

WEAVING THE GOALS: HOW WOMEN-LED CRAFT ENTERPRISES IN INDIA CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how women-led craft-based enterprises in India contribute to sustainability, understood through both the Triple Bottom Line framework and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on nineteen in-depth case studies, the paper analyses each venture's stated Unique Selling Proposition (USP), mission and self-reported sustainability contribution, before extracting and comparing the explicit SDG mappings across the full sample. Findings show near-universal engagement with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), strong engagement with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and negligible engagement with goals such as SDG 2, 6, 13 and 14 outside specific, contextually justified cases. The paper further develops a mechanism-sensitive method for distinguishing SDG claims substantiated by a specific, traceable practice from those resting on more general assertion, revealing that the sector's underlying social and economic contribution is genuine. The paper contributes an empirically grounded account of SDG engagement among women-led handicraft enterprises, a population underserved by existing corporate-oriented SDG reporting frameworks, with implications for how future research and policy might better measure and support this contribution.

Keyword: Sustainable Development Goals, Triple Bottom Line, women entrepreneurship, handicrafts, sustainability, India

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Introduction

The idea of entrepreneurship has always been associated with creativity and innovation. It was Richard Cantillon, a French analyst of Irish plume who defined the entrepreneurship. Cantillon gave the precise concept of entrepreneurship and its association with innovation (Filion, 1997). Likewise, a renowned economist and former Austrian Finance Minister Joseph A. Schumpeter in his theory of entrepreneurship has highlighted entrepreneur as an economic actor who plays a crucial role of driving economy towards growth and development. he talks about creativity and innovation as the key factors that make an entrepreneur stand apart from the crowd (Croitoru, 2012; Śledzik, 2013). Entrepreneurship is seen as a “process of creating something new with value by devoting the necessary time and effort, assuming the accompanying financial, psychic and social risks, and receiving the resulting rewards of monetary and personal satisfaction and independence” (Hisrich & Peters, 1998, p.9). However, Rwigema et al. (2008) define entrepreneurship as associated with fundamental activity of ‘new venture creation’.

In an economy the entrepreneurship is visualised as a source of getting together the efforts and resources and transforming them to derive greater value than before. Timmons (1994) describes entrepreneur as those individuals who are able to do diligent work, and are driven by an extreme responsibility and unflinching determination. Entrepreneurs have transformed the world around as they provide novel and creative ideas to solve the problems and challenges that have not been taken up. The onset of entrepreneurship ensures the presence of creativity or innovation. It is the application of creativity and innovation that gives successful solutions to challenges and opportunities emerging out in the society (Dees, 1998). Creativity is referred as the capability to trace, identify and develop new ideas to meet problems. Innovation is the act of applying creative solutions to those problems. Therefore, entrepreneurship is often considered as problem-solving as it offers creative and innovative solution to the problem (Austin et al., 2006) and derives sustainability through social and economic value-creation. (Mair & Marti, 2006).

Sustainability in an economy can be mapped across three pillars covered in ‘Triple Bottom Line’ (TBL) (Nica et al., 2025). For an economy pursuing sustainable growth, the real measure of progress lies in activities that deliver economic, social, and ecological value all at once (Hacking & Guthrie, 2008). In 2015, the United Nations introduced Sustainable Development Goals that have become the dominant global framework through which enterprises, government and institutional bodies articulate and assess contributions to sustainable development. Yet the empirical literature examining how small, entrepreneurial enterprises in emerging economies actually engage with this framework remains comparatively thin, particularly outside the corporate sustainability-reporting context for which much SDG-measurement infrastructure was originally designed (Elkington, 2018). India’s handicraft sector is labour-intensive,

predominantly rural and disproportionately reliant on women's participation both as artisans and as entrepreneurs (Yadav, Tripathi et al., 2023).

This paper aims to explore how women-led craft businesses contribute to sustainability through the accomplishment of the SDGs. To conduct this exploratory enquiry, qualitative approach has been adopted using case study method. For this study, 19 cases of women-led handicrafts businesses have been used. The paper proceeds through two analytical layers. First, it examines each venture's stated unique selling proposition, mission and sustainability contribution through the lens of the Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1997, 2004): Economic, Social and Ecological aspects, establishing the operational foundation upon which any SDG claim ultimately rests. Second, it extracts and compares founders' explicit self-mapping against the seventeen SDGs across the full sample of nineteen ventures, examining not only which goals are cited, but the specificity and evidentiary basis of the reasoning founders offer for each claim.

This two-layered approach responds directly to a methodological gap in existing SDG-alignment research, which frequently relies on simple frequency counting of claimed goals without examining whether those claims are substantiated by traceable operational mechanisms. By grounding the SDG analysis in founders' own reasoning, gathered through in-depth interviews, this paper offers a more discriminating account of genuine versus asserted sustainability contribution than large-sample, purely quantitative approaches would allow.

The paper's contribution is therefore twofold. Empirically, it offers one of the more granular, founder-based accounts currently available of how a specific population of women-led handicraft enterprises in an emerging economy engages with the SDG framework. Women-based craft ventures, a population significantly underrepresented in SDG-related research relative to large corporations (Dalal et al., 2024). Methodologically, it proposes and demonstrates a mechanism-sensitive approach to SDG-claim assessment that could be adapted and applied by researchers examining SDG engagement in other small-enterprise or emerging-economy contexts, where formal sustainability-reporting infrastructure is typically absent or informal.

Literature Review

The Triple Bottom Line

Elkington (1997, 2004) in Triple Bottom Line framework, holds that enterprises should be evaluated against economic, social and environmental performance simultaneously, remains the most widely used conceptual anchor for sustainability assessment at the enterprise level. Later, acknowledging that the framework has frequently been applied unevenly, with the three pillars rarely receiving equal analytical rigor in practice

(Elkington, 2018; Norman & MacDonald, 2004). Slaper and Hall (2011) offer a practical elaboration of the framework useful for operationalising each pillar empirically. Although literature calls for greater analytical clarity regarding precisely what is being measured when an enterprise claims simultaneous achievement across all three dimensions (Hacking & Guthrie, 2008).

More recent scholarship has extended this critique substantially. Wu et al. (2024), analysing cross-country data, argue that the TBL's three pillars do not reliably reinforce one another as the framework's harmonious "triple win" framing suggests, but frequently involve genuine trade-offs. For strategic renewal of the TBL concept on similar grounds, arguing that its pillars are too often treated as additive rather than as requiring deliberate, trade-off-aware strategic choice.

Against this more critical strand, Tavanti (2025) offers a more optimistic recent treatment, arguing that genuine TBL integration is achievable where sustainability practices are implemented with sufficient specificity and intentionality.

Blended Value and Community-Based Enterprise

Literature highlights that social and economic returns should be understood as a single, integrated measure of value often referred as "blended value" rather than separately accounted, competing categories provides a useful theoretical bridge between the TBL framework and the specific practices observed in social enterprise contexts (Emerson, 2003; Hechavarría et al., 2017). When entrepreneurship is pursuing mission ahead of, or alongside, profit maximisation informs about blended value creation in organisations (Dees, 1998; Austin et al., 2006). The relevance of blended value in community-based craft sector is explained by emphasising the embeddedness of the entrepreneurial venture within, rather than merely serving, its surrounding community (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006).

Sustainable Entrepreneurship Theory

Beyond the TBL framework, a broader literature on sustainable entrepreneurship examines how enterprises pursue economic, social and environmental goals as an integrated strategic project rather than as separable objectives (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). It is argued that market imperfections, including the underpricing of natural and social capital, create the specific opportunity space within which sustainable entrepreneurship operates (Cohen & Winn, 2007). Anderson (1998) argues entrepreneurship to be embedded within, rather than separate from, its natural and social environment further supports treating sustainability not as an added feature layered onto an otherwise conventional business, but as constitutive of what these ventures fundamentally are.

Women's Entrepreneurship and the SDGs

Women have successfully managed to flip the script as they thrive in every industry. It is now their responsibility to help peer women support their families by giving them access to resources such as training programs. Their socioeconomic position is therefore changing from that of a dependent family member to that of an autonomous individual (Bal & Anil, 2024; Hechavarría et al., 2012; Agarwal et al., 2020). A growing body of literature examines the specific relationship between women's entrepreneurship and the SDGs and shows that certain SDGs are most consistently associated with women entrepreneurship research globally (Raman et al, 2022; Thomas, 2024). However, evidence support women-led ventures attain sustainability as intrinsic consequence of their business (Al-Qahtani et al., 2022; Alshibani et al., 2024). Within the Indian context specifically, Agarwal et al. (2020) identify education and autonomous decision-making, rather than income generation alone, as the critical levers determining whether women-led entrepreneurship translates into durable, SDG-aligned development outcomes.

Methodology

For this exploratory research, qualitative approach has been utilised. Qualitative research designs focus on 'quality of description' instead of quantifying the data. It relies on understanding the subjective human processes described through behaviour, opinions and experiences captured through interviews, observations, discussions, case analysis or field visits (Abbott & McKinney, 2012).

This study employed a qualitative, multiple-case-study design (Yin, 2009, 2017). Case study research is suitable when researcher seeks in-depth understanding of identifiable cases or comparison across cases which have clearly defined boundaries between context and the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It is concerned about in-depth exploration of the phenomenon in light of the lived experiences and perception (Yin, 2009). In case study research it is relevant as it starts with questions primarily directed as "what" and "how" that conducts deep inquiry about the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2016; Yin, 2017). It then moves to developing theoretical propositions to guide the direction of the study for data collection followed by determining the unit of analysis for the research, in other words it is about identifying the "case". Then it is vital to link the collected data with propositions in order to draw conclusions in the form of findings.

Sampling for this exploratory case research (Yin, 2017) was targeted following purposive and snowball sampling technique. Data was collected from nineteen women-led craft enterprises, pan India, as distinct cases through semi-structured interviews with founders. The case profile of the entrepreneurs is mentioned in table 1. These samples are from different regions of India like Delhi – 6, Chhattisgarh – 2, Jaipur – 2,

Maharashtra – 2, Haryana – 2, Gujarat – 1, Madhya Pradesh – 1, Assam – 1, Karnataka – 1, Uttar Pradesh – 1 (refer figure 1).

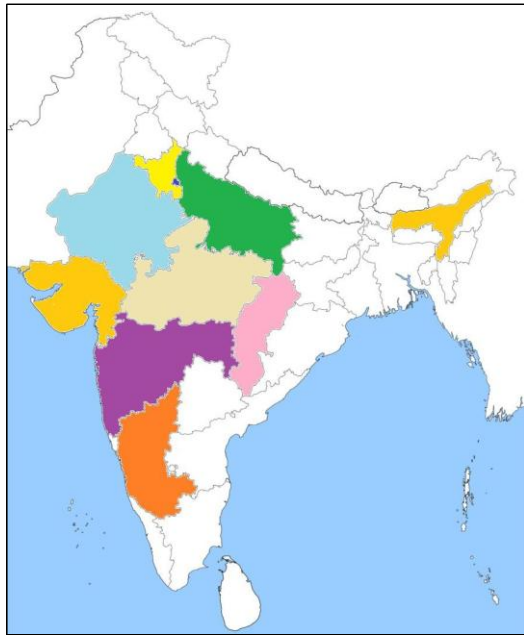


Figure 1: Sample representation on map of India

Table 1: Case profile

ID	Location	Position	Established in (year)
E1	Ahmedabad, Gujarat	Founder	2017
E2	Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh	Founder	2016
E3	Bengaluru, Karnataka	Founder	2020
E4	Raipur, Chhattisgarh	Founder	2020
E5	Chhattisgarh	Founder	2019
E6	Delhi	Founder	2011
E7	Gurgaon, Haryana	Co-founder	2010
E8	Delhi	Founder	2010
E9	Delhi	Founder	2013
E10	Jaipur	Founder	2024
E11	Kolhapur, Maharashtra	Founder	2021
E12	Delhi	Founder	2016
E13	Jaipur	Founder	2018
E14	Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh	Co-founder	2016
E15	Delhi	Founder	2020
E16	Mumbai	Founder	2025
E17	Gurgaon, Haryana	Founder	2024
E18	Delhi	Founder	2014

E19 Assam Founder 2008

In this research, all nineteen cases were analysed adopting Reflexive Thematic Analysis where themes were generated from the data following six-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For this paper specifically, analysis proceeded in two stages. First, each venture's unique selling proposition, mission and Triple Bottom Line contribution were extracted and coded across the Economic, Social and Ecological dimensions. Second, each founder's explicit self-mapping against the seventeen SDGs was extracted through verbatims, along with her stated reasoning for each claimed goal. This reasoning was then assessed for specificity thereby distinguishing SDG claims substantiated by a named, traceable operational mechanism (a certification, a quantified commitment, a specific programme) from claims resting on more general, unmechanised assertion of alignment. SDG frequency was then tabulated across the full sample to identify convergence and divergence patterns.

Findings

The Triple Bottom Line Across the Sample

The "Social" dimension of the Triple Bottom Line was, without exception, the most thoroughly evidenced across the sample. Every founder could describe, often with considerable operational specificity, how her venture generates and distributes economic value to artisans. Examples range from E1's technology-enabled model, in which artisans use a mobile application to make independent decisions about materials, colours and production volumes rather than executing middleman orders, to E2's explicit skill-tiered (rather than gender-tiered) pay structure, to E6's workshop location deliberately chosen for proximity to artisans' homes to accommodate domestic responsibilities.

The "Economic" dimension was similarly well-articulated, with founders describing diverse revenue architectures: E3 and E7 both combine lower-margin retail visibility with higher-margin business-to-business or commissioned work; E4 and E10 pursue premium, luxury-segment positioning; E5 and E14 operate made-to-order, zero-inventory models suited to their respective craft forms.

The Ecological dimension, by contrast, was considerably more unevenly developed, supporting Norman and MacDonald's (2004) critique of uneven TBL operationalisation. Some ventures offered genuinely specific, mechanism-level ecological evidence: E3's closed-loop water reuse in natural dyeing at its Kharad cluster; E5's targeted conversion of specifically non-biodegradable polyester waste into new products; E11's zero-waste studio policy assigning every part of a sourced saree to a specific end-use; E19's commitment to authentic, non-synthetic-blended silk and natural dyeing techniques, tied to reviving specific arts. Other founders offered more general assertions – that handloom production is inherently low-carbon by virtue of being non-industrial – without an equivalent operational mechanism to substantiate the

claim. Several founders were candid about unresolved ecological tensions: E9 acknowledged that acrylic paint remains an unavoidable, non-biodegradable input in her otherwise plastic-free products; E7 acknowledged that organic-sourcing of leather claims rest on artisans' self-reporting rather than independent verification; E10 expressed direct uncertainty about the ecological footprint of stone-based manufacturing. This pattern lends strong empirical support to the trilemma framing (Wu et al., 2024) where founders who prioritise fair artisan livelihoods and ecological sourcing consistently described accepting slower growth as the cost of doing so, rather than experiencing all three TBL pillars as simultaneously achievable.

A further, more encouraging observation qualifies this otherwise cautionary pattern. In several cases, the Ecological and Social dimensions were not merely co-present but mutually reinforcing through a single operational mechanism offering optimistic reading of TBL integration (Tavanti, 2025). E16's interchangeable bag design directly reduces fashion waste by allowing a single base bag to serve multiple style needs through swappable, artisan-crafted flaps, simultaneously generating artisan employment and reducing the total volume of new bags a customer needs to purchase. E5's fabric-waste-to-product model generates both artisan livelihood and landfill diversion through the same transaction. These cases suggest that TBL integration, while genuinely uneven across the sample as a whole, is achievable specifically where a venture's core product design – rather than a separate corporate-social-responsibility layer – is itself the mechanism generating simultaneous social and environmental value.

SDG Engagement Across the Sample

Case-wise contribution towards SDGs is represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Case-wise contribution towards SDGs

Case ID	SDGs Targeted
E1	SDG 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
E2	SDG 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12
E3	SDG 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 17
E4	SDG 4, 5, 8, 12
E5	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12
E6	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 17
E7	SDG 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13
E8	SDG 1–15 (broadly mapped, not itemized)

E9	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12
E10	SDG 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12
E11	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 17
E12	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12
E13	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 (innovation only), 10 (domestic only), 12
E14	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 (innovation only), 11, 12
E15	SDG 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 17
E16	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 (partial), 11, 12
E17	SDG 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 (partial), 12
E18	SDG 1, 3, 5, 8, 9 (partial), 12
E19	SDG 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 12

Table 3 summarises comparative analysis of case contribution towards SDGs in the form of SDG engagement frequency across the nineteen ventures examined in this study.

Table 3: Comparative analysis of case contribution towards SDGs

SDG	Case(s)	Count
SDG1	E1,E2,E3,E5,E6,E7,E8,E9,E10,E11,E12,E13,E14,E15,E16,E17,E18,E19	18
SDG2	E1,E7,E8,E15,E19	5
SDG3	E3,E5,E6,E7,E8,E9,E10,E11,E12,E13,E14,E15,E16,E17,E18	15
SDG4	E1,E2,E4,E5,E6,E8,E9,E11,E12,E13,E14,E15,E16,E17	14
SDG5	E2,E3,E4,E5,E6,E7,E8,E9,E10,E11,E12,E13,E14,E15,E16,E17,E18,E19	18
SDG6	E3,E8,E14,E16	4
SDG7	E8	1
SDG8	E1,E2,E3,E4,E5,E6,E7,E8,E9,E10,E11,E12,E13,E14,E15,E16,E17,E18,E19	19
SDG9	E1,E2,E5,E6,E7,E8,E9,E10,E11,E12,E13,E14,E15,E16,E17,E18	16
SDG10	E1,E3,E6,E7,E8,E9,E12,E13,E19	9
SDG11	E1,E2,E7,E8,E10,E11,E14,E15,E16	9
SDG12	E1,E2,E3,E4,E5,E6,E7,E8,E9,E10,E11,E12,E13,E14,E15,E16,E17,E18,E19	19

SDG13	E1,E3,E7,E8,E11	5
SDG14	E8	1
SDG15	E8	1
SDG16	Nil	0
SDG17	E3,E6,E11,E15	4

The findings and the literature highlight the pivotal role that women play in bringing sustainability in the industry and work towards attaining SDGs. Based on analysis, it was reported that all 19 cases have directly or indirectly worked towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although the SDGs being addressed are specific, the contribution of WE can be mapped towards almost all the SDGs.

SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) are the most prominent SDGs cited by all 19 cases. These two SDGs are the universal common denominator of the sector.

SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality) are each cited by 18 of 19 cases. E4 is the only case not citing SDG 1 while E1 is the only case not citing SDG 5.

It was observed that SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) are impacted the most through these. More than half of the cases (>50%) are targeting these SDGs.

SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) is the third-most-cited goal (16 cases), though several founders (E13, E14, E16, E17, E18) explicitly qualified their claim as “partial” or “innovation-only,” rather than covering the full industrialization/infrastructure scope of the goal.

SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) are cited only via E6 whose founder mapped her venture broadly across “SDG 1–15”.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) is cited by none of the 19 cases.

The pattern reported in findings, closely mirrors bibliometric findings regarding the goals most consistently associated with women’s entrepreneurship globally (Raman et al., 2022; Thomas, 2024).

Substantiated versus Asserted SDG Claims

Beyond frequency, this study's methodology allowed a further, more discriminating distinction: separating SDG claims substantiated by a specific, traceable mechanism from those resting on more general assertion. Examples of mechanism-substantiated claims include E4's quantified annual commitment to funding a fixed number of children's education (SDG 4); E2's explicit skill-tiered, rather than gender-based, pay structure (SDG 5); E1's NIFT-partnered scholarship programme (SDG 4); and E5's developing QR-based silk certification system (SDG 12). By contrast, several ventures' SDG claims – particularly around SDG 9, 10 and 13 – rested on more general assertions of alignment without an equivalently specific supporting practice, consistent with a broader pattern in which founders' operational practices genuinely embody SDG-aligned values, but the retrospective mapping of those practices onto formal SDG language is applied with less rigor than founders bring to describing their core artisan-facing practices.

SDG Contribution Through Blended Value and Community Embeddedness

A closer reading of founders' SDG reasoning reveals that sustainability contribution in this sample is rarely attributed to the founder or the end consumer in isolation. Instead, founders consistently describe impact as something produced collectively, by the whole community of artisans and craftspeople involved in bringing a product into being – a pattern directly consistent with Emerson's (2003) concept of blended value and with Peredo and Chrisman's (2006) theory of community-based enterprise. E2's skill-tiered pay structure, for instance, does not simply reward the founder's ethical choice; it distributes economic and gender-equality value (SDG 5, SDG 8) directly to the artisan community according to demonstrated skill, embedding the SDG contribution in the compensation structure itself rather than in a separate CSR-style initiative. E6's decision to locate its workshop within walking distance of artisans' homes similarly generates SDG-relevant value (SDG 5, SDG 8, SDG 10) through an operational, spatial decision rather than a discrete programme. This pattern supports shared argument that in enterprises, social value creation is not bolted onto commercial activity but constitutive of it (Austin et al., 2006).

Case Illustrations of Mechanism-Substantiated SDG Contribution

To illustrate the distinction drawn in the above section of this study with greater specificity, this section presents four brief case illustrations of mechanism-substantiated SDG contribution, selected to represent variation across craft form, business model and geography.

E1 and SDG 8 & SDG 9. E1 venture ties SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) to a single, traceable mechanism: an artisan-facing mobile application through which weavers make independent decisions about materials, colours and production volumes, rather than executing orders passed down through intermediaries. This mechanism is verifiable in principle

(the application exists, is described consistently across founder interview and secondary sources and directly changes artisan decision authority) rather than resting on a general claim that the venture “supports” decent work.

E1, E4 and SDG 4. E1’s association with NIFT-scholarship programme and E4’s venture funding the education of at least five children annually, ties SDG 4 (Quality Education) to a quantified, recurring commitment. This is a claim with a specific, checkable metric attached, distinguishing it from a more diffuse assertion that the venture “cares about education.”

E5 and SDG 12. E5’s venture ties SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) to a specific, targeted practice: purchasing leftover or irregular handloom fabric – specifically including non-biodegradable polyester waste that would otherwise reach landfill – in defined bulk lots and converting it into new products. The mechanism is traceable from input (waste fabric) to output (finished product) in a way a general “we support sustainable production” claim would not be.

E2 and SDG 5. E2’s venture ties SDG 5 (Gender Equality) to a structural compensation decision by paying artisans according to a skill-tiered system (Level A/B/C) rather than a gender-based one and actively working to advance more women into “master artisan” status, a category she notes few women in the sector currently hold. This is a specific, structural mechanism rather than a general statement of support for women’s empowerment.

These four illustrations share a common feature: in each case, the SDG claim is inseparable from a specific business decision that would be immediately visible and independently checkable, to an external observer – a pattern that stands in useful contrast to the more loosely substantiated claims identified elsewhere in the sample (Section 4.3) and that future SDG-measurement tools for this sector might usefully formalise as a minimum evidentiary standard.

Discussion

These findings extend the TBL literature by providing granular, founder-level evidence for the trilemma critique advanced by Wu et al. (2024) and the strategic-renewal call issued by Bhatti et al. (2025) depicting that the Social and Economic pillars are well-evidenced across this sample, but the Ecological pillar is asserted with considerably less operational specificity and founders who do prioritise ecological and social commitments consistently describe accepting slower growth as the necessary trade-off, rather than experiencing costless simultaneous achievement across all three pillars, as Norman and MacDonald (2004) similarly predict.

The SDG findings extend founder-level, mechanism-sensitive detail, showing not only which goals this sector engages with, but the degree to which that engagement is operationally substantiated (Raman et al., 2022; Thomas, 2024). This distinction between genuine, values-driven practice and more loosely evidenced SDG language layered onto it, represents a nuance that purely quantitative, large-sample SDG-alignment studies would likely miss and offers a template, other researchers examining SDG engagement among small social enterprises might usefully adopt.

The finding that SDG contribution in this sample is frequently embedded in operational decisions rather than delivered through separate programmes extends the concept of blended value creation (Emerson, 2003) beyond its more commonly cited dyadic framing (negotiated between an enterprise and its stakeholders) toward a genuinely distributed, community-level account of value creation (Anil et al., 2023; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). This has a practical corollary as it suggests that conventional SDG-reporting templates, designed with a single reporting entity in mind, may be poorly suited to capturing sustainability contribution in a sector where the “enterprise” is, in an important sense, inseparable from the surrounding artisan community it operates within.

The near-total absence of SDG 7, 14 and 15 across the sample, alongside the more selective presence of SDG 2, 6, 13 and 17, also merits brief theoretical comment. Rather than reading this absence as a deficiency, this study’s findings suggest it should be read as evidence of the sample’s disciplined, contextually grounded approach to SDG self-mapping: founders did not claim alignment with goals bearing no plausible connection to their operational geography or practice, a restraint that itself lends credibility to the more substantiated claims made elsewhere. This selective restraint contrasts with patterns of indiscriminate, overall SDG-alignment claims sometimes observed in corporate sustainability reporting (Elkington, 2018). The study also suggests that smaller, founder-led enterprises of the kind examined here may, paradoxically, exercise more disciplined SDG self-assessment than larger organisations with dedicated sustainability-communications functions.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has examined how nineteen women-led craft enterprises in India contribute to sustainability through both the Triple Bottom Line and the Sustainable Development Goals, finding a sector with genuine, substantial and consistent contribution to SDG 1, 5, 8 and 12 specifically, alongside more uneven and sometimes loosely substantiated engagement with goals further from the sector’s immediate operational reality.

These findings suggest that policymakers and support institutions seeking to strengthen this sector’s SDG contribution should focus less on encouraging broader SDG-language adoption which this study suggests

is already widespread and more on helping ventures develop lightweight, appropriately-scaled measurement practices that can substantiate existing claims with the same specificity that founders already bring to describing their core artisan-oriented production. Future research would benefit from developing and piloting such a measurement tool in direct collaboration with founders from this or a similar sample and from independently verifying artisan-level outcomes to test whether founder-reported SDG contributions are experienced as such by the artisans themselves.

This study's findings should be read alongside several limitations specific to its second research objective. The SDG mapping reported here reflects founders' own, single-interview self-assessment, expression of activities and initiatives undertaken, rather than independently measured outcomes against formal SDG indicators, meaning the mechanism-substantiated distinction developed in this paper represents an analytical refinement of self-report rather than independent verification. Moreover, the sample itself, drawn through purposive rather than random selection, likely over-represents founders with the communication skills and institutional visibility necessary to participate in an interview-based study of this kind and should not be read as statistically representative of India's handicraft sector as a whole.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the consistency of the SDG 1, 5, 8 and 12 convergence pattern across a varied sample all across India lends the core finding considerable robustness. Future research extending this mechanism-sensitive SDG assessment approach to larger, more representative samples and ideally combining founder self-report with independent artisan-level verification, would substantially strengthen the foundation this paper has begun to build.

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