

BETTER SKILLS BETTER CARE

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE MIDLINE IMPLEMENTATION REPORT

Driving women's economic empowerment through an integrated vocational skilling and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) intervention serving low-income families in India



Overview

The Better Skills Better Care (BSBC) programme integrates vocational skilling, childcare services and gender-responsive community engagement to enhance women's labour force participation and improve early childhood development. This report shares key findings from the programme's first phase (April–September 2024), based on a midline implementation survey conducted in September–October 2024.

BSBC is driving women's economic empowerment by integrating vocational skilling and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). In India, the National ECCE policy reaffirms the commitment to provide holistic development of children from the prenatal period to up to six years of age. ECCE includes cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth through structured learning and caregiving environments. BSBC enables women to pursue livelihood opportunities while their children access quality early learning.

Implemented under the Gender-Inclusive Care Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Programme (GICEEP), and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Visa Foundation in partnership with UN Women, SAFEEM and Bopinc, the initiative has been co-created by UN Women and Dharmalife Labs. It is also supported by SumUp, the Wheeler Institute at London Business School, Siriti, and Accenture, with additional support from Ekstep Foundation's "Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao" initiative. It has been implemented by UN Women, Dharmalife and Titli.

Piloted in India across three locations -- Ranchi (Jharkhand), Satara (Maharashtra), and Vadodara (Gujarat) -- BSBC aims to:

- Expand women's access to the labour market through skills training and care entrepreneurship.
- Strengthen gender-inclusive care delivery models, bridging gaps in accessible, affordable, and quality childcare.
- Enhance the care economy ecosystem by mobilizing investors, policymakers and businesses to foster inclusive solutions.

Through targeted outreach, participatory research and community engagement, BSBC is building evidence-driven solutions that promote economic empowerment for women, improved learning outcomes for children and progressive shifts in caregiving norms.

Key Results from Midline Implementation

Methodology

Baseline and midline assessments were carried out using a monitoring and evaluation framework that used surveys, focus group discussions and interviews to track women's employment, childcare usage and broader shifts in social norms.

During its pilot phase in three locations in India, the BSBC initiative met or exceeded all targets, demonstrating the effectiveness of its integrated approach that combines women's skilling, economic participation and access to quality early childhood care services. The results highlight how the programme empowers women by improving access to affordable childcare, skill development, job placement and entrepreneurial support, targeting low-income populations in rural and semi-urban areas. Across locations, primary beneficiaries included women who had limited or no prior paid work experience.

Summary of Results



164 families reached

through the Better Skills Better Care Centers.



100 per cent of women who used both childcare and training services are now in the labour market

- Among the 58 women who accessed both skilling and ECCE services, eight secured jobs, seven started their own businesses, ten were actively seeking work and thirty-three were available to start working.
- Women without children or with children of different ages also used the skills training services. 132 women are currently enrolled in vocational training (to date, 97 women have completed the training).
- Many women have started micro-businesses to serve diverse needs in their communities.



Over 3,800 community members including 1,522 women aged 15–45 engaged

in behavioural change initiatives that raised awareness of economic opportunities and encouraged greater involvement of men in caregiving.



3 community learning centres established, 101 children enrolled:

- 44 children (aged 2–6) received ECCE services.
- 57 children (aged 8–14) participated in the Lighting Up Young Minds initiative, focusing on spoken English and essential skills.

1. Women Are Accessing Economic Opportunities and Gaining Financial Agency

- The intervention directly enabled women—many with limited or no prior paid work experience—to access skills training and new job opportunities. 132 women are currently enrolled in vocational training (so far, 97 women have completed the training).
- Women who graduated from the skills training have started their own businesses in diverse areas, including tailoring, beauty therapy, care services, embroidery and small-scale food production (pickle and soap making).

2. Improved Early Childhood Learning Outcomes

- The value of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is increasingly being recognised as a crucial component for children's development and growth. The midline survey showed an increase in positive attitudes, i.e., more women consider ECCE important, from 75 per cent at baseline to 93 per cent at midline.¹
- Enrolment figures reflect this shift, with 101 children enrolled in the centres, including 44 in ECCE programmes. According to survey respondents, the following were observed:
 - Language development increased by 62 per cent
 - Fine and gross motor skills improved by 28 per cent
 - Personal, social, and emotional development rose by 14 per cent
 - Cognitive development saw a 5 per cent increase²

¹ Based on survey of all 132 female participants. 93 respondents at the baseline and 83 at the midline.

- A structured approach to early learning and engagement contributed to these outcomes by integrating play-based and experiential learning methods, multi-sensory teaching techniques and parental engagement sessions.
- The curriculum was aligned with the NIPUN Bharat framework and incorporated best practices from initiatives such as Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao.
- Although the centres operated independently, they complemented government Anganwadi services by extending childcare hours, reinforcing early learning practices and ensuring continuity in education.

 **101**

children enrolled
including
44 children
in ECCE



Positive attitudes
toward ECCE
rose from **75%**
to **93%**

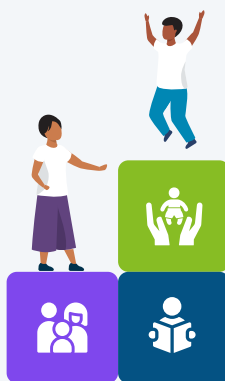
+62% 
improved
language
development

3. Community attitudes on the gendered division of labour show promising signs of shifting towards co-responsibility for care between women and men

Baseline and endline community surveys of 446 women and 312 men across the three project locations found that there was a positive change in the attitude that husbands should support working wives with childcare, indicating a shift towards recognizing the dual responsibilities of working women and the need for shared efforts in caregiving. Attitudes rejecting traditional caregiving norms—such as the belief that caregiving is solely a woman's responsibility—also shifted improved, reflecting progress towards shared responsibilities.

Agreement that husbands
should support childcare
increased from

32% to 85%
among men



Ongoing engagement
is key to ensure
behavior changed is
sustained and not just
temporary shifts.

There are encouraging signs of shifting attitudes towards shared caregiving and women's labour force participation. However, continuity of the project is needed, along with more analysis at a later stage, given the short duration of the pilot and the need for more longitudinal data over time.

² These improvements were measured through a pre- and post-assessment framework based on observational tracking by educators and caregivers.

4. Lessons learned

Women's Economic empowerment

can be facilitated through integrating skilling with childcare



The integrated model can unlock economic opportunities for women:

The midline survey results confirm that combining vocational skilling with childcare services effectively enables women to enter and remain in the labour market.

A key lesson and success is that the overall model has been validated. There is a clear case for combining economic empowerment training and childcare: The continued national low workforce participation among women, despite the presence of Anganwadi and preschool facilities, underscores the need for integrated solutions that address both economic and childcare needs. Providing quality childcare services such as Better Skills Better Care alongside vocational training can help bridge this gap and enable more women to join the workforce, particularly in regions like Jharkhand and Maharashtra where economic challenges are more pronounced.



Trusted local centres

BSBC centres have become trusted community spaces offering skilling, childcare, and other community-driven services under one roof

Labor force participation of women has increased as a result of the intervention, though it continues to be seen that single women without children appear to face fewer barriers to join into entrepreneurship and employment opportunities compared to the number of women with young children who ended up in entrepreneurship and employment.

Community-based centres build trust and drive inclusion:

BSBC centres have become trusted community spaces, offering skilling, childcare and other community-driven services—such as internet hubs, extended-hours childcare and after-school programmes for children aged 6–10 years—all under one roof. Their proximity (within 15 minutes of target communities) ensured accessibility, while active parental engagement in ECCE contributed to changing mindsets on early learning and the importance of structured childcare.

Care sector needs investment



Demand for trained ECCE workers significantly exceeds supply

Addressing gaps in the care sector:

The demand for trained ECCE workers significantly exceeds supply, underscoring the need for long-term investment in care workforce development. The gap between salary expectations and available funding also limits the hiring of qualified care providers, calling for strategies that professionalize and sustain the workforce.



Scale requires blended financing

Achieving scale will hinge on blended financing approaches

Financial sustainability is essential for scale:

While affordable fee structures have been introduced, the current model is not financially self-sustaining. Achieving scale will depend on blended financing approaches, including government collaboration, public-private partnerships and income-generating services such as digital skills training, co-working spaces and other value-added options.



Need to engage more men in caregiving

Social norms are shifting, but behavioural change takes time:

Attitudes towards women's work and shared caregiving responsibilities have improved, with more men recognizing the value of ECCE. However, actual behaviour change remains limited, particularly with regard to male participation in caregiving, cooking, cleaning and other domestic tasks. Sustained, gender-transformative engagement will be required to convert attitudinal shifts into real changes in behaviour.

Case Study:

Redistributing Unpaid Care Work—Young mothers supported to join the labour market

Ranthi Topo, a 34-year-old mother of three from Ekamba, faced the daily struggles of poverty. Her husband's meagre earnings as a daily wage labourer were barely enough to support the family. The dream of providing a better future for her children, especially her youngest, seemed distant. A turning point came when Ranthi attended an informational event organized by the project team. The event highlighted the importance of women's empowerment and the opportunities offered by the BSBC Centre. Inspired by the possibilities, she enrolled in the tailoring training programme.

The training not only equipped her with valuable skills but also boosted her confidence. She began taking orders for stitching clothes and now earns approximately INR 1,500 per month from home. Meanwhile, her son Adarsh was enrolled in the BSBC preschool and is receiving quality early childhood education.

Balancing her responsibilities as a mother, homemaker and entrepreneur was challenging. However, Ranthi's determination and the support of her family helped her overcome these obstacles. Her newfound financial independence has supported her family to meet their basic needs and even begin saving. Her success has inspired other women in her community. Ranthi's journey is a testament to the power of skill development and the transformative impact it can have on individuals and families.

Despite her progress, Ranthi still faces challenges. Inconsistent orders and limited market access hinder her ability to expand her business. To overcome these hurdles, she is working to improve her tailoring skills and build stronger relationships with local vendors. Her goal is to establish a sustainable business and provide a better future for her family.



Photo: Dharmalife



Photo: Nattapong Malirat

Rohini Patil's Journey: From Dharmalife Entrepreneur to Care Centre Manager

Rohini Prakash Patil is a 36-year-old Dharmalife Entrepreneur who has actively worked to raise awareness in her community about the importance of education, skills development and early childhood care. Her entrepreneurial journey with Dharmalife began in 2016, through participation in programmes such as Internet Saathi, Nutrition (HUL), JAYA 1.0 and Facebook initiatives in India.

Rohini and the project team conducted sensitization activities. Recognizing the importance of individualized support, she actively engaged in one-on-one counselling sessions with participants and their family members. These efforts encouraged many to take the first steps towards a brighter future. She played a central role in facilitating enrolment across the Centre's programmes. Her ability to connect with people and address their concerns helped build trust, break down participation barriers and create a network of families who support the Centre's mission, ensuring its sustainability and impact.

Both personally and professionally, Rohini has become a role model for women and is celebrated as a leader and changemaker. Stepping into a leadership role gave her a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Her involvement in the Centre's operations boosted her confidence and honed her organizational and communication skills. She aspires to continue working at the Better Skills Better Care Centre, supporting other women to improve their skills, economic opportunities and confidence within their families and communities.

5. Way Forward and Recommendations: Scaling and Strengthening the Better Skills Better Care Model

As part of the programme's expansion, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is funding the second phase of the initiative, with Dharmalife as implementing partners and UN Women providing strategic support. This phase will scale up the pilot centres, alongside a structured impact evaluation using a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to assess the model's effectiveness in enhancing women's economic participation and early childhood development outcomes. The RCT will ensure robust causal inference by randomly assigning participants to intervention and control groups, thereby isolating the programme's impact. This expansion builds on key lessons from the pilot phase, reinforcing the importance of community-driven solutions, strategic partnerships and evidence-based interventions to support sustainable scaling. The RCT will be designed and implemented by Dharmalife Labs, in collaboration with the Wheeler Institute at London Business School.

• Key recommendations: •



Scale the Integrated Model:

Scaling this integrated model to additional rural and semi-urban locations will amplify its impact. A hub-and-spoke approach is recommended, where larger hub centres should offer comprehensive services and serve as centres of excellence, while smaller satellite care spaces should cater to remote communities. This hub-and-spoke model would ensure broader accessibility while maintaining operational efficiency.



Strengthen policy partnerships:

Integrating BSBC with national policies and programmes such as Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), NIPUN Bharat and Skill India will enable cost-sharing for ECCE and vocational training, while engaging the private sector for funding and expertise.



Enhance skilling and childcare services:

Expand training opportunities in high-growth sectors such as digital marketing, healthcare and green jobs, while extending ECCE support to older children through after-school activities and flexible care options to support working mothers.



Sustain social norms changes:

Implement targeted male engagement programmes to reinforce shifts in caregiving norms, encouraging greater male participation in childcare and household responsibilities to support women's workforce participation.



Ensure financial sustainability:

Implement a blended financing model that combines public, private and revenue-generating streams to maintain operations and reduce funding dependency.



Generate evidence for scale-up:

Longitudinal research will be important to measure impacts on women's economic participation, childcare outcomes, and shifts in social norms.

Conclusion

The Better Skills Better Care initiative has demonstrated that when women have access to skills and childcare services, entire communities thrive. By integrating economic empowerment with quality care services, the model has increased women's labour force participation, improved child learning and shifted social norms.

Scaling this approach, embedding it within policy frameworks and ensuring financial sustainability will be key to deepening its impacts. With continued engagement, evidence generation and strategic partnerships, BSBC can serve as a blueprint for inclusive growth and unlocking new opportunities for women, children and the care economy.

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when women have access to skills
and childcare services,
entire communities thrive



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US\$100 million

to catalyse further public and private investments to transform care systems in 5-10 countries till 2035.



To learn more about how you can get involved with UN Women's initiatives on **TransformCare** Investment Initiative in Asia-Pacific, contact:

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