



International
Labour
Organization



► How institutional reform is reshaping entrepreneurship support for women in India

National Institute for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (ni-msme),
Hyderabad, India

Executive summary

The National Institute for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (ni-msme), under the Ministry of MSME, Government of India, undertook the ILO's WE-Check process to strengthen its institutional capacity to serve women entrepreneurs. While ni-msme had a long-standing commitment to women's entrepreneurship, its leadership recognised the need for more systematic and evidence-based approaches to make services more responsive to women's needs.

Through WE-Check, ni-msme assessed how gender responsiveness was reflected in its policies, systems and service delivery. The process generated practical insights into challenges faced by women entrepreneurs and informed a set of institutional reforms. Early results from the implementation of the WE-Check Action Plan include improved campus facilities, such as childcare and lactation spaces, more flexible training schedules and delivery models, and strengthened systems for tracking sex-disaggregated data.

Programme data indicates a significant increase in women's participation. Prior to 2024 (FY 2022–23 and 2023–24), female participation totalled 5,948 participants. Following the implementation of WE-Check (FY 2024–25 and partial FY 2025–26), this increased to 23,355 participants, representing an approximate 293 per cent rise. This increase reflects strengthened outreach and more gender-responsive programme design.

What is ILO Women's Entrepreneurship Self-Check (WE-Check)?

WE-Check is tailored for organizations offering financial and business development support to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

It enables them to assess their effectiveness in catering to women entrepreneurs in their markets and to refine strategies, policies and products to become more gender-responsive. Through a structured process, WE-Check supports organizations to develop and pilot an evidence-based action plan.

It focuses on three key assessment areas: (i) clients and outreach, (ii) products and services, and (iii) strategy and operations.

- ▶ **Step 1: Preparation**, includes engaging senior management, defining objectives, selecting the WE-Check internal team and facilitator, organizing an initial training workshop, and developing and communicating a WE-Check self-assessment plan.
- ▶ **Step 2: Self-assessment**, includes collecting and analysing data, organizing a data analysis workshop, and developing and validating the WE-Check Action Plan.
- ▶ **Step 3: Implementation** and follow-up, includes carrying out the WE-Check Action Plan while monitoring activities, compiling lessons learned, and preparing for certification.

You can find more information in the WE-Check [brochure](#).

About ni-msme

ni-msme is one of India's foremost entrepreneurship development institutions and an autonomous organization under the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises of the Government of India. Its mandate includes supporting MSME policy development, as well as providing training, research and advisory services. Since its establishment in 1962, ni-msme has trained more than 599,780 participants nationally and over 11,032 international delegates from 145 countries.

Women's entrepreneurship has long been a priority for ni-msme, reflecting the growing role of women in India's micro and small enterprise sector. Despite an extensive portfolio of programmes targeting women, participation levels did not fully reflect the scale of demand or potential. This prompted ni-msme to undertake the WE-Check process as a structured diagnostic to guide institutional improvements.

Overview of women's entrepreneurship in India

- ▶ Labour force participation in India is 34.4 per cent for women and 77.5 per cent for men.¹
- ▶ Women make up about 13.8 per cent of all entrepreneurs in India.²
- ▶ Women-owned and led businesses remain largely informal and small in size, with only 16.3 per cent of women entrepreneurs operating businesses with at least one employee. Most women operate businesses without fixed premises or hired labour.³
- ▶ Almost 79 per cent of women-led establishments are self-financed, with access to finance constituting a major barrier. In 2021, only 0.3% of India's venture capital funding went to women-led startups.⁴
- ▶ Women's entrepreneurship is often shaped by necessity rather than opportunity, influenced by care responsibilities, mobility constraints, and gender norms that limit business growth and sector diversification.⁵

1. ILOSTAT. n.d. [Labour force participation rate](#).

2. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. 2019. Sixth Economic Census: All India Report – Chapter VI: Establishments by Entrepreneur Characteristics.

3. Ibid.

4. WEF. 2023. [How Indian female entrepreneurs are growing despite funding gap](#).

5. Chakraborty, Shiney, and Rhitabrita Mukherjee. 2020. [Women's Entrepreneurship in India](#).

The WE-Check process

The WE-Check process at ni-msme was initiated with strong leadership commitment and supported by an internal, cross-departmental team. An external certified WE-Check facilitator guided the process throughout its different phases.

The self-assessment focused on three areas: (i) clients and outreach, (ii) products and services, and (iii) strategy and operations. Data collection combined surveys, focus group discussions and key informant interviews, with a deliberate

focus on capturing women's experiences. In total, 500 survey responses were collected, 60 per cent from women, alongside 15 focus group discussions and 25 in-depth interviews. This approach allowed quantitative trends to be complemented by qualitative insights and lived experience.

Importantly, the process was made visible across the organization. Faculty and staff were informed that ni-msme was undertaking WE-Check, reinforcing a shared understanding that gender responsiveness was an institutional responsibility rather than a niche activity.

ni-msme has always believed in the transformative potential of women entrepreneurs. However, WE-Check enabled us to critically examine our internal systems. The exercise helped us move from commitment to structured action, ensuring that gender responsiveness becomes embedded in our institutional culture.

Dr. S. Glory Swarupa, former Director General, ni-msme

The assessment findings highlighted that many of the challenges faced by women were not related to programme quality, but rather to how programmes were designed and delivered. Women described challenges linked to rigid schedules, limited flexibility, mobility and safety concerns, lack of care facilities and administrative processes that did not fully reflect their realities. Many women attended trainings with young children, highlighting the disconnect between institutional norms and lived experience.

The assessment also revealed that women participants often experienced time constraints due to household and caregiving responsibilities, limited access to reliable transportation, and lower confidence in engaging in mixed-gender learning environments, particularly when discussing financial decision-making and business expansion. In addition, the findings indicated that limited digital access and varying levels



© Mr. G. Rajender, Photographer, ni-msme

of digital literacy among some participants created barriers to accessing online learning opportunities.

Based on the findings, ni-msme developed a WE-Check Action Plan, which was validated by senior management and included clearly prioritised actions and timelines. The plan combined immediate, low-cost activities with longer-term institutional reforms. Early actions focused on improving accessibility and participation, while medium- and long-term measures aimed

to strengthen data systems, internal procedures and policy alignment. These included standardising sex-disaggregated data reporting, strengthening outreach through partnerships with women's groups and networks, and integrating gender-sensitivity orientation for faculty and staff.

Implementation has been supported by regular coordination across departments and a clear monitoring framework, enabling the Action Plan to translate into operational change.

As the WE-Check facilitator, I had the opportunity to engage closely with both the ni-msme team and women participants to understand how training programmes were being experienced on the ground. The process highlighted that many of the barriers women faced were not related to their motivation or capability, but to practical challenges such as time constraints, caregiving responsibilities and mobility limitations.

These insights helped the institute reflect on its programme design and take meaningful steps to make its training environment more accessible and responsive to the realities of women participants.”

Mrs. Masapogu Geetha Sree, ILO-certified WE-Check Facilitator

Overview of women’s entrepreneurship in India

Childcare facilities and lactation spaces to reduce participation barriers

The WE-Check assessment showed that many women attended training programmes with young children and balanced participation with caregiving responsibilities.

In response, ni-msme introduced a dedicated childcare space with basic play and resting facilities, allowing mothers to participate without disruption. A private lactation room was also established to provide a safe and comfortable space for nursing mothers.

These facilities, located within the training premises, improved accessibility, comfort and dignity for women participants. They also helped align training delivery with women’s lived realities, addressing a key barrier to participation for mothers and caregivers.



© Mr. G. Rajender, Photographer, ni-msme

More flexible training schedules and delivery models to improve access

Through WE-Check, ni-msme identified that programme design and delivery could unintentionally exclude women, particularly those facing mobility constraints, time poverty and household responsibilities. Limited remote access also restricted participation, especially for women in rural or remote areas.

In response, ni-msme introduced more flexible training formats, including hybrid and online options, shorter modular sessions, and programmes delivered closer to communities. In several districts of Telangana, training was held at Mahila Pranganams and other community-level facilities,

reducing the need for travel to urban centres.

These adjustments have widened access and made training more responsive to the constraints that can limit women's participation in traditional, fixed-format programmes.



© Mr. G. Rajender, Photographer, ni-msme

Expanded women-only programming and targeted formats

Since implementing WE-Check, ni-msme has significantly expanded women-targeted programming across its portfolio. From February 2025 onwards, the institute launched more than 20 training batches exclusively for women, alongside new formats such as women-only hackathons and innovation programmes.

A key component has been programmes on entrepreneurship development for rural self-help group

members, delivered in collaboration with the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty. These five-day residential programmes, held at the ni-msme campus, covered enterprise identification, basic business management, financial literacy and market linkages, with 10 batches training 425 women participants between February and March 2025.

In parallel, ni-msme delivered capacity-building and field exposure programmes for

Community Resource Persons under the Start-up Village Entrepreneurship Programme, reaching approximately 430 women across multiple districts of Telangana through community-based training locations.

These targeted interventions have strengthened outreach, created more supportive learning environments, and enabled women to engage more confidently in training and peer learning.

Strengthened sex-disaggregated data systems to track gaps and guide action

WE-Check supported ni-msme to strengthen its data practices through more systematic collection and use of sex-disaggregated participation data. Standardised registration and reporting formats were introduced to capture gender-disaggregated information

alongside key participant information such as location and programme type.

ni-msme's programme teams now review this data to understand participation patterns and identify gaps in women's representation. These insights inform outreach,

programme planning and participant mobilisation, particularly for women in rural and underserved areas. The approach has also strengthened internal accountability for monitoring participation and supporting more gender-responsive programme delivery.

Early outcomes and emerging results

Collectively, these changes have contributed to a 293 per cent increase in women's participation in ni-msme's activities and improved the accessibility and inclusivity of its service delivery. Women participants report stronger levels of support, including assistance with travel and participation logistics, and increased confidence in engaging with programmes designed around their needs.

While formal follow-up surveys have not yet been conducted, ni-msme collects participant feedback after each training through standard feedback forms. Feedback from women participants indicates positive responses to several measures introduced following the WE-Check process, particularly improvements in training accessibility, supportive learning environments and programme relevance. Participants also highlight the value of women-focused training, flexible formats and improved facilities, which make it easier to attend and actively engage. Programme records further confirm increased participation of women across training initiatives following the WE-Check process.



© Mr. G. Rajender, Photographer, ni-msme

ilo.org

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland



This work is available under a [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) licence which permits the reproduction, distribution and adaptation (including translation) of the content for any purposes. Credit must be given to the ILO as the original source.

The ILO expresses its sincere appreciation of all members of the internal working group, and in particular Dr. Shreekanth Sharma, Mr. Vivek Kumar, Mr. V. B. Rajendra Prasad and Mr. G. Devan Sai as well as to the external facilitator, Ms. Geetha Sree Masapogu, whose dedication and valuable contributions made the WE-Check possible, under the guidance and leadership of Dr. S. Glory Swarupa and Dr. Ashutosh A. Murkute.