

Moving from Silence to Speech: The role of language in Women's empowerment in an Indian Desert.

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The desert poses a major challenge to survival. The terrain of India's Rajasthan desert is harsh, arid and tough, with shifting sand dunes, a sparse population, extreme temperatures and stunted vegetation. The Thar Desert therefore makes the life of women who live there even more challenging. Their journey is remarkable and awe-inspiring; it is their passage from silence to speech.

They embroider beautifully and they know their traditional craft very well. They laugh, they sing, they weave the threads of colourful yarn into designs; they create and produce beautiful hand embroidered clothes. Still they have no power, no control in the decision making process, no access to resources, unequal status, and limited exposure to the outer world. They cannot understand the dynamics of the markets and the buyer's expectations. Language as a life skill involves negotiation of power. This paper examines the role of communication in empowering women to fight and find their identity as craft producers. It suggests a comprehensive communication model for capacity building in income generating activities.

Using five case studies, the paper follows rural women in the desert region who underwent language/communication training through developmental media, theme-based communication techniques, audio-visual and interactive learning materials. They now speak out against discrimination, inequality and motivate themselves to have a greater participation, access, decision-making, negotiation to develop life skills, personality, and confidence, to inculcate leadership and strengthen self respect and self reliance.