

Assessing the Efficacy of Gender Equality Schemes in Rural India: Educational and Economic Impacts on Women

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ABSTRACT

In India, rural women are often viewed as an invisible lifeline, yet systemic challenges severely limit their economic and educational opportunities. These challenges include unpaid labor, restricted access to education, and the compounded effects of gender, caste, and poverty. This paper analyzes the effectiveness of government initiatives that empower rural women, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Mahila Samakhya (MS) scheme, as well as channels like Self-Help Groups (SHGs), assessing both their successes and shortcomings in this complex landscape. It also explores the impact of educational policies and vocational training programs on enhancing women's skills and economic independence. Ultimately, the study advocates for a holistic approach that recognizes the diverse needs of rural women, encourages their active participation in policy development, and fosters collaboration among stakeholders. Such strategies can dismantle existing barriers and promote sustainable gender equality in rural India to ensure that women can lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Keywords: Gender equality, Rural women, Policy and development, Education, Economic empowerment

Introduction

Women are the backbone of rural communities. In developing countries, they are responsible for producing anywhere between 60% to 80% of all food (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2023). Rural women's engagement spans all levels of the agricultural value chain in India, with 75% of the full-time female rural workforce involved in this sector (Patel and Sethi, 2021, p. 26; Oxfam India, 2013, p. 1). Despite their significant contributions, women's landholdings remain disproportionately low, constituting as little as 5% of total agricultural land in some states (Oxfam India, 2013, p. 1). Aside from food production, the gendered division of labor in homes

means that rural women also disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid work. According to the International Labour Organization (2019), rural women in India dedicate an average of 291 minutes each day to unpaid care work. In contrast, men dedicate just 32 minutes.

These challenges are further exacerbated by limited access to education, which restricts their autonomy, mobility, and decision-making power. The scarcity of educational institutions and higher education opportunities in rural India reflects the sluggish pace of spatial development, further isolating rural women from academic advancement. Even when educational facilities are available, the curriculum often fails to adequately address critical issues such as financial literacy, women's health, and advocacy. Moreover, multidimensional poverty and entrenched patriarchal norms contribute to high dropout rates, which can reach up to 35% for girls (The Ministry of Education, 2023). Women from lower caste backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to these adverse conditions due to the intersectional impacts of gender, caste, and the urban-rural divide.

Such systemic issues have prompted the implementation of various programs, schemes, and affirmative initiatives since India's independence, which aim to empower rural women through educational and economic pathways. Education is recognized as a foundational springboard in this context, equipping women with the knowledge and skills necessary for personal and community development. Economic opportunities are equally crucial, facilitating the translation of educational achievements into tangible benefits. Outside the fold of formal education, initiatives such as skill development and vocational training programs have also been designed to provide women with the resources needed to participate in the labor market.

By critically analyzing the efficacy of these channels and mechanisms in both public and private sectors, this paper aims to address their impact on rural women's educational outcomes and economic opportunities. Specifically, it seeks to identify the strengths and limitations of these initiatives, providing insights that can inform policy improvements and enhance the effectiveness of interventions aimed at empowering this demographic in India.

Background

Gender equality schemes are crucial for India to drive inclusive development and fulfill its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. To do so, it must first confront the systemic and persistent barriers that rural women continue to face.

Feminist scholarship has long outlined how working status and economic independence are crucial determinants of empowerment, especially for rural women (Sundari, 2022). This is because paid work increases their bargaining strength within the family (Agarwal, 1997), allows them access to the public sphere (Dutta, 2000), and leads to considerably greater autonomy

(Anderson and Eswaran, 2009). A similar impact is correlated to literacy (Cameron and Cameron, 2005), which can address the informational poverty rural women face, allow them to exercise greater control over decisions that affect their lives, and increase self-esteem.

Since its independence, India has undertaken several affirmative measures to empower rural women. The Economic Survey 2022–23 (Ministry of Finance) also noted the importance of “proactive socio-economic inclusion, integration, and empowerment of rural India.” At a glance, statistics evidence that there has been notable progress in this landscape. The women's participation rate (WPR) rose from 24.8% in 2017 to 42% in 2023 (Agrawal and Bhattacharya, 2024), while the rural literacy rate among women surged from 17% in 1998 to 65% in 2021 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare).

A landmark initiative in this landscape has been the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 2005, which provides 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural household. Aside from this, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have long been viewed as pivotal channels for women's financial and economic empowerment in rural India. These voluntary, informal groups have also been central to the government's upliftment efforts and India's development agenda. Under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, which aims to organize rural poor women into SHGs, approximately 8.39 crore rural poor women have been mobilized into over 76.94 lakh SHGs nationwide (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022).

Educational policy remains another critical focus area. The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) initiative aims to combat the declining child-sex ratio and promote girls' education. Additionally, various governmental and non-governmental programs target women who have not benefited from formal education by enhancing employability through vocational training and skill development initiatives. Evaluating such policies, schemes, and interventions can provide crucial insights into successes, gaps, challenges, and future directions for rural development.

Discussion

In India, gender equality schemes—whether they take the form of nationwide policies or vocational training—have resulted in several positive outcomes. However, whether the framework is one of dependency or self-sufficiency is a concern often raised in policy and development discussions. For instance, the country's landmark Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has long been upheld as a crucial lifeline for rural communities. While implementation challenges remain, data collected over decades also evidences its positive effects on women's income, status, as well as decision-making power—outcomes that are a direct result of its design. This includes provisions where one-third of work is reserved for

women, paid childcare facilities, and direct payments made into women's bank accounts rather than being funneled through male family members.

At the same time, as *Bárcia de Mattos and Dasgupta (2017, p. 1)* argue, it is equally crucial to recognize that MGNREGA was always intended to function as a form of "last resort" employment. This means that the significant reliance of rural women on this program, although beneficial in the short term, reflects deep-rooted systemic inequalities. Others contend that an unintended consequence is that girls in these households often have to leave school to care for younger siblings (*Das and Singh, 2013*). While some point to a more positive relationship between MGNREGA and household educational outcomes, research is largely limited in both contexts. It does, however, highlight how expansive frameworks that reach the last mile like MGNREGA, cannot simply be reorientated to address the cycles of disadvantage rural women face.

In a country like India, rural women need integrated and responsive schemes that comprehensively tackle the complexities of their livelihoods. Such schemes must be built on the understanding that rural women are not a homogenous demographic. Female education often falls into this trap, where *Govindarajan (2014, p. 110)* notes that it functions as a "catch-all term" encompassing a complex array of issues and perspectives across primary, secondary, tertiary, and health education for both girls and women.

This dimension is most visible in the first-of-its-kind nationwide program, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)*. As a tri-ministerial effort, one of the aims of BBBP was to improve educational outcomes for women. However, despite nearing its decade mark, the scheme's efficacy has been widely criticized. A key shortcoming can be seen in its audit report of 2017–18, which revealed disproportionate spending on media and advocacy, rather than directly addressing the barriers rural women encounter in seeking education (*Chandra, 2021*). The lack of women's participation in the policy and planning process is another limitation that likely hindered the program's efficacy (*Nikore, 2019*). This is particularly evident when contrasted with the *Mahila Samakhya (MS)* scheme, a 1988 program devised to address gender-based educational disparities.

Rather than a top-down approach, *Jandhyala (2003)* situates the success of MS in letting women deliberate on their needs, priorities, challenges, and constraints. This was done through a facilitative model where collectives were supported as independent bodies. In a little over two decades, MS even grew to 45,000 villages, with a membership of approximately 1,500,000 women (*IIM Ahmedabad, 2014*). Its strength in harnessing women's active participation and agency, adopting a flexible structure, and involving people outside the government, allowed MS to maintain a wide geographic reach, while also allowing for tailored strategies specific to local contexts (*Ministry of Human Resource Development*).

The agency of women is central to the success of empowerment schemes, a feature which also explains the popularity of SHGs in India. Research has noted their significant positive externalities on women's empowerment, encompassing economic, social, and political facets (Kumar et al., 2021). For example, Swain and Wallentin (2009) analyzed SHG membership across five Indian states—Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra—and found that it correlates with women's enhanced ability to challenge patriarchal norms and greater decision-making power. Women SHGs also hold transformative power in India as they can unite individuals from diverse caste and social backgrounds.

Yet, this channel isn't universally beneficial either. Due to the result of the last-mile service delivery in India being broken, the over-reliance on SHGs is a growing concern, and in many cases, is extended as a solution for every social development issue (Deshpande, 2022). Additionally, there are growing concerns that the SHG movement is becoming increasingly politicized, potentially undermining its empowerment objective. Others, like Jakimow and Kilby (2006), also argue that SHGs address market failures rather than genuinely empowering women, raising critical questions about their effectiveness across contexts.

While no single policy can comprehensively address women's economic participation and educational outcomes, skill development and vocational training have gained significant attention from policymakers and NGOs. Such initiatives can enhance women's employability, provide essential skills, and promote economic independence. Despite this, according to previous data, 39% of women who received vocational training in various fields did not even enter the labor force (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2014). Additionally, government initiatives have also seen a decline in popularity, likely due to being misaligned with market needs. For skill development programs to be effective, they must closely correspond with labor market demands and include placement support to ensure a smooth transition. Public-private partnerships can play a crucial role here. The collaboration between Microsoft and the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) for example, has successfully provided digital skills training to over 100,000 women (The Economic Times, 2020).

Ultimately, there is no universal blueprint for successful equality schemes. To create lasting impact, it is however essential that their design acknowledges the complex intersectionality of rural livelihoods. More importantly, these initiatives must actively involve women at every stage of the process, recognizing them as key agents of change and ensuring that their voices and experiences shape the strategies implemented.

Conclusion

The evaluation of gender equality schemes targeted towards rural India brings to light a critical interplay between progress and persistent challenges. While schemes like MGNREGA, MS, and SHGs have positively contributed to the education and economic status of women in the country, systemic barriers still hinder the complete realization of gender equality. These schemes have helped in improving resources, education, and economic opportunities and empowered rural women toward greater autonomy and agency. Challenges that have persisted include inadequate infrastructure, lack of awareness of available schemes, and limited participation of women. Dealing with these gaps can ensure that these initiatives benefit all segments of rural women, especially the most vulnerable.

Sustainable progress toward gender equality also requires an integrated approach that relates to policy support, community engagement, and continuous monitoring of program effectiveness. Moreover, collaboration among various stakeholders—government, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders—is also essential for amplifying the impact of these schemes. Such collaborations could help in resource sharing, enhance knowledge transfer, and allow for solutions that address the unique needs of rural communities.

By incorporating the voices and perspectives of rural women into the policy and development process, India can more adeptly respond to the diverse and evolving challenges they face. Ultimately, empowering rural women to lead more independent and fulfilling lives hinges on a concerted effort to dismantle the barriers to gender equality while leveraging the strengths of existing initiatives to foster a more inclusive society for all.

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