

## QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER



### FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

FY 2025–26 has been a milestone year for STEP Academy, with over 10,000 youth supported across Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh to access training and dignified livelihoods. Behind this number are powerful journeys of aspiration and resilience.

This edition reinforces a key learning from our work and field insights—skilling is only the beginning. Retention, job quality, and long-term pathways are equally critical.

From women breaking barriers in non-traditional roles to stronger collaborations and team learning, our efforts continue to evolve to meet real needs on the ground.

As we move forward, we remain committed to building inclusive and sustainable livelihood opportunities for youth navigating vulnerability and migration.

*Mona Agrawal*  
STEP Academy, Aajeevika Bureau

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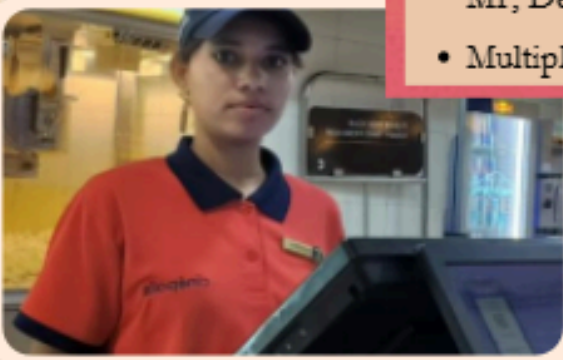
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# 10,000 Dreams Realised: A Milestone Year for STEP Academy



10,000+

- Youth Trained & Placed
- Across Rajasthan, Gujrat, MP, Delhi and Maharashtra
- Multiple Skill Domains



In FY 2025–26, STEP reached a major milestone—training and placing over 10,000 youth across Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh. This achievement reflects the collective efforts of the team, partners, and the resilience of the youth they support.

## Women in retail and the price they pay

**TASHIFA SHAKEEL**

Walk into any shopping space today—a mall, a franchise store, even a well-designed supermarket—and the first person who greets you is most likely a woman. She handles your product needs, handles complaints with patience, and manages the mood of the floor.

According to the India Brand Equity Foundation, the Indian retail industry has emerged as one of the most dynamic and fast-paced sectors, contributing over 10% to the country's GDP and 10% to employment. Yet, beyond the polished counters and the neatly organised shelves lies a workplace that often resembles the informal sector more than the formal one it claims to represent.

Women are joining retail in greater numbers because it offers visibility, a professional environment and an entry into the labour market. This reflects a wider national shift. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey 2023–24, India's female labour force participation has grown from 23.3% in 2017–2018 to 44.7% in 2023–24. A large portion of this workforce, however, still ends up in low productivity or own-account work.

Many women currently working in retail and sales said they wanted to "be independent and stand on their own feet while also earning respect," which is what drew them to the sector.

Although retail promises itself through uniforms, attendance systems and defined roles, the protections associated with formal employment are often missing. A former employee at a popular mall in Uttar Pradesh said she was often asked to work 12 hours more, with no fixed end time. Shifts often depended on customer flow or ongoing sales, and there was a general lack of structure.

The job demands extended hours and constant alertness. Sales targets do not adjust for low-footfall days, and festivals bring longer shifts without guaranteed overtime pay. Workers stand for hours and maintain a pleasant demeanor even when exhausted. Many describe their smiles as part of the job requirement. Emotional labour becomes a silent expectation, but it is rarely considered as a skill deserving higher value.

Benefits that should be standard in the formal sector—such as paid leave and maternity support—are applied inconsistently or discouraged practices. Women often feel compelled to continue working despite discomfort or personal needs, fearing that absence may be seen as irresponsibility. The insecurity of informal work quietly persists. Contracts

## From the field to the media: STEP Academy in IDR & Deccan Herald

We are proud to share that STEP Academy's work has been featured on two prominent platforms—India Development Review (IDR) and Deccan Herald—highlighting key insights on youth livelihoods and women's work. The IDR article, authored by Mona Agrawal, Sanjay Chittora, and Jahid

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LIVELIHOODS March 27, 2026

### Skilling alone isn't enough for rural entrepreneurs

Skilling helps rural youth start businesses, but most stay small. Here's what it takes to turn survival ventures into sustainable enterprises.

by MONA AGRAWAL, SANJAY CHITTORA, JAHID MAKRANI

This article is adapted from an unpublished report conducted by Mona Agrawal and Vignesh M Thyagar STEP Academy.

Makrani explores the journeys of rural entrepreneurs, noting that while skilling opens pathways, challenges like limited market access, business gaps, and financial constraints hinder growth. The Deccan Herald article by Tashifa, based on a study by Mona Agrawal and Vignesh, highlights both opportunities and challenges for women in retail, including job insecurity, low wages, and limited mobility. Together, these insights stress the need to go beyond skilling.



## Voices, Victories, and Vibrance: Women's Day at STEP

International Women's Day at STEP Academy, Udaipur was a vibrant celebration of the strength, talent, and aspirations of women trainees. The event brought together trainees, alumni, and team members in an atmosphere of pride and inspiration. From heartfelt alumni video messages to a special felicitation of successful former trainees, the day highlighted real journeys of growth and achievement.

An exhibition showcased the creativity and skills of current trainees, while music, games, and dance performances filled the space with energy and joy. More than just a celebration, the event created a safe and encouraging platform for women to share their experiences, build confidence, and recognise their own potential.

It was a powerful reminder of the collective strength of women and the importance of creating spaces where they can learn, grow, and thrive.

## Her Journey, Her Strength: Celebrating Women in Non-Traditional Roles



STEP Academy's OJT programme empowers migrant women with skills, confidence, and dignity.

Khushbu from Pali, once a construction helper, trained in marble and tiles fitting—a male-dominated trade—and now earns ₹700–800 daily.

Her journey highlights women's resilience and inspires others to pursue non-traditional careers, financial independence, and leadership within their communities.

# Why Youth Don't Stay in Jobs—And What Works

## Rethinking Retention in Skill Development



India has made significant strides in skill development. Yet, a major challenge remains—retention.

- ~30% dropout during training
- Only 40–45% get placements
- Many leave jobs within 3–6 months

Getting training a job is not the end—staying in it is the real challenge.

### What's Driving Low Retention?

- Low wages & insecurity
- Long hours, poor conditions
- Skill mismatch
- Migration challenges
- Social pressures (especially women)

### What Works: STEP Academy's Approach

STEP Academy addresses retention through a holistic model:

- **Right Selection:** PACE test to match aptitude with trades
- **Practical Training:** Industry-relevant, hands-on learning
- **Residential Model:** Reduces migration stress
- **Continuous Assessment:** Tracks and improves progress
- **Post-Placement Support:** Housing, migration support, self-employment guidance

### The Impact:

97% retention during training  
~70% youth retained in jobs after 6 months



### The Big Learning

Skilling alone is not enough.

Retention improves when training + job quality + support systems come together.

*This piece is based on an unpublished article written by Ajay Singh (Executive, STEP Academy). You can read the full article [here](#).*

# Collaborating for better skilling outcomes

## NETWORKING FOR IMPACT



STEP Academy convened a networking meeting with organisations working in the skilling ecosystem to expand opportunities for youth.

Participants included:

- Save the Children
- RSETI (SBI)
- Nayi Zindagi Foundation
- Jatan Sansthan
- Zila Parishad Rajsamand

The discussion focused on improving programme quality, optimizing resources, and building stronger collaboration.

## BUILDING STRONGER CONNECTIONS



STEP Academy brought together representatives from centres across multiple states for a collaborative meet focused on experience sharing and learning.

The gathering created space to:

- Reflect on achievements and challenges
- Share on-ground insights
- Strengthen coordination across centres

The event also celebrated years of collective impact, reinforcing a shared commitment to quality and scale in youth skilling.



## STEP Academy × Tech Mahindra Foundation

In collaboration with Tech Mahindra Foundation, STEP Academy conducted an Optician Skill Training Program at its Udaipur centre.

- 12 youth successfully completed training and received certification

This initiative reflects a shared effort to:

- Enhance training quality
- Build industry-relevant skills
- Create meaningful livelihood opportunities

# Staying Aligned: Strengthening Practice through Regular Team Dialogue



STEP Academy continues to invest in team engagements for reflection, learning, and planning. A Virtual Hamkadam workshop reviewed key FY 2025–26 innovations and set priorities ahead, enabling shared learning and direction-setting. This was complemented by a discussion on the Union Budget 2026–27, linking policy developments to skilling realities. Together, these efforts strengthen collaborative planning, continuous learning, and responsiveness to both field insights and evolving policy contexts, ensuring programmes remain relevant and impactful.

## Connect With Us



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