

Banasree Purkayastha looks at how this initiative can help rural women achieve financial freedom and raise female participation in the labour force

Lakhpati Didi scheme: Upping the target

In her interim Budget speech, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said the government plans to raise the target for the number of women trained under the 'Lakhpati Didi' scheme to 30 million from the existing 20 million. The scheme aims to train women's Self Help Groups (SHGs) members, affectionately called 'Didis', such that they are able to harness their entrepreneurial skills to earn a sustainable income of at least Rs 1 lakh per year per household by setting up micro-enterprises in their villages. The interim Budget had identified women besides farmers, youth and the poor as key focus groups for the government's policy initiatives.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had first announced in his Independence Day speech on August 15, 2023, that the government is working with women's SHGs with the aim of creating 20 million 'Lakhpati Didis' across India.

Skills training aligned with industry demands

Under the 'Lakhpati Didi' scheme, women undergo training in a range of practical skills that align with emerging industry demands, going beyond agriculture, handloom, handicrafts and allied sectors where rural women have been traditionally employed. These new skills include plumbing, light emitting diode (LED) bulb manufacturing, and the operation and repair of drones, among others.

The aim of the Lakhpati Didi scheme is not only to ensure economic empowerment of women, but also help these women to create employment opportunities in rural areas. As Prime Minister Modi had pointed out in his speech, in villages today, one can find a Didi in the bank, in the anganwaadi and in the health clinic, proving how financially empowered women can play a pivotal role in reshaping the socioeconomic fabric of rural India.

The innovative training under this scheme is also expected to help boost female labour force participation rate, which stood at 37% in FY23 as compared to 23.3% in FY18.

Drones and Didis

The diversified training approach under the Lakhpati Didi scheme not only ensures that women can tap into various sectors and explore entrepreneurial opportunities, but allows them to break social barriers that earlier prevented them from taking up work that were considered more apt for men. In November 2023, the Union Cabinet had approved a scheme under which the central government would provide drones to 15,000 women's SHGs, as part of the Lakhpati Didi initiative. These drones will be provided to the women starting 2023-24 through 2025-2026. The SHGs would be able to rent out these drones to farmers for agricultural uses. A five-day mandatory drone pilot training and additional 10-day training on agriculture nutrients and pesticide application are to be provided to one member of each SHG. The estimated capital outlay for the scheme is pegged at `1,261 crore. Central government assistance, 80% of the cost of the drone and accessories/ancillary charges up to a maximum of `8 lakh would be provided to SHGs under this scheme. Women SHGs will be selected

by the states from the clusters of villages growing commercial crops besides those with orchards and plantations.

Self Help Groups key to success

The 'Lakhpati Didi' scheme has been initiated under the government's poverty alleviation programme — Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana- National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), wherein each SHG member is encouraged to take up multiple livelihood activities coupled with value chain interventions. Around 90 million women are today associated with 8.3 million SHGs, helping transform the rural socio-economic landscape with women empowerment and self-reliance. Their success has assisted nearly 10 million women to become Lakhpati Didis already. Nearly Rs 6.96 trillion of bank credit has been accessed by the SHGs since 2013-14. In order to provide last-mile delivery of financial services, more than one lakh SHG members have been trained as Business Correspondent Agents/ Digipay points.

Earlier, the Lakhpati Didi scheme was implemented only in a few states but now it is being expanded on a national level, with the aim to reach out to every village in the country.

The government aims to offer skills training to 30 million rural women, who are members of Self Help Groups, under its 'Lakhpati Didi' scheme so that they are able to earn an annual income of at least Rs 1 lakh.