

Gender Issues and the Challenges in Acquiring Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Rural India

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Abstract: This study explores women's empowerment in rural India, focusing on the barriers and opportunities that shape gender equality. It highlights the interplay of socio-economic factors affecting women's agency and well-being. Objectives: The research aims to understand the various forms of women's empowerment, examine the challenges and opportunities in rural areas, and evaluate measures to overcome gender equality obstacles. Research Methodology: A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with rural women, community leaders, and local organizations. Findings: The study reveals significant progress due to grassroots initiatives and government programs, yet persistent challenges remain, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Issues such as domestic violence, economic insecurity, and limited access to education continue to hinder women's empowerment. Conclusion: A holistic strategy is essential to address the root causes of gender inequality, encompassing legal reforms, improved educational access, vocational training, and enhanced community engagement. Collaborative efforts among government, NGOs, and local communities are crucial to fostering a more equitable society and promoting sustainable socio-economic development for women in rural India.

Keywords: *Gender Issues; Women Empowerment; Rural India; Equality.*

INTRODUCTION

When women are empowered, they are able to make greater strides in all areas of life, including spirituality, politics, society, education, and economics. Many factors influence the degree to which women in India are able to exercise agency, including their age, level of education, social standing (caste and class), and geographic location (urban vs. rural). Numerous areas, such as healthcare, education, economic opportunity, political engagement, and violence against women, have national, state, and municipal (Panchayat) policies aimed at empowering women. Creating a political and social climate free of the oppression, exploitation, anxiety, discrimination, and generalized persecution that women experience when they are part of a male-dominated system is at the heart of women's empowerment. Despite the fact that women make up about half of the global population, India's sex ratio is significantly lower than the global average. There are still certain regions where women are not viewed as equal to men in terms of social status. Women enjoy full legal and social equality with males in Western countries. Unfortunately, prejudice based on gender persists in modern-day India. She was both concerned as Goddess and merely a slave at different points in time due to the contradictory nature of the situation [1].

The complex nature of gender inequality and women's empowerment has been shown by scholarly pursuits and advocacy initiatives. Previous studies have shown that women's agency, opportunities, and well-being are influenced by psychological, social, political, and economic factors [2]. Nevertheless, some rural communities in India continue to face long-standing gender stereotypes and oppression, even if there have been efforts to address these issues. This sad truth is all the more disturbing when considered in light of the abuse and mistreatment that girls and women face. The urban-rural divide is still very much there, even though women have had new opportunities brought about by technology, globalization, and industrialization [3]. Still, there are signs of improvement and optimism among these difficulties. A gradual but steady transition is taking place, thanks to grassroots efforts, community-led projects, and the lobbying of non-governmental organizations [4].

Finally, a holistic and integrative strategy is required to address the gender issues that are intrinsic to women's empowerment and gender equality in rural India. There is a bigger problem that needs fixing right now, and it has multiple components, including gender bias, low educational attainment, and salary inequities. A more comprehensive and long-lasting change is possible when we tackle the underlying causes of gender inequality, which include both economic disparities and the social and cultural standards that uphold them.

Objectives

- To understand women empowerment and its various forms.
- To study the opportunities and challenges in gender equality and women empowerment in the rural areas of India.
- To evaluate the measures to overcome gender equality challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Types of Women Empowerments

- **Social Women Empowerment:** The advancement of gender equality is an essential part of women's social empowerment. In a society that strives for general equality, men and women have equal access to resources, opportunities, and responsibilities in every aspect of life.
- **Educational Women Empowerment:** Providing women with the education, training, and self-assurance they need to take an active role in development is what this entails. It entails empowering women by raising their awareness of their rights and giving them the self-assurance to assert them.
- **Economic and Occupational Empowerment:** It suggests a higher standard of material existence. Making women a substantial component of human resources involves decreasing monetary reliance on men.
- **Legal Women Empowerment:** It implies establishing a strong legislative framework that encourages women's empowerment. It implies filling the gaps between the real occurrences and what the law mandates.
- **Political Women Empowerment:** It denotes the presence of a political structure that encourages women to take part in and lead political decision-making and governance [5].

Ongoing Situation of Women in Rural India

We are all still reeling from the pandemic, and this situation is no exception. It was once again the women who bore the brunt of the nationwide lockdown, which kept everyone confined to their homes. The men were unable to control their tempers and took it out on their coworkers, which is an extremely unpleasant experience. There was a clear correlation between the number of reports of domestic violence and the days of lockdown. Women reported 1,477 incidents of domestic violence in 2020, from March 25th to May 31st. Some statistics are mentioned figure 1 given below. In comparison to the preceding ten years' worth of complaints received between March and May, this 68-day period reported a higher volume. A staggering 86% of battered women never sought assistance, and an even more alarming 77% never even brought up the subject with anybody. An important warning has been issued by the National Commission for Women (NCW) concerning the rising incidence of domestic abuse [6]. One reason the risk of domestic violence is higher during these periods is because people are less likely to have social support systems. Consequently, victims have fewer options when it comes to finding help. The victim does not have the choice to stay somewhere safe, which is a common means of escaping violent situations [7].

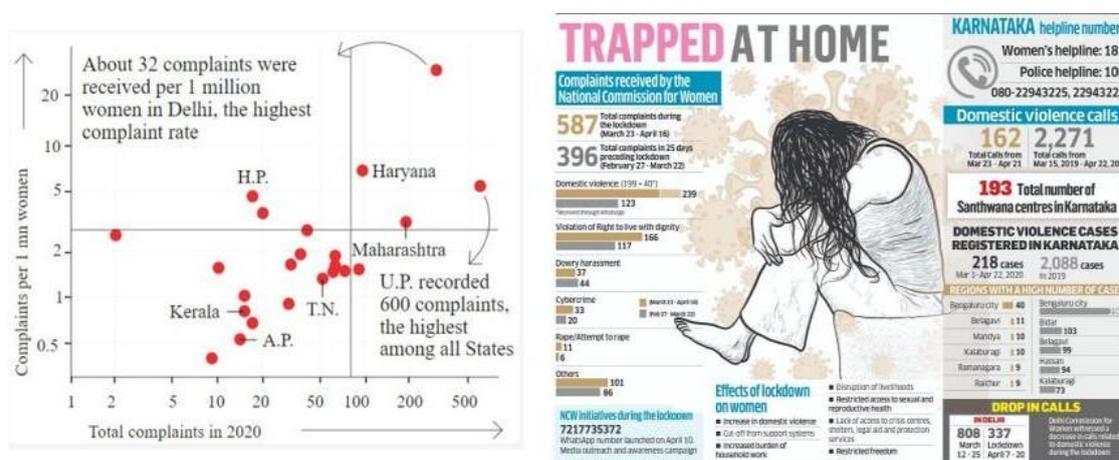


Fig. 1. Status of Women in Rural India [8]

Need of Women Empowerment

Both women's and society's sense of self-worth depend on this. It is empowering women that makes a difference. All areas of society, including the economics, politics, and education, can be accessible to women on an equal footing. Women can fully participate in society by choosing their own path in terms of religion, language, career, and other areas of interest. Geographical location, social class, educational attainment, and age are just a few of the numerous aspects that influence women's empowerment in India. There is national, regional, and state-level action on women's empowerment. Nevertheless, women encounter bias in various domains, including educational opportunities, economic security, healthcare, and political engagement, suggesting a significant disparity between the advancement of strategies and their implementation in community settings [9].

Challenges Faced by Rural Women

Farming, earning a living income, and starting their own businesses are all ways that women contribute to the rural economy. In addition to providing for their own families' material needs, such as food and shelter, they also tend to the health and happiness of their young and old. Collecting wood and water is a common kind of unpaid labor for rural women, especially in low-income homes. Many indigenous and grassroots women also serve as guardians of traditional knowledge, an asset vital to the survival, identity, and economic well-being of their communities. Women in rural areas receive lower wages than their male counterparts and are less likely to work for wages than women in metropolitan areas and males overall. Despite working longer hours, rural women may earn 25% less than males. They frequently work long hours in dangerous environments without proper health and safety precautions or social security. Sexual assault and other forms of harassment and abuse against women are unfortunately all too common among agricultural workers. There is a dearth of female participation in organizations that advocate for both employees and employers, which in turn hinders their ability to have their voices heard and their ideas implemented. There are a lot of ways in which women in rural areas face prejudice. They may face prejudice not only because of their gender, but also because of their religion, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. People from marginalized groups, such as indigenous or tribal populations, frequently face enormous gaps in decent employment opportunities and reside in rural places that are physically isolated [10].

Higher poverty rates and the negative impacts of climate change put rural women at a greater disadvantage than their urban counterparts. They face inadequate resources on top of the many obstacles that prevent them from utilizing vital public services like education and healthcare. In addition to limited economic possibilities and the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, rural women also endure gender-based violence, which worsens their already precarious status. Underrepresentation and marginalization of rural women in decision-making processes that affect their lives exacerbates gender-based violence. According to statistics, 70% of women in India have been victims of domestic abuse, making it a major issue. Additionally, young girls are already limited in their opportunities and agency as a result of child marriage since, as a result of societal pressures, they are afraid of losing their sanctity before marriage [11].

Latest Developments

The formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) is a direct result of the many government programmes that aim to assist rural women. More than 50 million small business entrepreneurs, including 78% women, receive support from schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana. Another program with the same goal of providing rural women with access to education, training, jobs, and health and nutrition services is Mahila Shakti Kendra [12]. The all-female Sargam Mahila band from Dhibra Village, close to Patna, is breaking down gender and caste norms in every way possible. The townspeople and family mocked the group of 10 at first, but they kept going because they believed in themselves. Bihar is one of the most unwelcoming states for women, ranking worst on the gender vulnerability index in terms of education, health, poverty, and other related factors. Varghese, who was bestowed the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian honours, revealed that the Sargam Mahila Band's female members receive twenty-four dollars (\$24) for each performance [13]. Incomes are rising because rural women are actively participating in both agricultural and non-agricultural economic activities. Their support for the economy is growing stronger every year, and their contribution is substantial.

Suggestions for Economic Empowerment of Rural Women

One of the most important ways to help women gain economic independence is to ensure that they have access to quality education, which includes literacy programs. Establishing schools, colleges, and even universities just for women is necessary to promote women's education at all levels and to reduce gender bias in the delivery and accessibility of

education. To help more girls, particularly those from low-income BPL households, get into mainstream schools, the government and a number of NGOs have begun offering financial incentives and other forms of support. As a result, more women are finding mainstream jobs thanks to literacy, vocational, and technical training programs that equip women with marketable skills and improve their decision-making ability [14].

Throughout history and especially during the COVID-19 epidemic, women have faced enormous obstacles in Indian and global communities. Gender inequality is on the decline, but there are still a lot of issues that need fixing because preexisting gender barriers have just become worse. Some examples include gender stereotypes in the workplace, bullying, sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and educational equity. It is critical to bring attention to the issue of gender inequality and the need to use technology to support programs that empower women. It is possible to arrange for local support groups, interactive videoconferencing software, and mobile app usage. By doing so, women will be able to forge a feeling of community, find their voice, and develop the confidence to make a difference in the lives of others around them. Women need to be educated and supported in society, while men and other genders need to be made aware of the changes in women's behaviour caused by repression and the effects it has on them. Furthermore, understanding how to confidently tackle challenges and cooperate with both governmental and non-governmental groups to support this effort is crucial, as eradicating gender inequality will require collective effort [15].

DISCUSSION

Achieving gender equality in India requires empowering women on many fronts, including social, educational, economic, legal, and political. The inherent problems that rural communities have, like lower levels of education, less job possibilities, and increased violence, are made worse by the COVID-19 epidemic [16]. Self-Help Groups and other government programs provide encouraging assistance despite these challenges. Improving access to high-quality education and vocational training, making better use of technology, and encouraging cooperation among communities, NGOs, and the government are all necessary to tackle these concerns [17]. For development to be meaningful and equitable, there must be a connection between policy and practice.

CONCLUSION

The study emphasizes the critical importance of a holistic strategy to empower women in rural India. Gender prejudices and sociocultural norms persist, causing substantial gaps to persist despite numerous initiatives. The health, education, and economic inequalities that rural women already endure have been worsened by the epidemic and other forms of discrimination. A comprehensive approach is necessary to tackle these obstacles. Reforming the legal system, expanding opportunities for vocational and academic training, and encouraging more people to get involved in politics are all part of this. Overcoming these obstacles can also be helped by grassroots initiatives and technology. To empower people and create a more equal society while also improving socioeconomic development, the government, NGOs, and communities must work together to close the gap between theory and practice.

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