2008). Artisans have the freedom to work at a common facility centre or from their homes (Kumar, 2004).

Table 5 provides details of the pricing strategy adopted, the profit-sharing mechanisms established, the sources of revenue, volumes, and margins.

Table 5 How we make money?

Pricing	The products are well-designed and handmade. The products are priced based on the costs and effort required to produce them.
Profit sharing	Profits earned by Toehold are divided as (i) 40 per cent to individual artisans, (ii) 20 per cent for SHGs and (iii) 40 per cent to Toehold (Kumar, 2004).
Revenue sources	From footwear sales profits, 40 per cent is allocated to Toehold (Kumar, 2004).
Volumes/margins	Toehold adopts a low-volume, high-value sales strategy. Production is decentralised, and sales are taken up collectively (Golikeri, 2011).

Table 6 provides details of the income model established at the individual artisan level and growth models established at the Toehold level.

Table 6: What are the time, scope and size ambitions?

Income model (At Cobbler Level)	Toehold's significant contribution lies in enabling artisans to receive a higher share of the profits generated. It kick-started the economic development, creating scope for empowerment. After being trained, women were given a major role in the venture's decision-making (Rama & Sindhu, 2008). Artisan families participating in this venture earn between INR. 3000 to INR. 4000 per month (Bangalore Mirror, 2008). Saving money was inculcated as income was regularised. Post offices and banks were used for saving purposes. Savings are intended for use in children's education and marriage. SHGs formed were also extending the credit that artisans needed, reducing their dependence on traders. Some families saved in gold, and others built their own houses (Asian Development Bank, 2011).
Growth model (Organisation level)	Though the organisation has a promising model for the existing members, if the number of members increases, which is a remote possibility, the model may not sustain the profits. It is because only a limited number of traditional chappals can be sold at any time. Also, there is a challenge: the existing members need to be supported as margins or profits increase. If the organisation increases the number of members, then the margins or profits need to be distributed among more members.

Discussion

This section discusses ASCENT/Toehold's efforts to empower Kolhapuri artisans. Resource aggregation and development at Toehold are discussed first, followed by mutual value-creation efforts, then the intervention's achievements, and finally the mechanisms established to sustain the empowerment.

Assets and Capabilities Development

Before ASCENT's intervention, the cobblers were unorganised producers living in poverty and, in some instances, bonded labour. It created problems for their collective organisation to work in remunerative markets. Prevalent poverty meant that producers, especially women artisans, were unable to contribute to improving production facilities. With these constraints in mind, Toehold first educated the artisans while establishing links with supporting organisations, such as CLRI, for further training and development. The support from CLRI helped artisans to overcome the difficulties of aggregating their own resources to improve skills, design capabilities, and produce better products.

Furthermore, the artisans gained first-hand market knowledge by participating in international exhibitions. For cobbler women who had never stepped out of their village, participating in an international exhibition and interacting with the customers opened up a new world of possibilities. It can be one of the main reasons the cobblers have shown such a strong interest in improving their designs with the help of CLRI and have created a portfolio of 450 footwear designs. These real-time interactions also gave the producers a sense of professionalism as they work to address the existing anomalies in their products, thereby reducing the rejection rate. All these results indicate towards development of human resources, which is significant for a product like traditional Kolhapuri footwear. A shining example of this is Ms Lakkavva Vitthala Honkande, owner of a petty shop trained by Toehold, who demonstrated that with willingness, any objective can be achieved.

She says, *"I gave up tobacco chewing in a day based on the suggestion from ASCENT"* (Kumar, 2004). She is a producer and authority on sandal uppers. With her leadership and self-assertion, she paid back the loan and currently runs a grocery shop (David, 2003).

Steps taken to secure economic resources have helped Toehold enhance its human resource development efforts. Toehold has ensured that artisans and their SHGs receive about 60 per cent of the business's profits. As understood in the words of Ms Kausalya, who is a member of the SHG formed for enabling savings and extension of credit,

"Our lives changed from doing what we were told to supporting footwear making and handling money. We were trained in diligent spending, so we could decide how to spend it more effectively. Now our lives are happier together". Kausalya feels that trust in women is a significant element of Toehold's intervention (Kumar, 2004).

Reinforcing these two resources are social resources, which are important for empowering an oppressed community, such as cobblers. With the help of Toehold, professionals and influential citizens of the Belgavi district provide the support artisans need. Bank support has helped improve artisans' bargaining power with local traders.

Business Model for Mutual Value Creation

Toehold received support from agencies such as ASCENT, CLRI, NLDP, and Lidkar, which began with resource aggregation and development. Support from these institutions enabled Toehold to build infrastructure, easing some production difficulties. As the dwellings of individual producers are not suitable for an organisation, a common infrastructure was needed. It enabled bringing dispersed production under one roof, thus smoothing the process of product standardisation across artisans. It was necessary to serve well-to-do customers from developed markets. To ensure that the resources provided are used optimally and that investments are made for the future, 40 per cent of profits were allocated to Toehold. To foster a sense of ownership and ensure continued patronage, producers are made stakeholders and given freedom in their work. Out of the profits generated from the same products, members, their SHGs, and Toehold share 40 per cent, 20 per cent, and 40 per cent, respectively. In the words of Ms Savitri Ramavatar Yadav,

"We never knew school education and never felt it to be important. Those who realised its importance suffered from poverty, so they kept children at home to support them in work. Girl marriages used to happen at the age of eight or ten, but now we have stopped. We are educating our boys and girls. The children are interested in continuing with the business due to its promise of regular income" (Phatate, 2011).

In terms of production or value creation, Toehold ensures a high-quality raw material supply from CLRI, which is then processed with vegetable dyes. The products are regularly updated to reflect changing trends in international markets. Supporting this aspect is the patronage of Ms Catherine Williams, a professor in footwear technology at a university in Brussels. She works with artisans to design footwear for high-end boutiques and stores in Belgium, Paris and New York. Working with Catherine brought significant visibility to Toehold's artisans (Menon, 2007).

She says, *"The creativity and patience exhibited by artisans is amazing. There is no surprise that the products are ethnic yet trendy"* (Bangalore Mirror, 2008).

As producers have to invest their own funds to produce footwear, they often face financial constraints. SHGs and the bank linkages address these constraints. Such an arrangement not only provides cash but also gives artisans the option to obtain a 15- to 30-day credit period from suppliers. Further, the presence of a CAD-CAM facility brings the producers on par with others in the business. The provision of these facilities and artisans' skills reduces production costs. In terms of value capture activities, low-cost production gives Toehold an advantage in international markets. These are highly remunerative compared to domestic markets, thereby boosting the flow of money into producers' households. As explained by Mr Raghu,

"It is the quality and 40-50 new product introductions each year facilitated through CLRI that helps in pulling European customers".
"Domestic retailers returned consignments without explanation. Their employees who coordinated the sales process changed frequently, causing complications for Toehold. Further mass markets looking for cheap products are not remunerative enough"
(Menon, 2007).

As the client base in the international markets for such exotic products is limited, Toehold focuses on value rather than volume in its sales strategy. It boosts the self-esteem of Kolhapuri footwear makers as their products are considered valuable by consumers of developed markets. The continuous patronage of CLRI helped Toehold to reach international markets. The improved returns through an organisational set-up, apart from the removal of production constraints, created a positive impact on the cobbler community. They are motivated to produce the best products and are interested in tapping the premium segment of international markets. In a way, Toehold addressed both production and transaction constraints simultaneously and is creating choices for cobblers in Athani.

Development Outcomes

This section explains the outcomes of the intervention in terms of the provision of basic services, equitable access to markets, the building of strong civil society relations, collective identity among members, and efforts to sustain empowerment.

Achievements of Intervention

Toehold's intervention has resulted in a regular monthly income for the cobblers involved. It has resulted in savings for children's education and marriage. It also boosted the consumption of food and clean drinking water. All this indicates an improvement in artisans' quality of life. It is well demonstrated with the instance of *Sanakki Girls*, Ms Shobha and Ms Savithri, who say,

"Along with school work, we extend a helping hand to parents in their production work". Ms Shobha became a school teacher with a Bachelor's in Education, but wants to continue working in leather (Kumar, 2004).

The regularity of income also led households to seek better facilities in their society, e.g., sanitation, which improved with the introduction of common toilet facilities. Most importantly, Toehold reduced bonded labour by creating countervailing power for local traders who had earlier controlled producers. The artisans also embraced technology, realising from their training and market interactions that it would pave the way for their development. It is best demonstrated in the words of Ms Kantha and Ms Shantha, who are children of bonded cobblers living in a small dwelling.

Toehold enabled income generation, and with that, they secured a diploma in leather technology from Bangalore University. They say, *"We are confident that, with skills gained from the diploma, a bright future awaits us in leather products"* (Kumar, 2004).

The intervention gave cobblers the ability and the power to choose, which was absent from their lives earlier.

The intervention not only introduced choices but also gave voice to the community, which had remained silent for ages. Now, the cobbler community is recognised by customers worldwide. It is a real shift that made the invisible producer, especially women producers, visible. As mentioned earlier, their ability to obtain a credit period for supplies is an achievement never conceived before. Most importantly, all these developments and the collective work of women and men have reduced the problem of alcoholism, which was rampant in the community. In the words of Social Entrepreneur Ms Madhura Chatrapathy,

"Reduction in alcoholism and domestic violence was observed due to sharing of work between men and women" (Golikeri, 2011).

"Women working in the project were able to break free from bonded labour, which is a significant change" (David, 2003).

Improvement in consumption was observed among the members. Grocery purchases for family consumption stabilised with regular income. Purchases are made on a cash basis, not on credit. Clean drinking water is available in the artisans' colony. Their hygiene levels in the community also improved. Common toilet facilities with running water were constructed to improve hygiene. Bonded labour, which was prevalent in the area, had been reduced. About 90 families were in bonded labour due to debts owed to traders. This number was reduced to only 25 families in 2004 and was completely reduced in later years. Non-toehold members may still be under bonded labour. Caste dynamics, which are very pertinent in Indian society, have also changed. Cobblers got recognition and connection with mainstream markets. It is very important for cobblers as they suffered centuries of exploitation and degradation (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

Sustaining Empowerment

The positive effects of Toehold's efforts to build a cobbler community need to be sustained in the long run. In this regard, some processes were established. First is a constant focus on designs and manufacturing, which, in the words of Ms Catherine Williams,

"Kolhapuris have evolved from being sandals only to shoes for men. Though the sandals are good for summer, the shoes are good for cold weather. Kolhapuri designs are suitable for dresses ranging from Salsa dresses to casual wear for women. These footwear items are a big hit in Belgium" (Bangalore Mirror, 2008).

The export markets are constantly expanding, and efforts are underway to reach the domestic premium segments as well to unlock their potential in India. To cater to both international and national customers, producers need to be motivated. It was also ensured by co-opting artisans in international exhibitions and sales. In the words of Ms Sujatha Sahadev, who participated in one of the international exhibitions in Germany,

"My family was in this business for generations. Nevertheless, I am the first person on an international flight bound for Düsseldorf, Germany, to participate in the International Shoe Fair. There was a lot of interest among foreigners to know how we handcrafted the footwear" (Golikeri, 2011).

The presence of Toehold and its collaborations with various supporting institutions create mechanisms to absorb economic shocks that affect the business. Toehold ensured that, at the individual artisan level as well as at the organisational level, money is accumulated or sourced through the formal financial system to ensure the survival of both. As expressed confidently by one of the women members, Ms Vatsala Saudagar,

"We are comfortable with banking transactions and follow bank rules and regulations" (Kumar, 2004).

Most importantly, the creation of the brand "Toehold," under which the footwear is sold, gave the cobblers of Athani the recognition and the premium they have long been due. Ms Chatrapathy expresses with confidence that,

"Winning an export excellence award in 2006 encouraged us to think of expansion in international markets and constantly improve our designs and innovate" (Bangalore Mirror 2008).

Collective Identity of Toehold Women

Toehold's intervention helped lay the groundwork for collective identity among women, a collective identity denied to them for ages in Indian society. Toehold created social spaces, e.g., participation in meetings and international exhibitions, through which the women developed a sense of self-worth. The organisation promoted women like Ms Balabhai Kamble to directorships, thereby elevating women who fight oppression and break free as role models. Interactions with international designers like Ms Catherine Williams, social entrepreneur Ms Mathura Chatrapathy, and others from CLRI help the women understand sources of oppression and ways in which such oppression needs to be resisted to achieve a qualitatively different future for all involved. Constantly seeking self-worth by confronting the inherited cultural definitions of what a woman from the cobbler community should be doing is instilled among all the women artisans as part of the intervention. Finally, the establishment of SHGs and women working together to produce the best products gave them the confidence to consider changes in their lives, their children's lives, and their community (Evans, 1979, pp. 219-220).

Success Story of Ms Balabhai Kamble

Ms Balabhai Kamble's journey summarises Toehold's work and its impact on the cobbler community. Like other cobbler artisans, she did not know the final customers or the price they paid. She did not raise a question about this set-up and accepted it as given by tradition and socio-economic conditions, which she inherited and lived with. However, now she can converse extensively about designs, sales and how this has changed her life (David, 2003). She joined Toehold and, over time, became a director. She participated in the International Shoe Fair in Düsseldorf, Germany, and understood that their designer footwear commands a remunerative price. The regular income she earned enabled her to repay loans and invest in gold for her daughter. Every month, she manufactures 100 pairs of footwear with her husband's support. She says, "*Our footwear is exported to Korea, Japan and countries in the European Union*". Her family owed INR 40,000 to a local trader in the past. She recollects, "*Earlier we lived life on the edge*" (Golikeri, 2011). As director, she signed a deal with Fabmall to enable online sales of designer Kolhapuri footwear (Kumar, 2004).

Challenges before TAC

Though Toehold presents a picture of how a community can be empowered, it also faces challenges. The natural way to go about it is to scale up the business and increase the number of people benefiting from the intervention. Such scaling up without any rapid improvement in exports will only reduce profits for all involved (Rama & Sindhu, 2008). Attracting the right individual to occupy the CEO's position remains a challenge. Gaining ground in the domestic market, which is also increasing its spending, is another challenge. Kolhapuri footwear-making is seasonal. If Toehold is to cater to both domestic and international markets, then a better marketing mix and strategies are needed (Phatate, 2011).

Practical Implications

The organisation interested in empowering women from oppressed communities should work at multiple levels and with multiple stakeholders. It needs to focus on gaining support from significant organisations with the resources and intent to support oppressed communities. Further, it should identify skills at the individual level, and resources and capabilities at the community level, to be developed before organising members of the oppressed community. Then the social enterprise should identify the skills and resources that are marketable to develop a business model that is remunerative for its members. It should provide remunerative market access and steady income to members who join the organisation, to sustain their interest and encourage continued participation. As subsistence entrepreneurs are at risk of falling back into poverty, the social enterprise should provide continuous handholding to its members. As empowerment of women is a long-drawn-out, complex process, the social enterprise needs to limit men's role in organisational decision-making. It is not to create a gender war, but to develop the decision-making capabilities among women members. In all, the organisation should serve as a countervailing force to address exploitative market institutions, enabling its members to earn sustained income and achieve growth. This way, the organisation should be able to develop assets and capabilities at individual and collective levels. By developing assets at the collective level, the organisation not only binds members together but also creates a collective identity. In addition, it provides a platform for raising their voices and concerns. These steps, if followed, will help a social enterprise guide oppressed communities toward overall development and empowerment.

Conclusions

This paper examines how Toehold, through its interventions, is helping cobblers in Athani escape poverty. These cobblers have remained invisible and poor due to exploitation by middlemen who control the footwear business. The intervention has organised cobbler women and provided them with raw materials, training, designs, and marketing support. This continuous handholding has resulted in a steady stream of income for the cobbler families and has helped them overcome exploitation by middlemen and the social oppression that results.

The intervention helped resource-poor cobblers aggregate resources among themselves and arrange them through collaboration with significant organisations such as CLRI, NLDP and Lidkar. These efforts were reinforced through mutual value creation, which addressed both production and transaction constraints. As a result, the community improved its standard of living, sanitation, access to banking services, and bargaining power. These positive changes are helping the cobbler community to improve their self-esteem, fight for their due share in society and gain overall recognition in national and international markets.

The paper highlights the role of social enterprises in empowering women from socially and economically oppressed communities involved in entrepreneurial activities, but not receiving remunerative prices. It provides a conceptual framework for understanding and analysing a social enterprise's intervention. Content analysis was employed to bring out the intricacies of entrepreneurial behaviour in the Toehold intervention. Anecdotal evidence from published sources was used to substantiate the data used in the analysis. It contributes to the literature on social enterprises by suggesting measures for aspiring social enterprises.

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