

Self-Efficacy and Entrepreneurial Career Preferences Among Rural Youth in the Shekhawati Region, Rajasthan

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Abstract— This study examines the relationship between entrepreneurial self-efficacy and entrepreneurial career preferences among rural youth in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan, a semi-arid area historically associated with mercantile enterprise but presently characterised by high out-migration and strong preference for salaried government employment. A cross-sectional survey was administered to 420 rural respondents aged 18–30 across the districts of Jhunjhunu, Sikar and Churu. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy was measured using an adapted multidimensional instrument, and career preference was assessed alongside perceived access to finance, family support and risk propensity. Mean entrepreneurial self-efficacy was 3.42 on a five-point scale (SD = 0.68), while mean entrepreneurial career preference was 3.28 (SD = 0.81). Only 34.5% of respondents identified self-employment as their first-choice career, against 41.4% who preferred government service. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy correlated strongly with career preference ($r = .58$, $p < .001$) and emerged as the dominant predictor in a multiple regression model explaining 47% of variance in

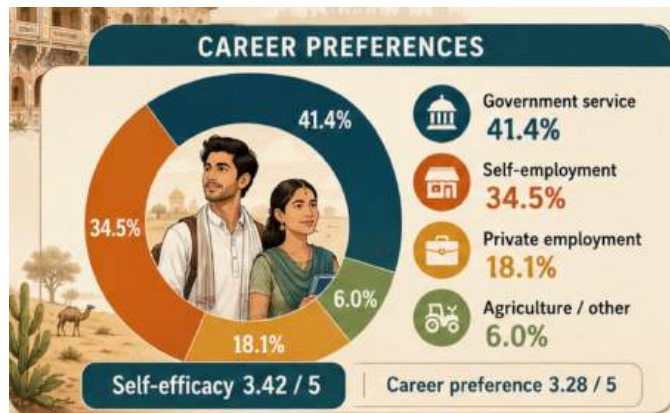
career preference ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$). Family support and risk propensity contributed significantly, while formal education did not. Mediation analysis indicated that self-efficacy partially mediated the effect of family support on career preference (indirect effect = .18, 95% CI [.12, .25]). Male respondents reported significantly higher self-efficacy than female respondents ($t(418) = 4.42$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.44$). The findings suggest that entrepreneurship promotion in the region should prioritise mastery-experience-based confidence building over information provision alone.

Keywords— entrepreneurial self-efficacy, career preference, rural youth, Shekhawati, Rajasthan, entrepreneurial intention, social cognitive theory

INTRODUCTION

Rural youth unemployment and underemployment remain among the most persistent development challenges in northern India. In Rajasthan, the Shekhawati region presents a particular

paradox. The region is the ancestral home of several of India's most prominent business communities and retains a dense cultural memory of trade and enterprise, visible in the painted havelis of Nawalgarh, Mandawa and Ramgarh. Yet contemporary rural youth in the same districts display a marked orientation towards salaried employment, particularly in the public sector, and the region has become a significant supplier of migrant labour and competitive-examination aspirants to urban centres.



Explaining this divergence requires attention to more than structural opportunity. Career choice is a psychological as well as an economic act, and a substantial body of research locates the psychological pivot in self-efficacy: the individual's belief in their capacity to organise and execute the courses of action required to attain a given outcome. Where the perceived personal capability to found and run a venture is low, objective opportunity may go unexploited; where it is high, individuals may pursue enterprise despite constrained resources.

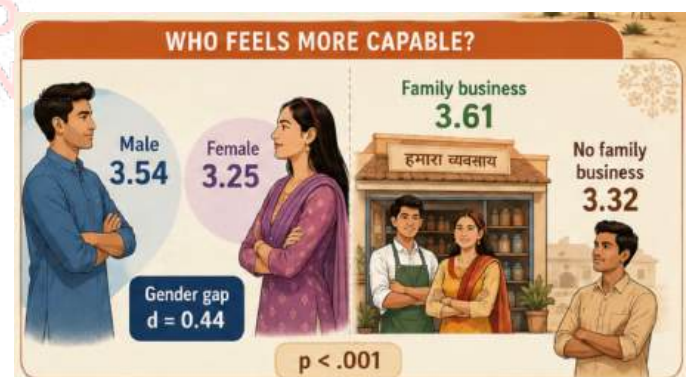
This study therefore investigates entrepreneurial self-efficacy as a determinant of entrepreneurial career preference among rural youth in Shekhawati. Four questions are addressed. What is the prevailing level of entrepreneurial self-efficacy among rural youth in the region? How is self-efficacy distributed across gender, education and family background? To what extent does self-efficacy predict entrepreneurial career preference relative to perceived resource access and social support? And does self-efficacy operate as a mechanism transmitting the influence of family support onto career preference?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in social cognitive theory. Bandura (1977) introduced self-efficacy as the belief in one's capability to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments, and later elaborated four principal sources of efficacy beliefs: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion and physiological states (Bandura, 1997). Crucially, Bandura argued that efficacy beliefs influence not merely effort and persistence but the range of career options individuals seriously consider, effectively foreclosing occupational paths perceived as beyond personal capability.

Boyd and Vozikis (1994) were among the first to formally integrate self-efficacy into models of entrepreneurial intention, proposing that efficacy beliefs mediate between attitudes and intentions and shape the transition from intention to action. Chen, Greene and Crick (1998) operationalised entrepreneurial self-efficacy as a multidimensional construct spanning marketing, innovation, management, risk-taking and financial control, and demonstrated that it distinguished entrepreneurship students from those in other management specialisations, and founders from non-founders.

Parallel work developed within the intention paradigm. Shapero and Sokol (1982) proposed the entrepreneurial event model, in which perceived desirability and perceived feasibility, precipitated by displacement, determine venture initiation. Ajzen (1991) advanced the theory of planned behaviour, in which perceived behavioural control, a construct closely allied to self-efficacy, joins attitude and subjective norms in determining intention. Krueger, Reilly and Carsrud (2000) competitively tested these models and found both to have predictive validity, with perceived self-efficacy and feasibility emerging as robust antecedents.



Kolvereid (1996) demonstrated that employment status choice between organisational employment and self-employment is

predicted well by attitudinal and control variables, providing methodological precedent for treating career preference as a discrete comparative choice rather than a continuous intention alone. Liñán and Chen (2009) developed and cross-culturally validated the Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire, establishing measurement invariance across national samples and confirming the centrality of perceived behavioural control.

Empirical work has consistently supported the self-efficacy–intention link. Zhao, Seibert and Hills (2005) found that entrepreneurial self-efficacy fully mediated the effects of perceived learning from entrepreneurship coursework, previous entrepreneurial experience and risk propensity on entrepreneurial intentions, a mediation structure directly relevant to the present study. Sequeira, Mueller and McGee (2007) showed that strong ties and social network support influence nascent entrepreneurial behaviour largely through their effect on self-efficacy, suggesting that social support operates indirectly rather than directly.

Gender differences have received sustained attention. Wilson, Kickul and Marlino (2007) reported that women consistently score lower on entrepreneurial self-efficacy than men across adolescent and adult samples, and that the effect of entrepreneurship education on intentions was stronger for women, implying that efficacy deficits are malleable rather than dispositional. McGee, Peterson, Mueller and Sequeira (2009) subsequently refined measurement by developing a task-specific, phase-based instrument, arguing that aggregate single-factor measures obscure meaningful variation across venture stages.

On the contextual side, De Noble, Jung and Ehrlich (1999) constructed an entrepreneurial self-efficacy scale emphasising skills distinctive to venture creation, including risk management and relationship development. Nabi and Liñán (2011) examined graduate entrepreneurship in developing contexts and highlighted the interaction of efficacy beliefs with institutional voids, resource constraints and family expectations, cautioning against direct transfer of Western findings. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor reporting has repeatedly documented that perceived capability is among the strongest correlates of entrepreneurial activity rates across economies, frequently outperforming perceived opportunity.

Two gaps are apparent. First, most Indian evidence derives from student samples in urban management institutions, whose opportunity structures differ markedly from those facing rural youth. Second, the mediating role of self-efficacy between family and social support and career preference has rarely been

tested in an Indian rural setting where family influence over occupational choice is unusually strong. This study addresses both.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design and Setting

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. The study area comprised the three districts constituting the historical Shekhawati region: Jhunjhunu, Sikar and Churu. A multistage stratified sampling procedure was used. Within each district, four blocks were selected at random; within each block, three villages were selected proportionate to population; and within each village, respondents were selected by systematic random sampling from voter rolls, restricted to residents aged 18 to 30.

Sample

Of 450 questionnaires distributed, 428 were returned and 420 were usable after removing incomplete responses, giving an effective response rate of 93.3%. Table 1 presents the sample profile.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (n = 420)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
District	Jhunjhunu	152	36.2
	Sikar	148	35.2
	Churu	120	28.6
Gender	Male	246	58.6
	Female	174	41.4
Education	Up to secondary	84	20.0
	Senior secondary	118	28.1
	Graduate	156	37.1
Family business background	Postgraduate diploma	62	14.8
	Yes	143	34.0
	No	277	66.0
Age	Mean 22.7 years (SD = 3.1)	—	—

Instruments

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy was measured using a 22-item adaptation of the Chen, Greene and Crick (1998) instrument, covering marketing, innovation, management, risk-taking and

financial control. Entrepreneurial career preference was measured using a six-item adaptation of the Liñán and Chen (2009) Entrepreneurial Intention Questionnaire. Perceived access to finance (5 items), family support (4 items) and risk propensity (5 items) were measured with adapted scales. All items used a five-point Likert format anchored from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Respondents additionally indicated a single first-choice career category.

The instrument was translated into Hindi, back-translated, and pilot tested with 40 respondents from a non-sampled block. Reliability statistics are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and reliability of study variables (n = 420)

Variable	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Entrepreneurial self-efficacy	22	3.42	0.68	.91
Entrepreneurial career preference	6	3.28	0.81	.88
Perceived access to finance	5	2.71	0.74	.79
Family support	4	3.55	0.79	.83
Risk propensity	5	3.16	0.71	.76

Analytical Procedure

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA with Tukey post hoc comparisons, Pearson correlation, hierarchical multiple regression, and bootstrapped mediation analysis with 5,000 resamples. Assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity and multicollinearity were verified; all variance inflation factors fell below 1.8.

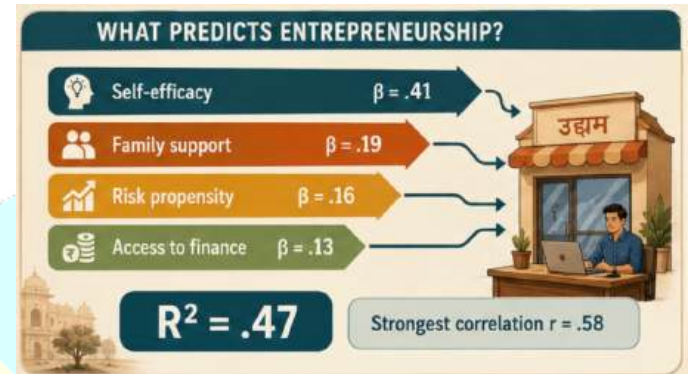
RESULTS

Career Preference Distribution

Table 3. First-choice career preference (n = 420)

Preferred career	n	%
Government service	174	41.4
Self-employment / own enterprise	145	34.5
Private salaried employment	76	18.1
Agriculture / other	25	6.0

Government service was the modal preference. A chi-square test of association between career preference category and entrepreneurial self-efficacy tertile was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 38.2$, $p < .001$, with 52.9% of respondents in the highest efficacy tertile selecting self-employment against 19.3% in the lowest.



Group Differences in Self-Efficacy

Male respondents reported significantly higher entrepreneurial self-efficacy ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.65$) than female respondents ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(418) = 4.42$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.44$. Respondents with a family business background also scored higher ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.64$) than those without ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.68$), $t(418) = 4.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.43$.

Table 4. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy by educational level

Education level	n	Mean	SD
Up to secondary	84	3.19	0.71
Senior secondary	118	3.34	0.66
Graduate	156	3.52	0.65
Postgraduate / diploma	62	3.61	0.63

One-way ANOVA indicated a significant effect of education on self-efficacy, $F(3, 416) = 6.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .047$. Tukey post hoc tests showed that the graduate and postgraduate groups differed significantly from the up-to-secondary group ($p < .01$), while adjacent categories did not differ.

Correlations

Table 5. Pearson correlation matrix (n = 420)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
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1. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy	—				
2. Career preference	.58**	—			
3. Access to finance	.29**	.31**	—		
4. Family support	.34**	.42**	.22**	—	
5. Risk propensity	.40**	.37**	.18**	.21**	—

** p < .01

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy showed the strongest association with career preference, exceeding that of family support and risk propensity.



Regression Analysis

Table 6. Multiple regression predicting entrepreneurial career preference (n = 420)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Entrepreneurial self-efficacy	0.489	0.052	.41	9.40	<.001
Family support	0.195	0.043	.19	4.53	<.001
Risk propensity	0.183	0.048	.16	3.81	<.001
Access to finance	0.142	0.044	.13	3.23	.001
Family business background	0.187	0.074	.11	2.53	.012
Gender (male = 1)	0.149	0.069	.09	2.16	.031
Education level	0.052	0.032	.07	1.63	.104
Constant	0.312	0.196	—	1.59	.112

$R^2 = .47$; adjusted $R^2 = .46$; $F(7, 412) = 51.6$, $p < .001$

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy was the dominant predictor, with a standardised coefficient more than double that of the next strongest variable. Educational level, significant as a correlate of self-efficacy, ceased to predict career preference once self-

efficacy was entered, indicating that its influence operates through efficacy beliefs rather than directly.

Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapped mediation testing with family support as predictor, entrepreneurial self-efficacy as mediator and career preference as outcome yielded a total effect of 0.37 ($p < .001$), a direct effect of 0.19 ($p < .001$), and an indirect effect through self-efficacy of 0.18, 95% CI [0.12, 0.25]. Since the confidence interval excluded zero while the direct effect remained significant, partial mediation is indicated, with self-efficacy transmitting approximately 48.6% of the total effect of family support.

DISCUSSION

The central finding is that entrepreneurial self-efficacy is the strongest single determinant of entrepreneurial career preference among rural youth in Shekhawati, accounting for a larger share of explained variance than perceived access to finance. This is consequential because policy in the region has been dominated by credit-side interventions, including subsidised loan schemes and margin-money support. The relatively low mean for perceived access to finance (2.71) confirms that credit constraints are genuinely felt, yet its modest standardised coefficient ($\beta = .13$) indicates that relaxing them alone is unlikely to shift career orientation substantially. This pattern is consistent with Zhao, Seibert and Hills (2005), who found that objective inputs to entrepreneurial intention operate through efficacy beliefs rather than in parallel with them.

The mediation result extends Sequeira, Mueller and McGee (2007) to a rural Indian context in which family authority over occupational choice is unusually consequential. Family support does exert a direct effect on career preference, but nearly half of its influence is carried by its effect on the young person's belief in their own capability. Practically, this suggests that interventions engaging parents and elder kin are likely to be effective not because they secure permission but because they alter the individual's efficacy appraisal, most plausibly through Bandura's (1997) mechanisms of social persuasion and vicarious experience.

The gender gap of 0.29 scale points, with a moderate effect size, replicates the pattern reported by Wilson, Kickul and Marlino (2007) in very different settings. Its persistence in a rural North Indian sample where female labour force participation is low suggests a compounding of restricted mastery experience and limited exposure to female entrepreneurial role models. Since

Wilson and colleagues found entrepreneurship education to have stronger effects on women's efficacy than on men's, the gap should be read as a policy opportunity rather than a fixed constraint.

The finding that education predicts self-efficacy but not career preference directly deserves emphasis. Higher educational attainment in the region is closely associated with competitive-examination preparation oriented towards government service, which may offset the efficacy gains that education confers. This tension is visible in the modal preference for government service at 41.4%, and it echoes Nabi and Liñán's (2011) caution that in developing contexts graduate entrepreneurship is shaped by prestige hierarchies among occupations as much as by capability.

Finally, the association between family business background and both self-efficacy and career preference is consistent with the mastery- and vicarious-experience pathways central to social cognitive theory, and with the region's mercantile heritage. That two-thirds of respondents lack such a background indicates the scale of the vicarious-experience deficit that programme design must address.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; the theorised direction from self-efficacy to career preference is grounded in theory rather than established temporally. Self-report measurement raises the possibility of common method variance, although the presence of differentiated predictor coefficients and a non-significant education term argues against a uniform response bias. Career preference is an attitudinal outcome and not equivalent to venture creation; the intention-action gap is well documented and remains untested here. The sample is confined to three districts and to youth resident in villages at the time of survey, thereby under-representing those who have already migrated, a group whose exclusion may bias the sample towards lower entrepreneurial orientation.

CONCLUSION

Among 420 rural youth surveyed across Jhunjhunu, Sikar and Churu, entrepreneurial self-efficacy averaged 3.42 on a five-point scale and emerged as the principal predictor of entrepreneurial career preference ($\beta = .41$), within a model accounting for 47% of variance. Only 34.5% of respondents named self-employment as their first career choice, against 41.4% preferring government service, yet within the highest self-efficacy tertile the entrepreneurial preference rose to

52.9%. Family support influenced career preference substantially through self-efficacy, which carried 48.6% of its total effect. Women and those without family business exposure reported significantly lower efficacy.

These results imply that entrepreneurship promotion in Shekhawati should be reoriented from information and credit delivery towards structured mastery experience: short-cycle venture simulations, incubated micro-trading exercises, mentorship pairing with local established entrepreneurs, and deliberate visibility for women entrepreneurs from the same social milieu. Future research should adopt a longitudinal design capable of tracking the movement from preference to actual venture registration, and should extend the model to migrant youth originating from the region, whose exclusion from the present sample represents its most significant boundary condition.

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