

A Journey of Women's Employment, Empowerment, Identity, and Resilience: A Case Study of Happy Faces Foundation (HFF) Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

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ABSTRACT

This case study explores the journey of women's empowerment through employment, emotional resilience, and identity formation at the Happy Faces Foundation (HFF), a grassroots non-governmental organization based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Founded in 2018 by Reeta Ben Bhagat with just five women, HFF has grown into a collective supporting more than 500 women across Gujarat through skill-based livelihood initiatives and holistic welfare programs.

Drawing on qualitative interviews with women beneficiaries, the study documents how women—many of whom had limited education, economic dependence, and restricted social mobility—experienced significant transformation after joining HFF. Beyond income generation, participation led to enhanced self-confidence, emotional well-being, social recognition, and a renewed sense of dignity and purpose.

The case highlights how HFF's integrated approach—combining livelihood training, emotional support initiatives such as *Dil ni Vaat*, health interventions, and community bonding—creates a family-like environment that sustains empowerment over time. The findings underline that women's empowerment is a multidimensional and continuous process, shaped not only by economic participation but also by emotional safety, collective belonging, and respect.

KEYWORDS: Women Empowerment; Skill-Based Livelihoods; Emotional Well-being; Identity and Resilience; NGOs; Qualitative Case Study; Happy Faces Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Women's contributions to family and society have historically remained undervalued, particularly among those with limited education and economic opportunity. For many women, life has been confined to domestic responsibilities, with little space for self-expression, independence, or recognition. However, when supportive environments are created, even the most marginalized women can reclaim agency and dignity.

The Happy Faces Foundation (HFF) represents one such environment. The foundation emerged from the lived experiences of its founder, Reeta Ben Bhagat, who closely observed the struggles of women caregivers from economically deprived backgrounds while caring for her bedridden mother-in-law. These

encounters revealed not only material hardship but also emotional exhaustion, invisibility, and lack of opportunity.

In 2018, HFF began with five women engaged in small-scale snack preparation. Over time, it evolved into a vibrant collective producing handcrafted goods such as macramé products, banana fiber items, and eco-friendly crafts. Today, HFF supports over 500 women across Gujarat. Guided by its philosophy “Everyone is Special,” the foundation emphasizes that every woman possesses talent and strength, irrespective of age, education, or background.

This case study examines how HFF functions as a transformative space where women move from silence to self-expression, from dependency to contribution, and from invisibility to identity.

RESEARCH FOCUS

This case study addresses the following questions:

- How do women experience changes in economic and emotional well-being after joining HFF?
- In what ways do skill-based livelihood activities influence women’s self-identity and dignity?
- How do family and social environments respond to women’s participation in HFF?
- What meanings do women attach to work, independence, and personal growth within the foundation?

METHODOLOGY

The case is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 women associated with the Happy Faces Foundation. Interviews were conducted in Gujarati and focused on participants’ lives before and after joining HFF, emotional changes, economic contributions, family dynamics, and future aspirations.

Participants ranged in age from 25 to 80 years and were involved in various activities, including snack preparation, macramé work, banana fiber product creation, and administrative roles. Interviews were conducted in person over a period of two to three days, allowing women to share their experiences in a comfortable and confidential setting. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings across narratives.

THE CASE: HAPPY FACES FOUNDATION IN PRACTICE

Life Before HFF

Most participants described their pre-HFF lives as emotionally restricted and socially limited. Many had never engaged in paid work outside the home and reported low self-worth, minimal decision-making power, and limited interaction beyond family responsibilities. Their skills and abilities remained largely unrecognized.

Transformation through Work and Identity

Participation in HFF marked a turning point. Women described gaining confidence, discipline, and a sense of purpose through skill-based work. Notably, some women with no formal education were later invited to demonstrate their craft at reputed institutions such as the National Institute of Design (NID). This shift—from learners to knowledge providers—significantly strengthened their public identity and self-respect.

Economic Contribution and Dignity

Although earnings were often modest, they carried deep symbolic value. Women reported feeling proud to contribute to household expenses, children’s education, and personal needs. Economic participation enhanced their independence and dignity, altering how they were perceived within their families.

Family Support and Social Change

Initial resistance from family members gradually transformed into acceptance and support as women's contributions became visible. Many participants described HFF as a second family—a space offering emotional safety, care, and belonging. This supportive environment fostered resilience and sustained engagement, even during personal crises.

Emotional Support and Holistic Welfare

HFF's empowerment model extends beyond employment. Initiatives such as *Dil ni Vaat*—an anonymous emotional expression platform—allowed women to share personal struggles without fear of judgment. Health camps, eye-care programs, celebrations, and collective outings further strengthened emotional well-being and community bonds. During the COVID-19 pandemic, HFF ensured salary continuity and distributed ration kits, reinforcing trust and solidarity.

DISCUSSION

The case of HFF illustrates that women's empowerment is not a linear or purely economic process. Consistent with Kabeer's (1999) framework, empowerment at HFF encompasses resources (skills and income), agency (decision-making and voice), and achievements (confidence, dignity, and recognition). Emotional support mechanisms and collective belonging emerged as critical factors sustaining empowerment over time.

By positioning women not merely as beneficiaries but as contributors and mentors, HFF challenges traditional notions of capability linked to age or education. The gradual shift in family and social attitudes further suggests that women's empowerment can generate ripple effects beyond the individual level.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AS A QUALITATIVE TOOL

Qualitative interviews, especially semi-structured interviews, have gained prominence in educational and social research due to their ability to provide depth, flexibility, and personal insight. As (Kvale, 1996) describes, a qualitative interview is more than a data-gathering technique; it serves as a means of accessing the lived experiences of participants. Kvale introduces two metaphors—the “miner,” who extracts pre-existing knowledge, and the “traveller,” who engages in a reflective journey through dialogue. This perspective is especially relevant for understanding women's personal transformations, which are often difficult to capture through rigid research instruments.

(Rubin, 2005) further explains that qualitative interviews function as guided conversations, where the researcher directs the discussion while remaining receptive to emergent themes and unanticipated insights. This approach aligns with the objectives of the present study, which seeks to explore how women associated with the Happy Faces Foundation perceive their empowerment and identity transformation.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ECONOMIC AUTONOMY

Existing literature conceptualizes women's empowerment as a multidimensional process where women gain control over their lives, participate in decision-making, and achieve economic independence (Kabeer, 1999). Empowerment often begins with access to resources—economic or educational—but it flourishes through confidence, support systems, and right opportunity. Empirical studies indicate that women's engagement in income-generating activities significantly enhances their self-worth and influence within household and community decision-making processes (Malhotra, 2005).

Within the Indian socio-cultural context, women's self-reliance has historically been valued as a means of achieving both personal and societal well-being, as reflected in the Sanskrit expression "*Yatra naryastu pujoyante, ramante tatra devatah*"—where societies that respect and empower women are believed to prosper. Such cultural perspectives underscore the importance of recognizing women as active contributors rather than passive dependents.

Women-led social work initiatives in India have historically emphasized economic participation and collective support as key pathways to women's empowerment. For instance, Ela Bhatt, founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972, demonstrated how organizing women engaged in informal and home-based work could enhance their income security, self-confidence, and bargaining power (**Bhatt, 2006**). Similarly, Chetna Gala Sinha, through the establishment of the Mann Deshi Mahila Bank, advanced women's economic autonomy by facilitating access to financial resources and entrepreneurship training for marginalized women (**Sinha, 2014**). These historical examples provide a contextual framework for understanding the present study and briefly indicate how HFF reflects similar principles at a local level.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT THROUGH "DIL NI VAAT"

"Dil ni Vaat" (Heart Talk) is a distinctive emotional support initiative implemented by the Happy Faces Foundation to provide women with a safe and confidential platform for expressing personal concerns. Through an anonymous letter box system, participants are able to share their emotional struggles, fears, and challenges without hesitation or fear of judgment.

The concerns expressed through this initiative are addressed with sensitivity, empathy, and appropriate guidance by the foundation's leadership. This process has helped create a supportive emotional environment where women feel heard, understood, and valued. As reflected in the participants' narratives, "Dil ni Vaat" has played a significant role in strengthening emotional resilience, trust, and a sense of belonging among the women, reinforcing the family-like culture of the foundation.

LIMITATIONS

This study is based on a single qualitative case of the Happy Faces Foundation (HFF), which limits the generalizability of the findings to other organizational or regional contexts. The insights are drawn from self-reported narratives of 25 women participants, which may be influenced by personal perceptions and social desirability bias. Additionally, data collection was conducted over a short time frame, capturing experiences at a specific point in time rather than across multiple phases of empowerment. While these limitations are inherent to qualitative case study research, they do not diminish the depth or contextual richness of the findings.

IMPLICATIONS

Despite these limitations, the study offers important implications for practice, policy, and research. For practitioners and NGOs, the findings highlight the value of integrating emotional support mechanisms alongside livelihood initiatives to sustain women's empowerment over time. For policymakers, the case underscores the need to recognize grassroots organizations as critical partners in advancing inclusive and holistic development. Academically, the study contributes to empowerment literature by emphasizing emotional well-being and collective belonging as essential dimensions of empowerment, suggesting avenues for future comparative and longitudinal research across diverse socio-cultural settings.

APPENDIX– PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

This appendix includes a brief summary of the lived experiences shared by the 25 women interviewed as part of this research. All participants are identified using participant codes (P1 to P25).

Kavita Yadav (P1, Age 30)

Kavita Yadav from Bihar has been with HFF for three years, working in product-making. She has learned discipline and the value of money. Her family has been supportive, and she hopes to own a house and provide a better life for her children. When her house caught fire and their temple was destroyed, the support she received from HFF was invaluable, helping her rebuild both physically and emotionally. She now feels her life is stable and moving in a positive direction after joining HFF.

Madhu Yadav (P2, Age 28)

Madhu Yadav from Bihar has been with HFF for three years, making macramé items like purses and cushions. She now feels more confident, positive, respected, and values discipline and harmony after joining HFF. Her goal is to provide a better future for her children and to become a respected mother within her community. After her brother passed away, the support she received from the foundation made her feel deeply connected to HFF.

Jasuben Gohil (P3, Age 61)

Jasuben Gohil from Ahmedabad has been with HFF for seven years, making macramé, purses, and raffia material products. Initially reserved and hesitant, she now speaks with confidence and moves independently. HFF gave her the courage to value herself and stay active. She believes that women, no matter their age, should continue to work, learn, and grow, as there's always room for self-improvement. She once saved her brother from drowning—an act that reflects her inner strength and calmness.

Laxmiben Chauhan (P4, Age 79)

Laxmiben Chauhan from Ahmedabad, the oldest and one of the most respected members at HFF, has been working actively for the past seven years. Previously a housewife, she is now exceptionally skilled in creating any sample product given to her, showing remarkable sharpness and adaptability. Her ability to contribute meaningfully at this age is an inspiration to other women in the foundation. She feels joyful and motivated by her ability to earn, support herself, and doing charity. After joining HFF, she learned to sign documents and travel alone—milestones she never imagined achieving before. Her message to all women is to keep working, stay brave, and believe in themselves, regardless of age.

Kantaben Dasora (P5, Age 47)

Kantaben Dasora, from Rajasthan, has been working with HFF for four years. Previously, she did handwork from home. but now she confidently handles all sample products at HFF. With strong family support, she transitioned from working at home to joining full time. Her journey has given her emotional strength and self-reliance, especially when she stood by her daughter during a difficult phase of depression, showing resilience and love. Today, she feels respected and hopes to start her own small business. Her message to women is to stay calm, work together, and move forward through life's challenges.

Jayshreeben Gohil (P6, Age 54)

Jayshree Ben Gohil from Rajkot has found a new purpose through the HFF over the last seven years. From making bags and snacks to training herself in new skills, she transformed her challenges into strength. She faced personal struggles, including the immense pain of losing her son to suicide, but she chose resilience over despair. Her message to all women is simple every woman deserves a chance to rise, no matter her past so step out, learn something new, be self-independent, confident and never doubt your worth. What once felt impossible is now her everyday reality—full of hope, work, and joy.

Sheelaben (P7, Age 49)

For the past six years, Sheela Ben has been crafting intricate macramé products with HFF. After undergoing five surgeries, she found a fresh start—regaining her health, confidence, and happiness. Today, she earns independently, manages her own expenses, and proudly supports her family. She believes every woman should adapt with time and be practical—working not only brings income, but peace of mind too. Though her journey came with challenges, but she faced them with strength and emerged even stronger.

Jayaben Gohil (P8, Age 60)

Jaya Ben Gohil, from Ahmedabad has been quietly powering through life at Happy Faces Foundation, for the past four years, doing fine detailed finishing work on every item completed. Being a single mother, she stood strong against all odds, earning just enough to support her home and make her child's future bright. Working here has given her more than money—it's given her peace, self-identity, strength, and a reason to wake up with purpose. She says this space has filled her time with meaning, not silence. Her journey is a gentle reminder that age is no barrier to success—when there's will, work, and determination, anything is possible.

Mukta Ben Chauhan (P9, Age 38)

Mukta Ben Chauhan, has been creating snacks and macramé products with care and dedication at HFF for the last seven years. With her earnings, she supports her home and now holds a quiet pride in being able to help her family. More than money, she's found peace of mind, purpose, and a sense of identity that others around her admire. She feels motivated every day, knowing she matters now in the family. Her message is clear—if you want peace and value at home, step out and work; staying active isn't just good for the body, it's strength for the soul.

Patel Pinaben (P10, Age 56)

Patel Pinaben, has been turning her hobby into a purpose—crafting macramé and embroidery work. What began as a simple hobby has become her daily livelihood—a source of pride, peace, and purpose. Her work reflects her personality: graceful, patient, and full of detail, traits that are evident in her interactions with fellow artisans. She believes doing what you love brings joy, peace and deep sense of fulfilment. Her quiet passion now inspires others to rediscover their own hidden talents.

Ranjan Ben Gohil (P11, Age 43)

Ranjan Ben has been associated with HFF for the past seven years, during which she not only developed confidence by working here but also ensured stability in her joint family of six members. With her low monthly income, she managed household responsibilities while focusing on her children's education. With the support of the foundation her son's educational journey was guided right from school admission to higher studies, and today he has successfully completed an MBA and secured a good job. Her daughter is currently in 12th Science and preparing for her bright future career. Ranjan Ben expresses deep satisfaction, as her hard work and the timely support from HFF have helped her weave both livelihood and her children's future together.

Damyanti Saresa (P12, Age 39)

Damyanti Saresa has been associated with the Happy Faces Foundation for seven years and is engaged in macramé work. Through her regular income, she has been able to enroll her grandson in an English-medium school, reflecting her commitment to improving the next generation's future. Over time, her work at HFF also enabled her to learn to drive and independently purchase a two-wheeler, significantly enhancing her mobility and self-reliance. Despite experiencing a gold theft at home, she chose resilience

and continued working with determination. Her journey reflects how sustained livelihood opportunities can translate into economic stability, personal confidence, and long-term family upliftment.

Sangita Chavda (P13, Age 43)

Before joining HFF, Sangita Ben Chavda was a timid woman, barely speaking to anyone and with hands trembling when using a computer. Through patient training, she learned online order checking, product listing, and team coordination. Today, she leads a team of five women, with her sharp decisions and her clear voice. Neighbours who once ignored her now seek her advice for running an online business. Sangita's journey proves "Inside every woman lies a silent river of strength. Training gives it a path; belief gives it wings."

Niruben Raval (P14, Age 59)

Niruben Raval has worked at HFF for 5 years and was promoted to floor manager 2 years ago. She manages tasks like cluster and loom checking. She learned not only business operations but also how to balance work and life effectively. Her confidence grew through consistency, proving that no job is small. Niruben managed to send her daughter to Canada for her better career while excelling at work. Her journey shows that with steady effort, anything is achievable.

Preetiben Bhavsar (P15, Age 44)

"Preetiben Bhavsar, joined HFF a year ago, where she now handles daily production reports and manages floor activities. Coming from a corporate background, she found this work to be a completely different experience but one that has broadened her skills. Through her journey, she has learned the importance of self-defense and personal protection for women. Preetiben's story proves that stepping out of your comfort zone leads to growth, both personally and professionally. Her message is clear: women must empower themselves with confidence and protection."

Dakshaben Makwana (P16, Age 39)

Dakshaben Makwana always believed that education could change her children's lives, and she worked tirelessly to secure their future. Managing the household on her own was never easy, but after joining HFF she found both confidence and a steady income that allowed her to support her family's needs. From her income, she helped her son pursue studies in IT, provided him with a laptop from savings, and gradually contributed to his career growth. Today, her son is well-settled in the IT field, while both her daughters are pursuing M.Com and preparing for their bright careers. Dakshaben feels proud that her efforts and determination have enabled her children to move towards a better future, reflecting both resilience and the impact of timely support.

Rupalben Dave (P17, Age 44)

Rupal Ben Dave originally from Amreli and now settled in Ahmedabad, joined HFF six years ago after spending several years as a housewife. At HFF, she began by preparing snacks on order and gradually expanded her skills by learning macrame products and actively participating in exhibitions, where she managed counters and interacted with customers. Over time, her responsibilities grew, and for the past year she has been managing inventory and checking orders independently. Through HFF, she gained confidence and overcame her fears, even recovering from a period of deep depression after the loss of her child. Today, she takes pride in her self-achievements—whether it is saving money by purchasing gold, or supporting her sister-in-law's daughter's bright career by helping her pursue studies in Canada. Rupal Ben's journey reflects how HFF not only gave her livelihood but also rebuilt her confidence, emotional strength, and sense of purpose.

Jyoti Vasava (P18, Age 30)

Jyoti Vasava (age 30) is a single mother with a two-year-old daughter. She has been associated with HFF's Karnali unit for five years. Jyoti works as a Team Leader in the Karnali unit, guiding and training 15 women in making macramé products, checking the quality of their products, and providing support in their work. She shared that while there were initial financial and personal challenges, but the support of HFF helped her overcome difficulties and build a stable livelihood. Today, she sees a clear change in herself—greater self-reliance, leadership skills, and respect from her family and community. Looking ahead, Jyoti hopes to continue empowering more women and her biggest motivation is to provide a better life for her daughter, with the dream of making her daughter an engineer one day.

Jasodaben Tadvi (P19, Age 28)

Jasodaben Tadvi, 28 years old, has studied up to 10th standard and has been associated with HFF for the past two years. At the foundation, she is engaged in loom and stitching work. Through HFF, she also received special training supported by GAIL, where she learned how to make and stitch banana paper bags. Today, she looks after this activity within HFF and contributes actively to its growth. Jasodaben feels that after joining the foundation her discipline, personality, and overall confidence have improved. Looking ahead, her aspiration is to open her own beauty parlour, using the skills and confidence she has gained from her journey with HFF.

Rukshana Bano (P20, Age 44)

Rukshana Bano, 44 years old, has been associated with the Foundation for the past two years. Before joining HFF, she worked as a housemaid and earned a very modest income, struggling to support her family. Through the foundation, she received training under a program supported by GAIL, where she learned to make banana fiber hats and other handmade products. HFF provides her with all the necessary raw materials, enabling her to work efficiently and earn a stable income. With her earnings, Rukshana has been able to support her family financially and even contribute to her daughter's successful marriage. She feels grateful to HFF for transforming her life by helping her gain confidence, financial independence, and a sense of pride in her work.

Jyotikaben Tadvi (P21, Age 25)

Jyotikaben Tadvi, 25 years old, has studied up to the 10th standard and comes from a family dependent mainly on farming, with very limited financial means. She joined the Foundation two years ago and received specialized training under a GAIL-supported program, where she learned to make handmade diaries using banana fiber. This opportunity not only enhanced her skills but also brought significant changes in her life. From living in poor conditions, Jyotikaben has now gained respect and recognition in her community. Through her earnings, she has started saving money and even opened her own bank account—a step that symbolizes her growing independence and confidence. She feels proud of her journey with HFF, which has given her a better social standing and a renewed sense of self-worth.

Shivani Pandya (P22, Age 24)

Shivani Pandya, 24 years old, comes from a lower-middle-class family that has faced financial challenges for many years. After joining the Foundation, she began working as a junior accountant and received valuable training in Tally accounting and ERP software through the foundation. This exposure enhanced her professional skills and helped her become more confident in her work. Today, Shivani efficiently manages accounting responsibilities at HFF and has achieved a strong sense of independence. With her growing financial stability and self-assurance, she is now planning to purchase her own two-wheeler—a milestone that reflects her progress and determination to move forward in life.

Mitalben Chauhan (P23, Age 22)

Mitalben Chauhan, 22 years old and studied till 10th standard, is the sole earning member of her family. Her father passed away in an accident four years ago, leaving the family without any financial support or savings. The loss deeply affected her emotionally, and she struggled to cope with the sudden responsibilities. However, after joining Happy Faces Foundation, Mitalben began working in the loom and weaving section, gradually regaining her confidence and emotional strength. Through her hard work and dedication, she has become the backbone of her family, even managing to arrange her younger sister's marriage. Today, she proudly fulfills the role her father once held and has significantly improved her family's lifestyle, becoming an inspiring example of resilience and courage.

Kalpaben Yadav (P24, Age 26)

Kalpaben Yadav, 26 years old and studied till 10th standard, hails from Bihar and has been associated with Happy Faces Foundation, where she is engaged in making banana fiber products. Through her consistent efforts and the opportunities provided by HFF, she has been able to contribute significantly to her family's income. With both being working, they have recently managed to move into their own house in a better locality—a proud milestone for the family. Moreover, Kalpaben now provides her son with quality education in an English-medium school, something she once dreamed of. She feels grateful to HFF for empowering her to achieve financial stability, personal growth, and a brighter future for her family.

Ashaben Rana (P25, Age 42)

Ashaben Rana, 42 years old and studied till 7th grade, comes from a financially struggling family. Her husband works as a rickshaw driver, and they have two children—a daughter and a son. Due to their difficult financial situation, her son had to discontinue his studies, which was a painful decision for the family. To overcome their debts and improve their circumstances, both Ashaben and her husband are working hard to repay the loans and secure a stable future. Through her association with Happy Faces Foundation, Ashaben has found not only a source of income but also renewed strength and hope. She continues to work diligently, determined to uplift her family and rebuild their lives happily.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of the Happy Faces Foundation (HFF) in fostering women's empowerment through employment, skill development, emotional support, and community engagement. Drawing on qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with women beneficiaries, the research explored how participation in HFF influenced women's economic autonomy, emotional well-being, self-identity, and family relationships.

The findings reveal that empowerment at HFF is not limited to income generation alone. While financial contribution provided women with dignity, independence, and an enhanced role within the household, the emotional and psychological dimensions of empowerment were equally significant. Women reported increased confidence, self-worth, communication skills, and a renewed sense of identity—shifting from being perceived solely as homemakers to recognized contributors within their families and communities. These changes align with existing literature that conceptualizes empowerment as a multidimensional process involving resources, agency, and achievements.

The study further highlights the importance of supportive environments created by grassroots NGOs. HFF's holistic approach—combining livelihood training with emotional initiatives such as Dil ni Vaat, health interventions, and community bonding activities—played a critical role in sustaining women's

engagement and resilience. The gradual transformation of family attitudes and increased social acceptance indicate that women's empowerment can act as a catalyst for broader social change.

By presenting lived experiences and narrative-driven insights, this research contributes a localized understanding of women's empowerment in the Indian context. It reinforces the argument that empowerment is a continuous process shaped by opportunity, emotional support, and collective belonging. The study underscores the potential of NGOs like the Happy Faces Foundation to function not merely as service providers, but as transformative spaces where women rediscover dignity, purpose, and agency.

In conclusion, the journey of women associated with HFF demonstrates that empowerment is achievable at any stage of life when women are provided with respect, skills, and emotional support. The study affirms that women's empowerment is not only a pathway to individual well-being but also a foundation for inclusive and sustainable social development.

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