**2024**

ABOUT MEDHA

India's large youth population presents an enormous opportunity for the country but an equally significant challenge. With over 50% of the population under 25 years old, more than 150 million people will enter the workforce in the next 20 years. However, very few have the skills, experience, and access to succeed in today's workplace. In the most under-developed and patriarchal states where Medha works, the problem is even more acute. Students largely come from under-resourced educational institutions and have little exposure to the workplace.

Young women, Medha's primary focus, face several additional challenges when it comes to pursuing a career of their choice:

- They attend poorly performing schools because families prioritize educating young boys.
- They face pressure from family and society to marry soon after completing their education
- They are expected to pursue only certain kinds of jobs considered suitable for women.

For the past 13 years, Medha has been tackling this challenge to ensure India takes full advantage of Its demographic dividend-not just to fuel the country's economic growth but to ensure this growth is more inclusive, equal, and just. If we can help level the playing field for the segment of youth we work with, we are confident many of them will become agents of change and rewrite India's growth story for generations to come.

Medha better prepares youth for life after school. Our combination of 21st-century skill-building, career counseling, and workplace experience helps young people start rewarding careers of choice and achieve economic inclusion.
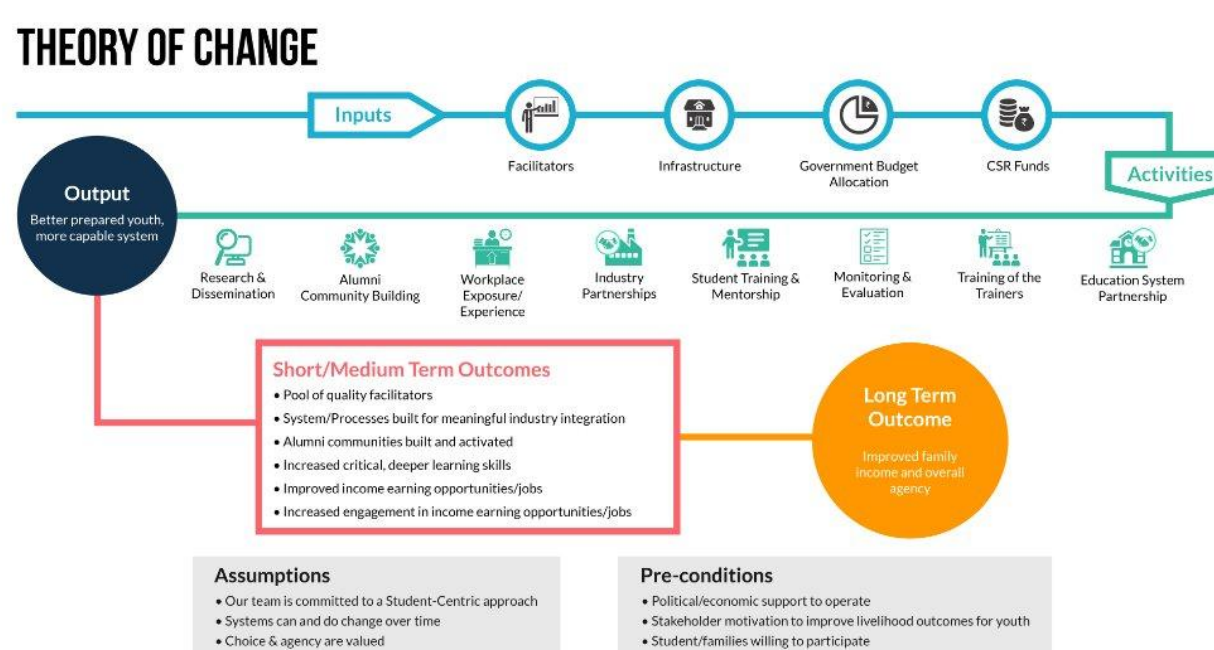
Need for innovation

India's youth are redefining traditional work and success, exploring careers that prioritize their purpose, flexibility, and autonomy. Freelancing and unconventional paths are gaining popularity as a primary source of income to support their aspirations. Young people, especially women, can leverage their skills to build sustainable freelancing careers in digital/online marketing and communication, social media, web/app development, and e-tailing. Improved tech infrastructure and digital connectivity in tier 2/3 cities make these opportunities increasingly accessible, reshaping employment.

Swarambh helps young people, particularly women, build freelance employability skills, gain mentorship from experienced and successful freelancers in their domain, and access local and digital opportunities from businesses and individual clients. The program connects three key groups: aspiring freelancers, experienced freelancers as mentors, and clients providing gig opportunities. The program targets youth aged 18 to 30 from small towns and cities in Uttar Pradesh , Haryana, and Bihar.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1) Evaluating program effectiveness : a mixed-methods approach

Medha's Swarambh program has demonstrated the potential to drive transformative impact among participants in tier 2/3 cities. To that end, a mixed-methods study was undertaken to assess the program's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. This involved collecting quantitative data from 303 participants, 36 mentors, and 37 community members (family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances of participants). Qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with 10 participants and 5 mentors. This multi-faceted approach allowed for evaluating the program's impact from various perspectives.

2) Learning experience

Motivation for joining the program
- Both participants and mentors had distinct motivations and pathways that led them to connect with the Swarambh program.
- For participants, the primary motivation was a desire to enhance their skills in areas ranging from soft skills to domain-specific expertise and improve their career prospects. Qualitative data further suggests this, with participants expressing their hope that Swarambh would provide them with a competitive edge in the job market, expand their professional network, and equip them with practical skills relevant to their chosen fields.
- Mentors were primarily driven by a desire to give back to the community and a genuine interest in supporting aspiring freelancers. This spirit, combined with their experience in their respective domains, positioned them as valuable guides for participants.

Alignment with interest and program satisfaction
- The program demonstrated a solid ability to match training content with participant interests, with nearly 80% of participants receiving training in their preferred professional domain.
- The diverse professional interests of participants, ranging from fashion design to web development, highlight the program's ability to cater to a wide range of career aspirations.
- 96% of participants expressed satisfaction with the program, highlighting the value of the relevant content, interactive sessions, networking opportunities, and effective mentor support.

Mentors' perspective
- Mentors highly regard the Swarambh program, with 81% affirming its professional benefits for participants.
- Only 44% believe that participants are adequately prepared to start their careers.
- Therefore, they emphasize the need for more hands-on learning and extended mentorship to effectively prepare participants for freelance careers.

Community's perspective
- Community members perceived positive changes in participants after program completion, including increased confidence, improved problem-solving abilities and communication skills, and a greater sense of responsibility.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

3) Progress on key outcomes

Freelancing awareness
The program significantly increased awareness of freelancing opportunities, with 67% participants reporting moderate to comprehensive awareness after completing the program, compared to 5% before.

Skill development
Participants reported utilizing the skills acquired through the program, including digital literacy, marketing, networking, financial skills, and life skills, in their personal and professional lives.

Employment status
37% of Swarambh participants are engaged in income-generating activities, with 24% employed full-time in domains that align with their training. While the program succeeds in enhancing general employability, only 9% of the participants are engaged in freelance work.

Work patterns & income generation
Participants reported a significant increase in both the frequency of freelance opportunities and overall earnings after completing the program. The program positively impacted income generation, with the average monthly income increasing more than twofold from ₹6,717 at registration to ₹15,313 at the time of the study .

4) Recommendations

To further enhance the impact of Swarambh , the following recommendations are proposed based on feedback from participants and mentors:

Strengthen employee-employer connections
Initiate a localized job board to address the needs of participants who note a lack of project opportunities in their local areas.

Deepen mentor support
Extend mentorship beyond the program with advanced courses and a sustainable mentor compensation model to provide ongoing support and deeper engagement.

Expand real-world learning opportunities
Integrate simulated projects that reflect real-world challenges to provide hands-on practice and professional feedback, making learning more applicable and dynamic.

Access to resources
Partner with financial institutions to provide microloans or seed funding for participants, coupled with financial management training to support new freelance initiatives.

Learning accessibility
Implement a flexible catch-up system with access to recorded sessions and interactive tasks to accommodate diverse participant schedules and ensure continuous learning. To encourage engagement with the live sessions, provide quizzes or interactive tasks related to the recordings.

INTRODUCTION

Background

India's gig economy is experiencing rapid growth, with widespread internet access and smartphone penetration. This presents a significant opportunity for young people, especially women, to access flexible and rewarding employment. According to a report by the Boston Consulting Group, the gig economy could support up to 90 million jobs in India's non-farm economy, handle transactions worth over $250 billion, and add roughly 1.25% to India's GDP in the long run. However, to realize the potential of the gig economy, there is a need to sensitize youth – who have a very nascent idea of freelancing opportunities – and to upgrade the skill sets of the neediest on-demand task-based service providers. Challenges still need to be addressed in achieving widespread and meaningful growth in the gig economy. Many young people lack awareness of freelancing opportunities and the necessary digital tools to participate. Additionally, income instability poses a significant challenge for gig workers, particularly women who face marginalization in the workforce.

Program objective, design, & structure

Swarambh, launched in 2020, seeks to address this gap by supporting young freelancers, especially women, in smaller cities to participate in the gig economy and build successful careers. The program has impacted over 1,100 participants in the last two years, connecting them with mentors and addressing challenges such as market access and relevant skill development. The Swarambh program is mainly implemented in two districts of Uttara Pradesh – Varanasi and Ghaziabad.

Primarily conducted online, Swarambh connects aspiring freelancers with experienced mentors in their chosen fields. The program comprises of three phases:

Gyan: Building freelance awareness through a 30-hour bootcamp

Kaushal: Developing skills through mentor connections

Kshamta: Gaining practical exposure through local and hyperlocal gig projects

STUDY DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Research objectives

This mixed-methods study evaluates the effectiveness of the Swarambh program across its three phases. The following objectives guided the study:

1 Assess how Swarambh met its learning objectives and achieved its intended outcomes

3 Understand the challenges participants face in translating their learning into remunerative opportunities and identify the support required for success

2 Track participant progress in skills development, employment opportunities, entrepreneurial endeavors, and income generation

4 Provide evidence-based recommendations to inform the ongoing development and refinement of Swarambh

Data collection & quality

To achieve these objectives, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data was gathered through structured surveys administered by trained enumerators. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with a smaller subset of participants and mentors using a semi-structured interview guide.

The list of the tools used for this study is as follows:

Survey Instruments:
- Alumni Survey Tool
- Mentor Survey Tool
- Community Survey Tool

Interview Questionnaires:
- Alumni Interview Tool
- Mentor Interview Tool

To ensure the rigor and reliability of the data collection process, experienced enumerators with research backgrounds were recruited from Medha's alum network. The enumerators underwent training focused on survey methodologies, ethical data collection practices, and proper administration of the survey instruments. A thorough review of the objectives of the study and the specific information sought was also emphasized to ensure accurate and effective data collection. Data quality checks were employed to maintain data hygiene.

Sampling

The study included three core respondent groups:

- **Swarambh participants:** A random sample of 303 participants was drawn from 1,100 participants who completed the program in 2022 and 2023.

- **Swarambh mentors:** A sample of 36 mentors (representing 17% of the total mentor pool) was selected to capture diverse perspectives and experiences within the program's mentoring component.

- **Community members:** To provide an external perspective on the program's impact, a random sample of 37 community members, comprising family, friends, neighbors, and professional acquaintances of participants, was included.

SWARAMBH PARTICIPANTS:
LEARNING EXPERIENCE & IMPACT

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Beyond the evident demographics, a closer look at the participant profile reveals an inclination toward more flexible, self-driven career paths. Participants from traditional fields like stitching and teaching also showed interest in freelancing, digital, and life skills.
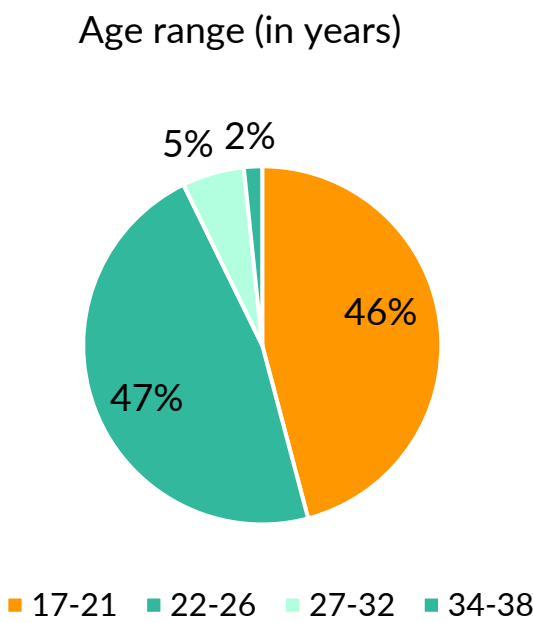
303

Sample size

77% **23%**

₹ 1.9L

Avg. annual household income

Educational background

27% Bachelors
46% Diploma/Polytechnic
2% Secondary
10% Higher Secondary
13% Masters
1% Other

Age range (in years)

5% 2%
46%
47%

■ 17-21 ■ 22-26 ■ 27-32 ■ 34-38

PARTICIPANT DOMAINS

24%
Other

1%
Graphic Designer

4%
Beautician / Mehendi Artist

5%
Stitching / Tailoring

3%
Freelance Writer / Content Writer

4%
Social Media Influencer / Digital Content Creator

5%
Web-Development

6%
Sketching / Drawing / Wall Painting

32%
Fashion Designing / Fashion Illustrator / Fashion Technology

2%
Photography

8%
Teaching / Training

5%
Digital Marketing

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

a) Motivations

Participants joined the Swarambh program primarily to enhance their skill sets across a range of areas, including the desire to improve soft skills such as communication, confidence, and personality development, as well as specialized skills like presentation and freelancing expertise. Some participants sought domain-specific knowledge in areas such as merchandising and makeup.

For the young participants, Swarambh has been more than just a learning experience — it's been a gateway to new opportunities and personal growth.

"I felt that Swarambh would up-scale my career by skilling me, provide me a bigger network, and give me a better starting salary than my other batch mates doing Fashion Designing." – **Yogita**
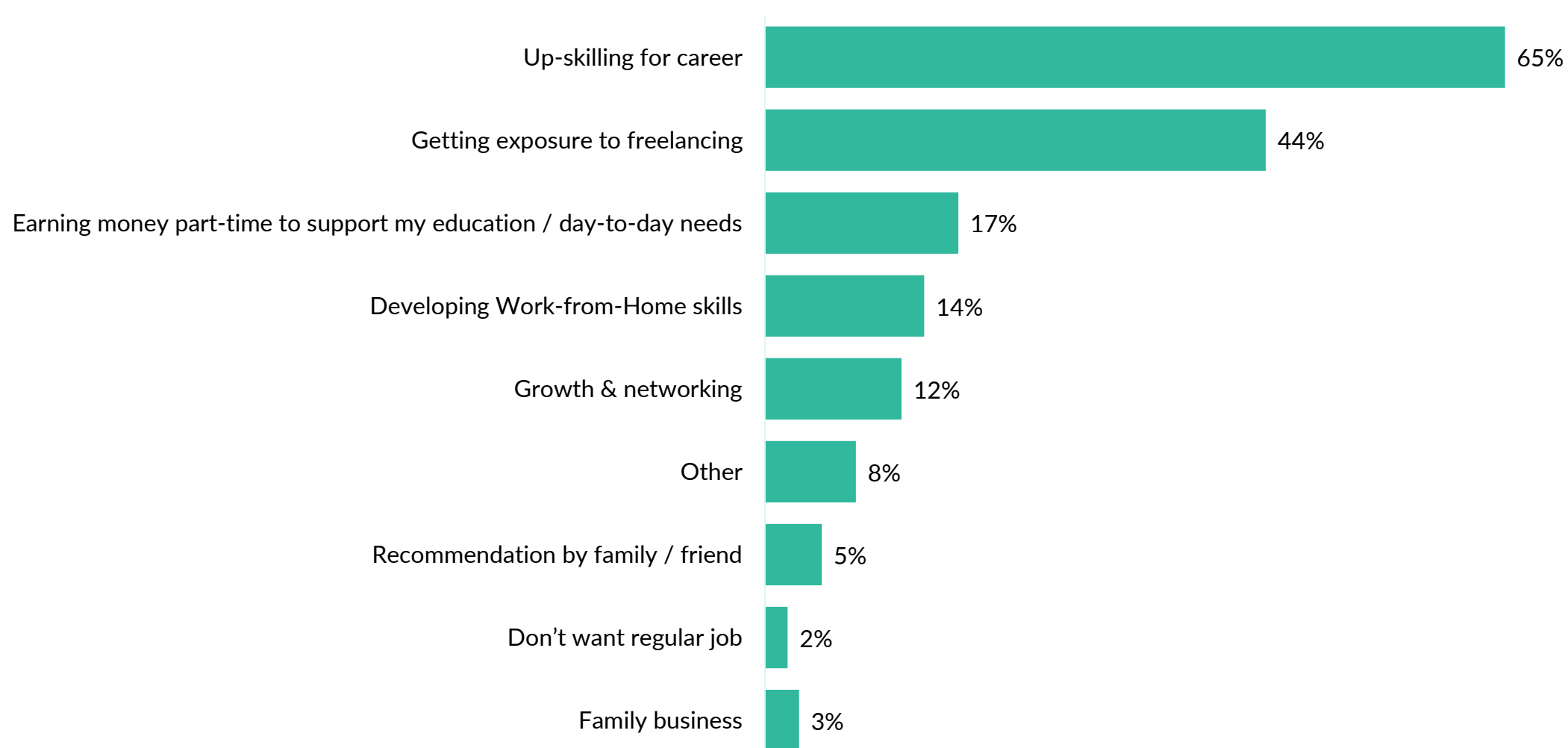
"We have a small family business, and initially I thought that getting a better understanding of freelancing would help me expand it or provide me with some other earning opportunity." – **Akhilesh**

"I expected to gain marketing, communication, and networking skills relevant to merchandising, which would advance my merchandising career." – **Radhika**

"I expected that Swarambh would help me build confidence, enhance my networking, and give me practical insights into makeup and freelancing. I was looking both for better career opportunities and personal growth." – **Trishala**

"I anticipated that Swarambh would enhance my social media skills, help me gain practical knowledge for content creation, and improve overall professional skills." - **Shivangi**

Participants' motivation to join Swarambh

Motivation	Percentage
Up-skilling for career	65%
Getting exposure to freelancing	44%
Earning money part-time to support my education / day-to-day needs	17%
Developing Work-from-Home skills	14%
Growth & networking	12%
Other	8%
Recommendation by family / friend	5%
Don't want regular job	2%
Family business	3%

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

b) Feedback

Insights from participant interviews suggest that while the program is highly valued, there is room to strengthen the practical components to meet participant needs more effectively. Feedback from participants reveals a mix of satisfaction and areas for improvement in the training program. While the program excels in interactive learning, there's a call for more real-life application in the curriculum and better mechanisms to review missed content, highlighting opportunities to enhance both the depth and accessibility of the training.

The overall training and mentorship were very good. They helped us in self-expression and gaining self-confidence. We learned in an interactive manner through various games and activities such as dumb charades and Doraemon. We also learned how to better face interview boards, as everything from posture to body language was discussed and instilled in us." – **Arnima**

"Swarambh helped me gain insight into the freelancing space. It provided tips for better communication and thought analysis. However, the Gyan phase could have included more real-life examples and hands-on activities." – **Anupama**

"The program was undoubtedly useful, but there was no way to catch up on any sessions that we missed." – **Akhilesh**
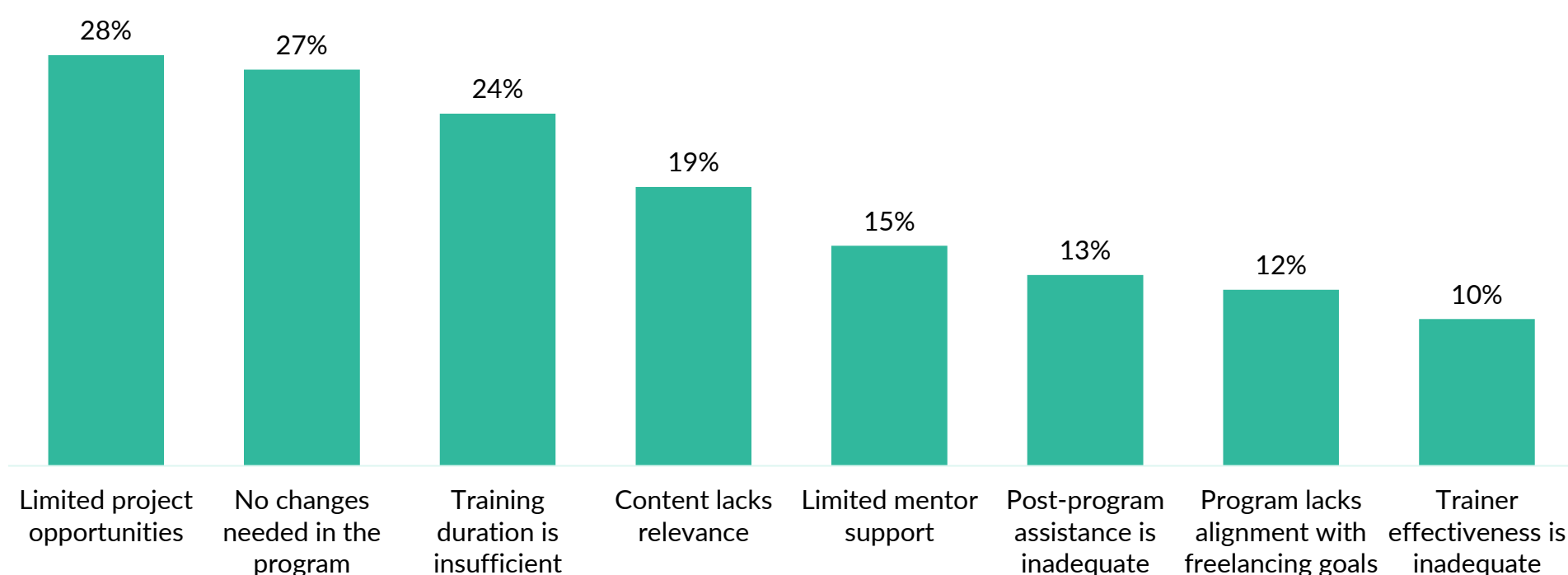
c) Support required

Participants expressed a need for more practical learning, resources, and marketing and client retention support.

"I live in a rural area. I do not know how to get resources to start a small stitching business. If I could get some seed money, I could start a small business," – **Babita**

"Practical sessions providing more in-depth industry insights would be helpful," – **Rani**

"Support in marketing and also providing more insights on client retention strategies would be helpful," – **Trishala**

Areas for program improvement as expressed by participants

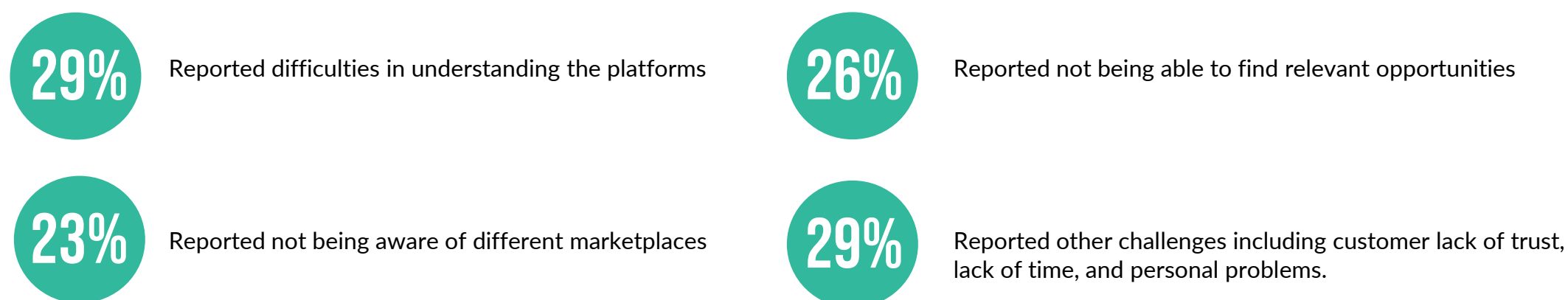|	28%	27%	24%	19%	15%	13%	12%	10%
	Limited project opportunities	No changes needed in the program	Training duration is insufficient	Content lacks relevance	Limited mentor support	Post-program assistance is inadequate	Program lacks alignment with freelancing goals	Trainer effectiveness is inadequate

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS REPORTED BY PARTICIPANTS

a) Factors affecting job search for those looking for employment

The most significant barriers to participants' job search is the lack of opportunities in their local areas coupled with an inability to relocate. Many participants also identified a need to develop new skills to access better opportunities.
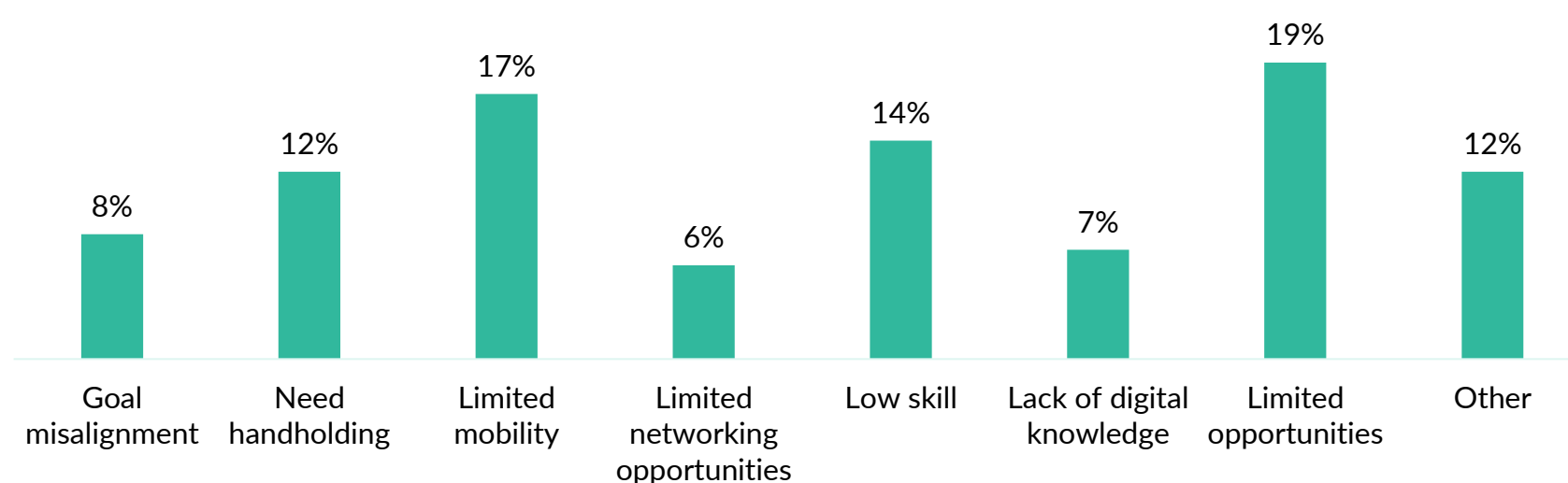
Factor	Percentage
Need more exposure / network / mentoring in my field	5%
Lack of resources (devices / laptop / mobile phone)	5%
Lack of digital knowledge (access to online marketplace)	5%
Need to develop new skills	12%
Other	38%
Less opportunity in my area and cannot relocate	35%
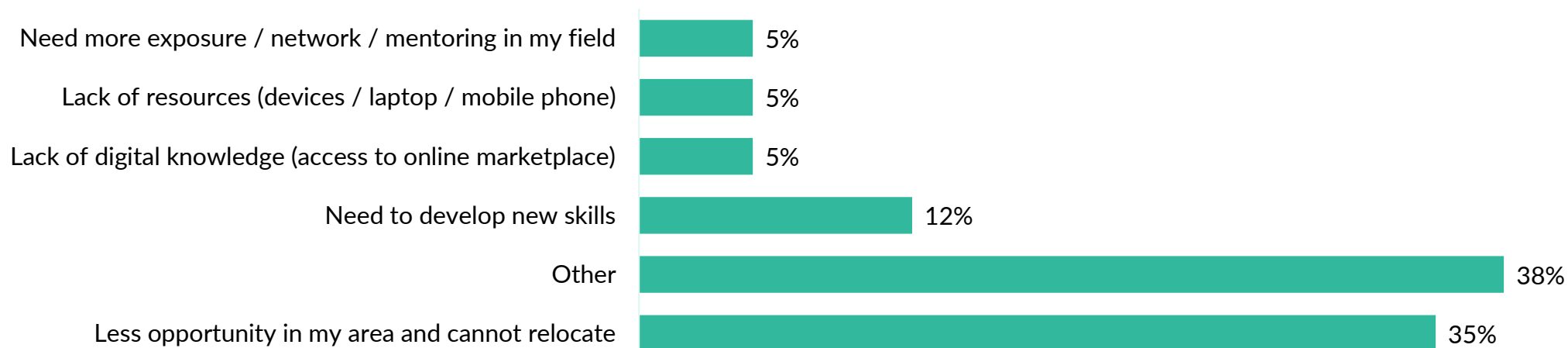
Other includes having a small child, not getting work in textile design , lack of vacancies , and having no work experience .

b) Challenges in accessing online marketplaces

29% Reported difficulties in understanding the platforms

26% Reported not being able to find relevant opportunities

23% Reported not being aware of different marketplaces

29% Reported other challenges including customer lack of trust, lack of time, and personal problems.

c) Barriers to career progression

37% of participants said they faced no specific challenges in their career progression. The most common challenges identified by the rest were the lack of opportunities in their local areas, limited mobility, and a lack of adequate skills.

Category	Percentage
Goal misalignment	8%
Need handholding	12%
Limited mobility	17%
Limited networking opportunities	6%
Low skill	14%
Lack of digital knowledge	7%
Limited opportunities	19%
Other	12%

Other includes financial problems, preparing for UPSC / government exams, family problems, lack of experience, and lack of digital literacy.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Swarambh addresses participants' aspirations through relevant training and effective mentorship

84%

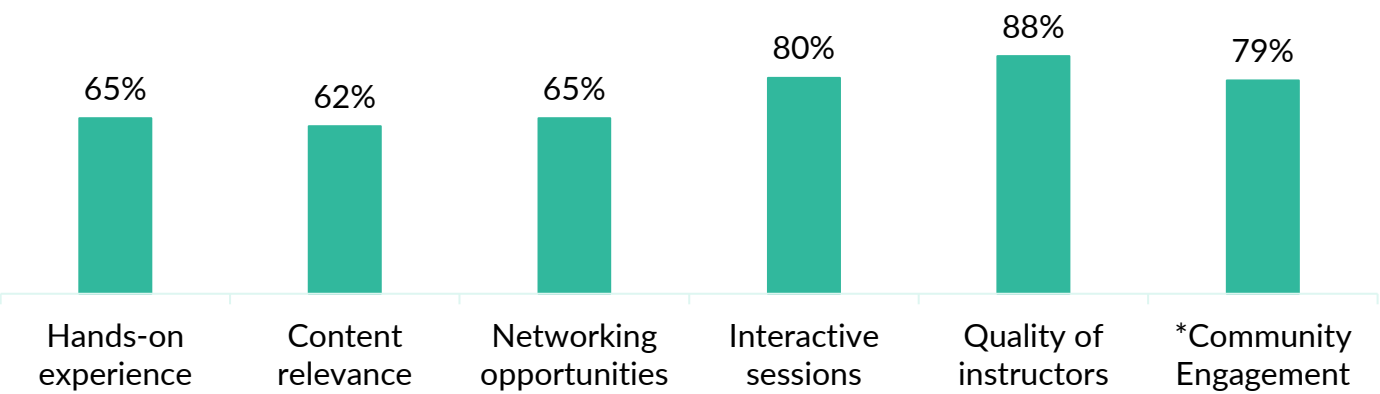Participants satisfied with the Swarambh program

80%

Participants received training in their chosen domain

96%

Alumni recommend the program to others

Program satisfaction

|	
65%	Hands-on experience
62%	Content relevance
65%	Networking opportunities
80%	Interactive sessions
88%	Quality of instructors
79%	*Community Engagement

"Community Engagement", in this context, involves building connections with professional freelancers, peers, and the local market. The Swarambh program organizes events like the Swarambh Walk and Freelancer's Jamming to help participants connect with established freelancers and the local market. These events allow participants to understand market needs and learn how to use their skills to meet those needs.

66%
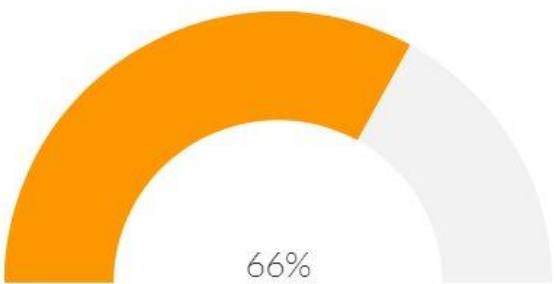
Participant satisfaction with Medha's support in accessing new opportunities

51%
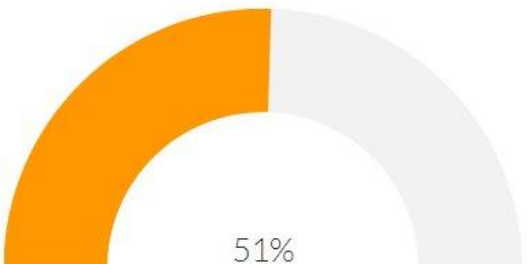
Participant satisfaction with Medha's assistance in connecting to online marketplaces

Effectiveness of Mentorship

The top three areas where the mentorship was most effective was

Developing skills and competencies	51%
Networking and making connections	38%
Setting goals and objectives	37%

80%

Participants found the mentorship provided to them effective

PROGRESS ON KEY OUTCOMES

The Swarambh program has raised awareness, with most participants well-informed about freelancing principles at program completion. The skills taught in the program, ranging from digital know-how to life skills, are actively used by participants in their daily lives, enhancing both personal and professional growth. This training led to a notable increase in income for participants, increasing the frequency of freelancing opportunities and doubling their earnings on average after completing the program.

1) Freelancing awareness

Participants improved their freelancing awareness but were not quite confident in building a career in freelancing. While 90% of the participants reported an increase in their freelancing awareness, only 69% felt confident about starting their freelancing career. Additionally, only 44% of mentors believed participants were ready to start their careers. This indicates a gap between skill development and the confidence to apply these skills effectively in the freelance economy.

Awareness Level	Before Swarambh (%)*	After Swarambh (%)
Had no awareness	54%	4%
Had minimal awareness	28%	5%
Had some / moderate awareness	16%	69%
Had high awareness	1%	22%

"Before and after Swarambh" data is collected within the same survey.

69%

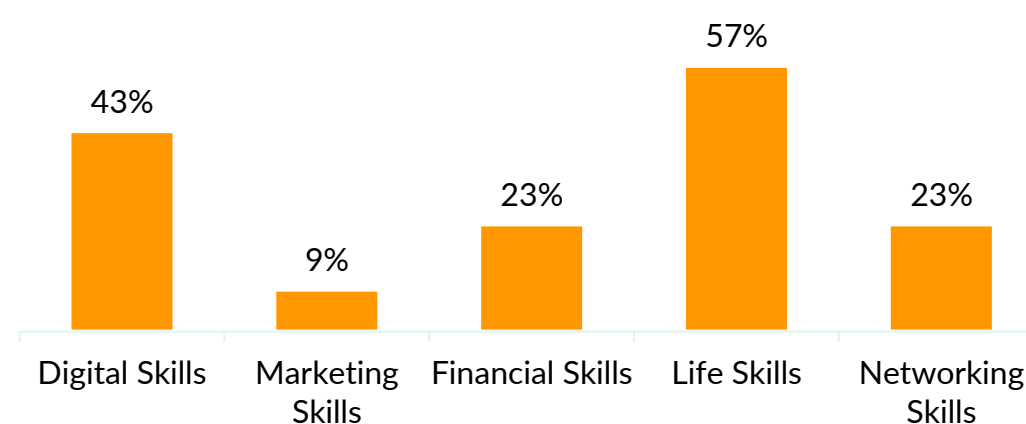Felt confident / moderately confident about freelancing after the program

2) Skill development

Participants use the skills they learnt from the Swarambh program in their day-to-day lives, both personally and professionally. They reported significant improvement in various skills, including digital literacy, marketing, networking, financial skills, and life skills, which were described as relevant and beneficial for their professional endeavors. A high proportion of participants reported utilizing the 21st-century skills acquired during the program in both their personal and professional lives.

Skills used in professional life

Digital Skills	Marketing Skills	Financial Skills	Life Skills	Networking Skills
68%	37%	48%	72%	51%
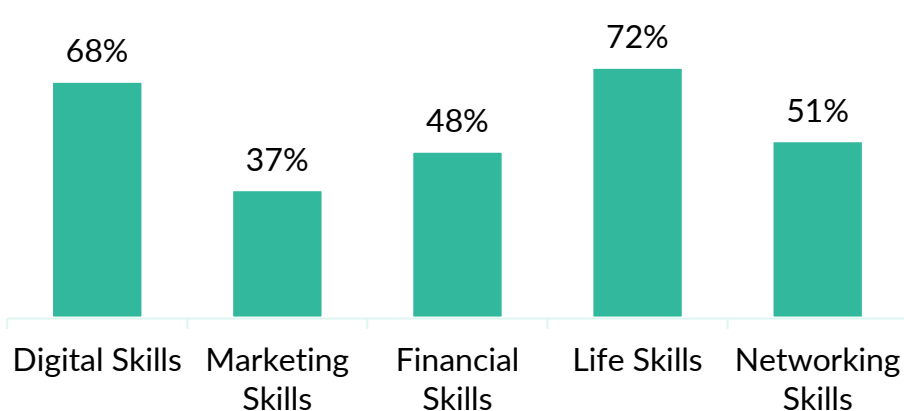
Skills used in personal life

| Digital Skills	Marketing Skills	Financial Skills	Life Skills	Networking Skills
43%	9%	23%	57%	23%

PROGRESS ON KEY OUTCOMES

3) Employment status

35% of Swarambh participants are engaged in income-generating activities. Of the 24% participants employed full-time, over 60% are working in domains aligned with the training provided by the program. 9% of alumni are pursuing freelance work on a part-time basis, either alongside their studies or regular employment, generating supplementary income.

The program prepares participants for freelance opportunities and enhances their general employability skills, enabling many to secure full-time and part-time jobs. This demonstrates the program's effectiveness in equipping participants with a diverse skill set applicable across various types of employment. Further, this indicates that while participants are enhancing their skills, they tend to prioritise careers with stable income, using freelancing as a supplementary source of earnings.

Current employment status

Reasons for unemployment
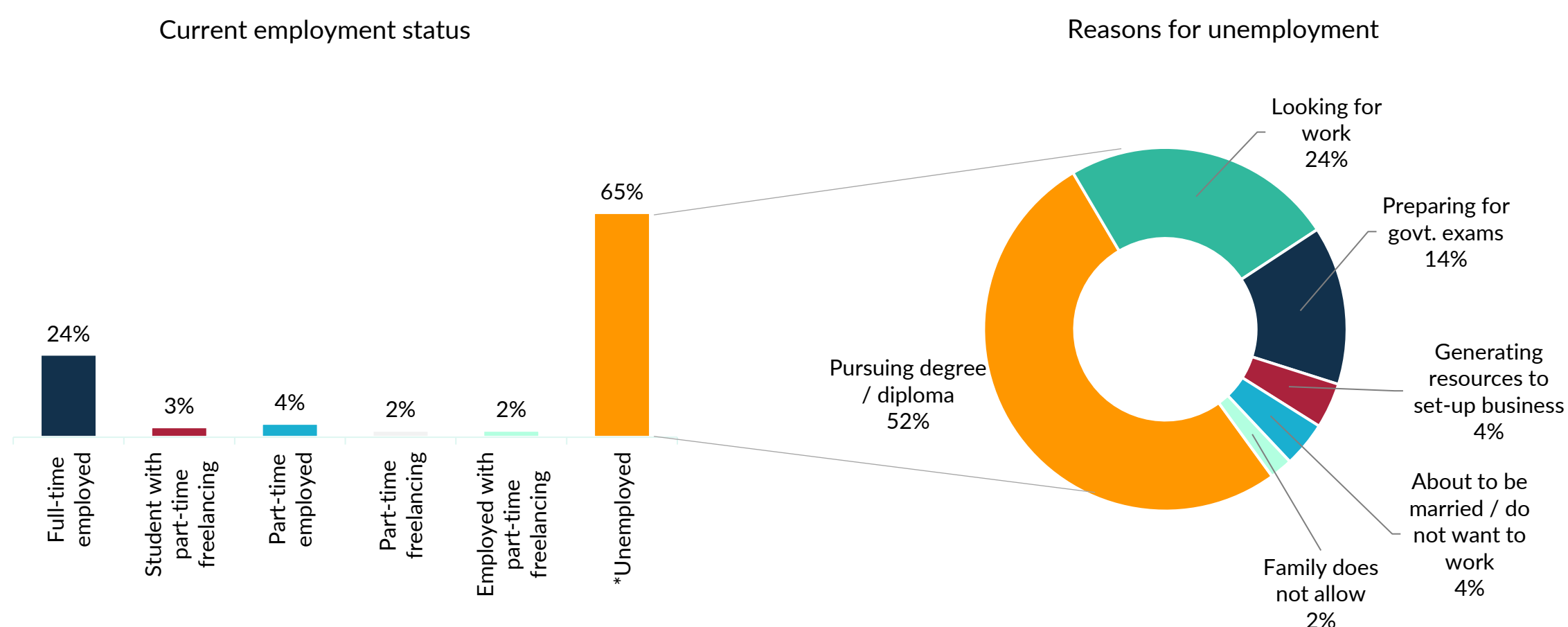
The "Unemployed" category also encompasses individuals awaiting exam results or pursuing fellowships. Additionally, the "Others" group (10%) has been merged into this category due to overlapping characteristics with the "Unemployed" group.
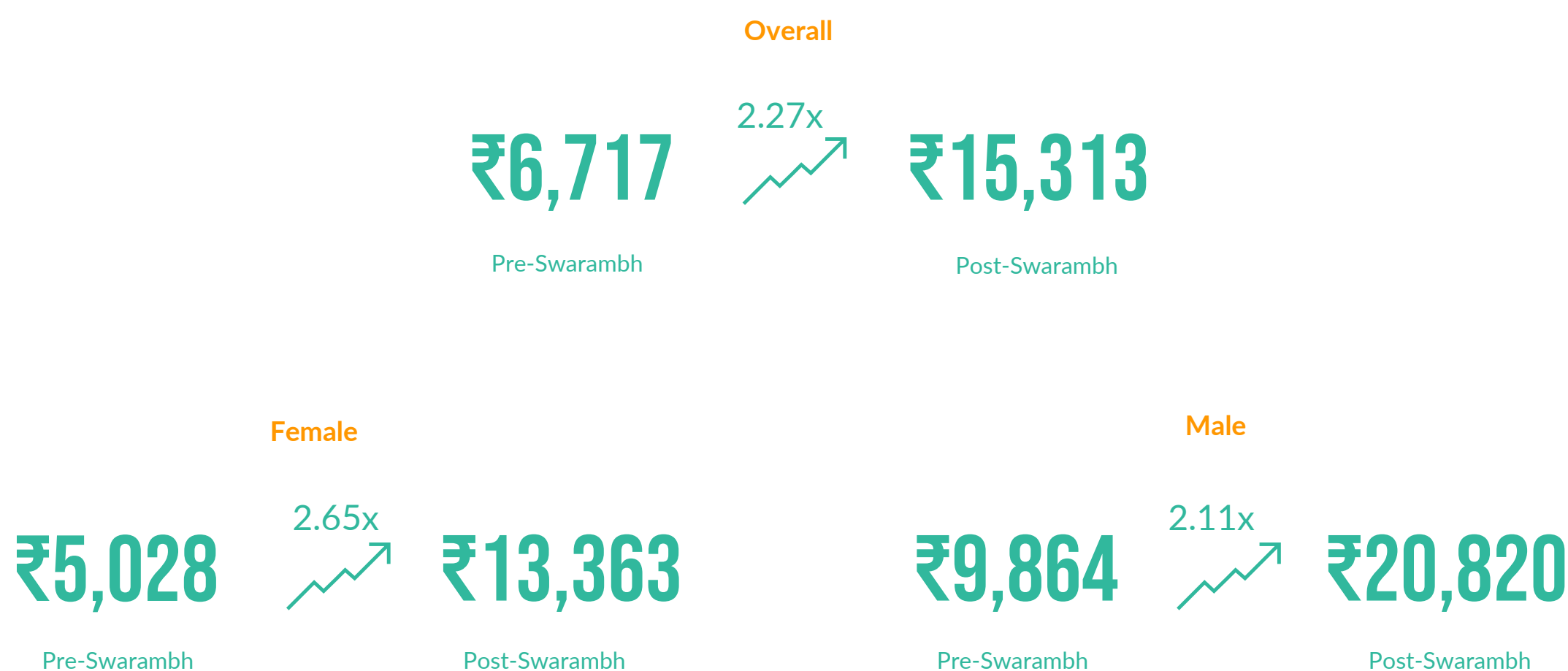
4) Work patterns & income generation

Swarambh participants have a decent workflow and are engaged in multiple projects. Participants doing freelancing work reported:

- **19** gigs on average in the past 3 months per participant
- **20** days average number of working days in a month per participant

The number of participants engaged in income-generating activities increased by over 2.5 times compared to the pre-program period, with average income levels more than doubling. Qualitative insights reveal that the skills acquired through Swarambh have enabled participants to secure better-paying jobs compared to their peers, and they find these skills valuable in both their personal and professional lives.

It's important to highlight that before the Swarambh program, most participants were still studying and primarily earning through part-time jobs. After completing the program, however, they began to pursue income-generating activities more seriously which could have contributed to the income growth apart from the Swarambh training.

Overall

₹6,717 →2.27x→ ₹15,313

Pre-Swarambh   Post-Swarambh

Female

₹5,028 →2.65x→ ₹13,363

Pre-Swarambh   Post-Swarambh

Male

₹9,864 →2.11x→ ₹20,820

Pre-Swarambh   Post-Swarambh

Note:

i) The growth in income is similar when we compare it with the group of 23 students who reported both pre- and post-incomes or when we compare all participants who reported pre- and post-incomes (40 and 104)

ii) Gender-disaggregated data is of all participants who report pre- and post-incomes
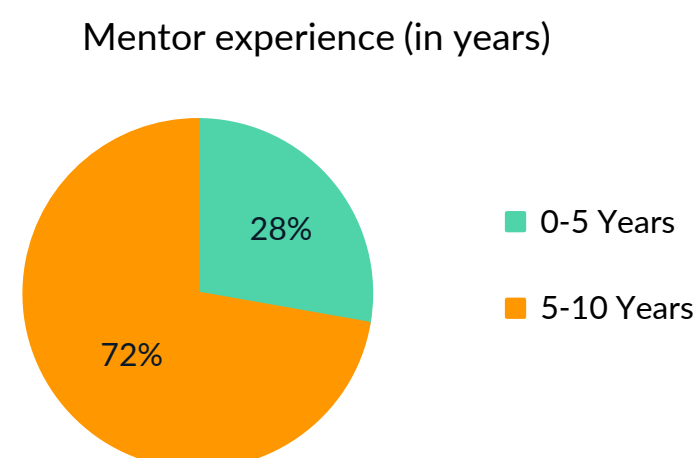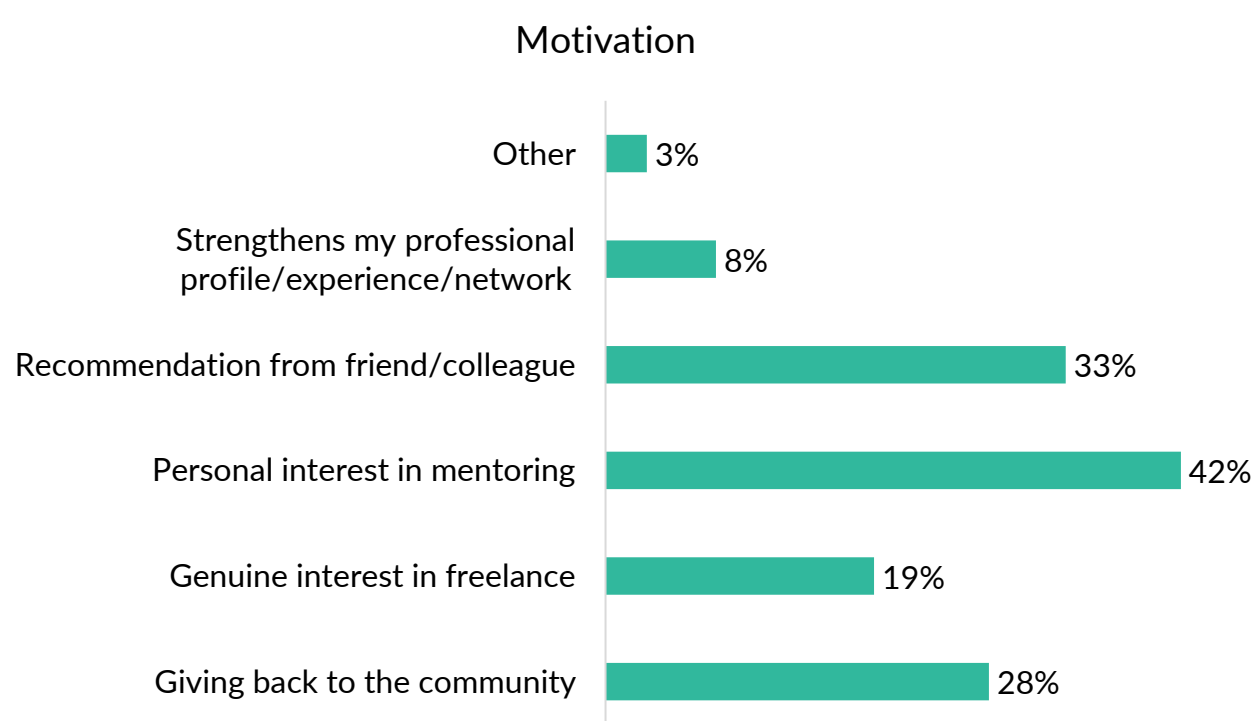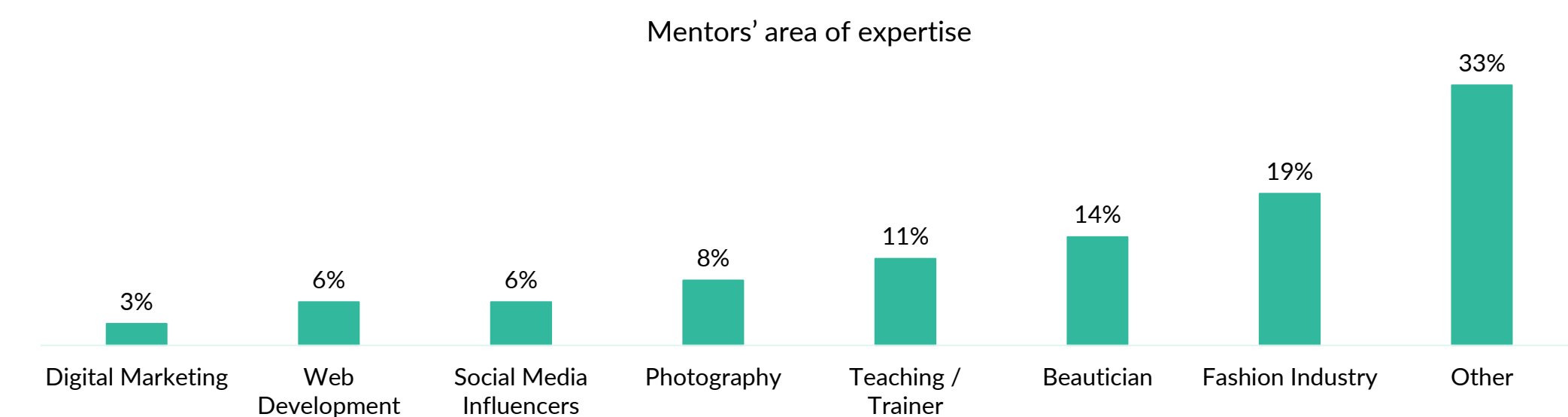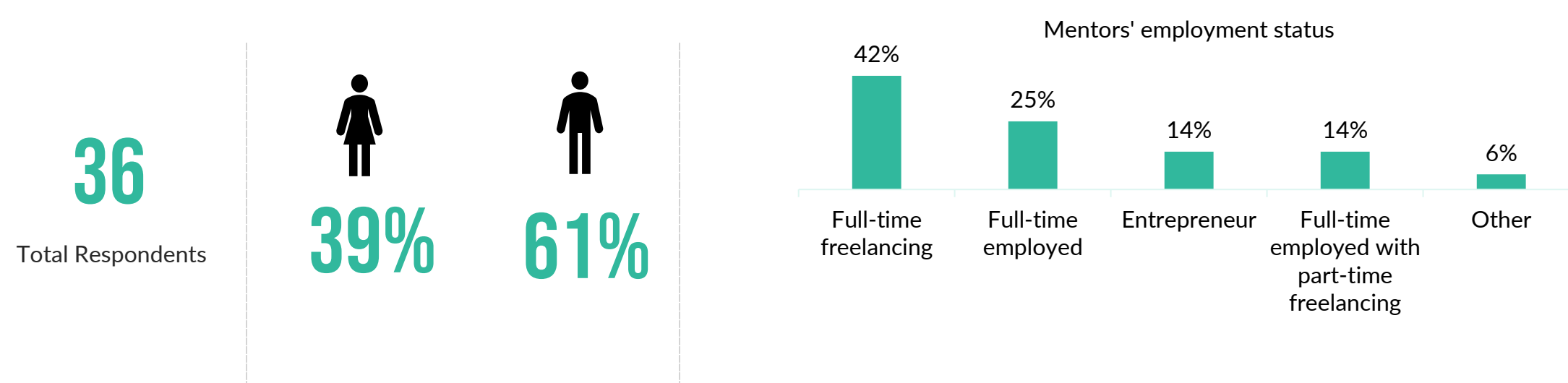
SWARAMBH MENTORS:
LEARNING EXPERIENCE & IMPACT

HEAR IT FROM THE SWARAMBH MENTORS

Mentor perspectives on enhancing participant readiness

Swarambh attracts diverse mentors primarily driven by altruistic motives, with a strong personal interest in mentoring (42%) and a desire to give back to their community (28%). This suggests the program appeals to individuals' intrinsic motivations for knowledge sharing and societal contribution.

However, despite recognizing the potential of the program, a significant number of mentors (56%) believe that it does not adequately prepare participants for launching freelance careers.

36
Total Respondents

39%

61%

Mentors' employment status

Full-time freelancing	42%
Full-time employed	25%
Entrepreneur	14%
Full-time employed with part-time freelancing	14%
Other	6%

Mentors' area of expertise

Digital Marketing	3%
Web Development	6%
Social Media Influencers	6%
Photography	8%
Teaching / Trainer	11%
Beautician	14%
Fashion Industry	19%
Other	33%

Motivation

Other	3%
Strengthens my professional profile/experience/network	8%
Recommendation from friend/colleague	33%
Personal interest in mentoring	42%
Genuine interest in freelance	19%
Giving back to the community	28%

Mentor experience (in years)

- 0-5 Years: 28%
- 5-10 Years: 72%

medha

Mentors' confidence in the Swarambh program

81% mentors believed the Swarambh program would be professionally impactful for participants.

86% mentors would recommend the Swarambh program to other which reflect the high overall satisfaction with the program's

58% outcomes.

44% mentors found the program's content relevant to their respective freelancing domains.

mentors believe that alumni have basic skills to kickstart their careers.

Changes observed by mentors in Swarambh participants

When mentors were asked if they noticed any differences in Swarambh alumni compared to other aspiring freelancers, most felt that 33% of alumni demonstrated an improved understanding of their freelance domain, while 22% had better client networking skill, 19% highlighted enhanced online portfolio quality.

Legend:
- ■ Enhanced client networking skills
- ■ Enhanced online profile / portfolio quality
- ■ Improved understanding of freelance market
- ■ Improved understanding of their freelance domain
- ■ None
- ■ Other
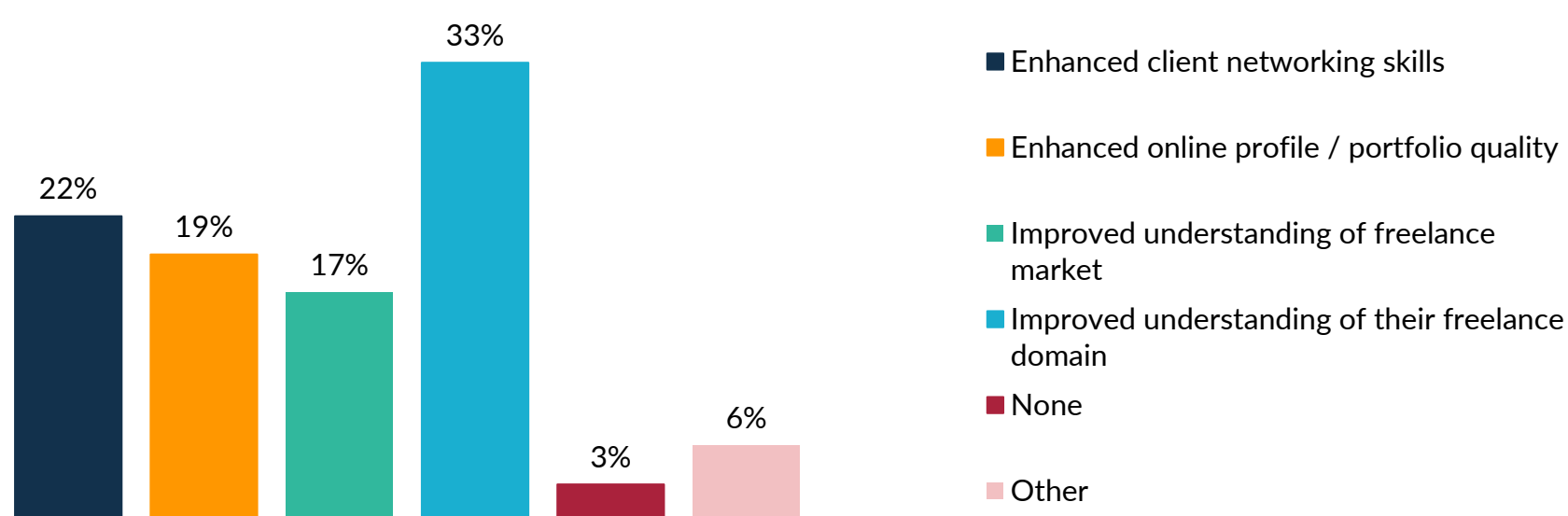
Mentors' recommendations

To improve mentoring experience, mentors expressed a need for additional training and support for mentors (42%) and an opportunity for them to develop a network and a community (14%). While mentors expressed satisfaction with the program's knowledge-sharing efforts, several challenges were highlighted regarding the online format and the duration of mentorship.

Areas of improvement for the Swarambh program according to mentors

More mentors in the network	31%
Trainer effectiveness	19%
Training duration	28%
Support or assistance	28%
Lack of project opportunities	17%
Updating content as per freelancing need	6%

Mentors' voices

"The sessions were interactive, however, more time and practical support are needed for deeper learning. Some students lacked passion, affecting their involvement, and the mentorship duration felt too short."
- **Apurva**, Mentor (Painting and Sketching)

"It is a good initiative. I could provide the students with at least some idea on content writing, report writing, language tones, and digital platforms; also on newspaper and book reading to increase vocabulary. But online mode can be less impactful,"
- **Rajat Tripathi**, Mentor (Journalism and Content Development)

SWARAMBH COMMUNITY
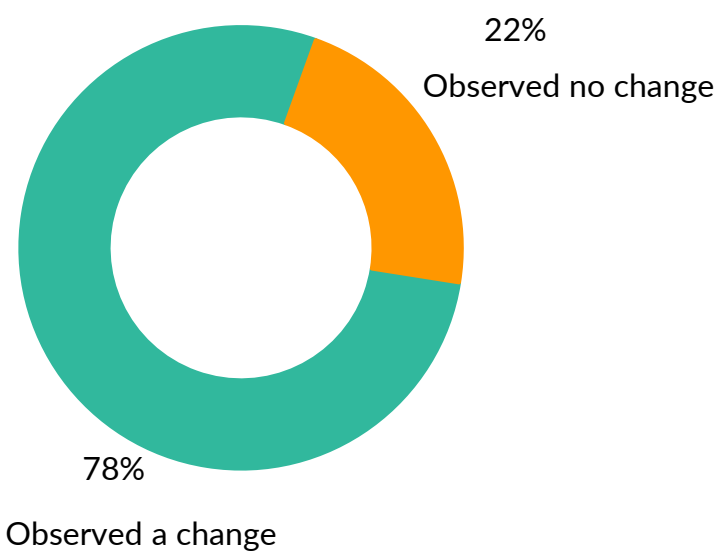
HEAR IT FROM THE COMMUNITY

Community feedback highlights positive shifts in participants' skills and aspirations

Community members observe positive changes in Swarambh participants, particularly in increased confidence and problem-solving skills, indicating that the program's impact extends beyond technical skills, contributing to participants' overall personal and social development.

37
Community members

65%   **35%**

Type of community member

- Family Member — 22%
- Friends — 51%
- Other — 27%

(Neighbours / professional acquaintances)

Community observes positive shifts in Swarambh participants

Change in participants' career aspirations / life goals post-Swarambh

- 22% Observed no change
- 78% Observed a change

Positive changes observed by the community

Other	11%
Greater responsibility	43%
Enhanced problem-solving skills	54%
Improved communication skills	39%
Increased confidence	46%

Ways in which Swarambh participants positively support their community and households

Online presence	Other	Market awareness	Domain knowledge	Digital literacy	Budgeting /Pricing
25%	11%	18%	36%	25%	29%

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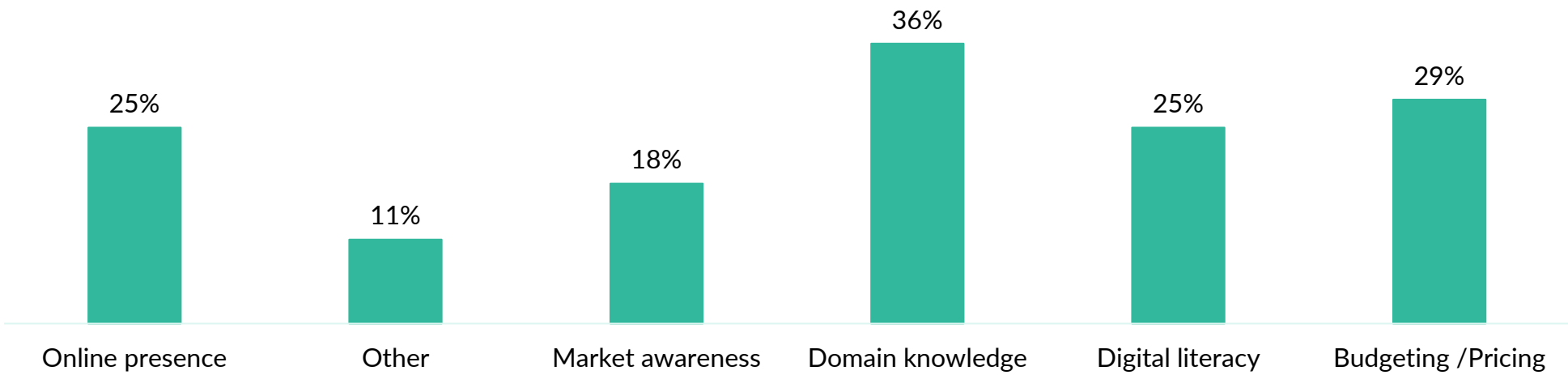
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Participants

Participants' feedback reveals the perceived value of the Swarambh program and highlights areas where improvements can enhance their learning experience and career prospects.

What the participants are saying:

- **Program value and satisfaction:** Participants widely appreciate the Swarambh program, with 96% expressing satisfaction due to its relevant content and effective mentorship. They report improvements in their professional and personal abilities. This approval is rooted in the program's ability to align its content effectively with participant interests.
- **Need for practical learning:** Despite the high satisfaction rates, there is a strong demand among participants for learning experiences that mirror real-world demands. This need highlights a gap in the program's ability to offer hands-on, practical experiences critical for successful freelance careers.
- **Barriers to skill application and market access:** Several barriers hinder effective skill application among participants. These include limited access to digital platforms, and local job markets and insufficient networking opportunities. They recommend more guidance on using online marketplaces and improved networking opportunities.
- **Challenges of online delivery:** Participants highlight the program's online delivery as a limitation, noting a lack of real-world examples and hands-on activities that would better prepare them for work.

Mentors

Mentors' feedback provides valuable insights into Swarambh's strengths and weaknesses from their perspective. Their suggestions for improvement, particularly regarding practical learning, content relevance, mentorship duration, and mentor support, offer a roadmap for enhancing the program's effectiveness for aspiring freelancers.

What the mentors are saying:

- **The program has value:** Mentors believe the program has a professionally impactful effect on the participants and would recommend it to others.
- **Need for more practical and engaged learning:** Mentors repeatedly emphasize the need for more practical and engaging learning experiences. They feel the current program lacks sufficient real-world application and hands-on activities.
- **Concerns about preparedness:** Less than half the mentors believe the participants are fully prepared to launch their freelance careers after completing the program.
- **Challenges with the online format and mentorship duration:** Mentors highlight challenges with the online format limiting and find the mentorship duration too short. This suggests a need to rethink the program structure and delivery to better support online and in-person learning and build more extended mentor-mentee relationships.
- **Desire for more support and networking:** Mentors express a need for additional training and support for themselves, as well as opportunities to develop a network and community with other mentors. This highlights the importance of investing in mentor development and creating a supportive ecosystem for mentors to thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Recommendations for program improvement & evolution

Swarambh can refine its strategies and processes to better integrate and support its young participants. Feedback from participants and mentors underlines the need for the program to enhance its practical learning components and support mechanisms, ensuring that graduates are well-trained and well-equipped to navigate the workplace more successfully.

1. **Strengthening employee-employer connections**: Addressing the gap in project opportunities highlighted by approximately 28% of participants is crucial. These platforms should be designed to enhance the visibility of freelance opportunities and improve matching between freelancers and businesses, tailored to specific local dynamics.

2. **Deepening mentor support**: Echoing participants' needs, mentorship should extend beyond the program duration to provide continuous support. This extended mentorship support could include options for extended learning, such as advanced refresher courses available for a nominal fee. A sustainable compensation model for mentors could incentivize them to engage more deeply and regularly, providing participants with continuous support and guidance as they navigate their careers.

3. **Integrating real-world projects**: Both participants and mentors demand more practical learning experiences within the program. The program can offer hands-on practice and professional feedback by integrating simulated projects that reflect real-world challenges. Structured projects should be time-bound and designed to mimic the pressures and deadlines typical of the professional environment, thus better preparing participants for the demands of the workplace.

4. **Facilitating access to capital and resources**: Exploring options to provide working capital or resources to participants could help them start their own freelance initiatives. This could include partnerships with financial institutions to offer microloans or seed funding to those in need. Further investigation into the needs and capabilities of participants regarding financial management should inform the development of support structures that include financial literacy training.

5. **Improving accessibility and flexibility in learning**: A flexible catch-up system is essential to accommodate the diverse schedules of participants, especially those with academic commitments. Providing access to recorded sessions can help participants stay up-to-date without penalizing them for unavoidable absences. To maintain the integrity and engagement of live sessions, strategies such as quizzes or interactive tasks related to the recordings could be employed to ensure active learning and discourage reliance on recorded materials.

These refined strategies aim to enhance the program's adaptability, relevance, and impact, ensuring it not only meets its participants' immediate educational needs but also supports their long-term success in freelancing and traditional workplaces.