

Rural Women: Integral for AatmaNirbhar Bharat

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Government of India has made significant impact in empowering rural women through economic inclusion, assuring social parity and ease of living. Rate of rural women participation in workforce was estimated to be 24.8 percent and out of which 80 percent are engaged in agriculture and allied sector. Being an important demographic dividend, rural women empowerment can be an important contributor for economic reforms in realising an ambitious target of a USD 5 trillion economy for India by 2024-25 and achieving UN- millennium goals by 2030.

New India, under the leadership of honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, envisions rural India as an asset laden with great potential to speed up its economic development and also yield on delivering Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Looking at spree of recent schemes targeting well-being of rural women like Ujjwala Yojana, Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), National Health Mission and several other initiatives - empowerment of rural women seems to be the heart of a plan to attain dream of an Aatma Nirbhar Bharat. Dwelling deeper, most flagship schemes and programmes of Government of India are initiated to improve rural women's stature in society by creating diverse livelihood opportunities and engagements in paid employment. Schemes like Prime Minister's Employment Generation Program (PMEGP), National Livelihoods Mission, Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), National Rural Economic Transformation Project (NRETP), Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) etc. have evolved the rural ecosystem and facilitated socio-economic empowerment of women in India (Patel and Sethi, 2022). These measures have opened avenues for access to education, productive resources, capacity building, skill development, healthcare facilities and diversified livelihood opportunities through beneficiary schemes. These development initiatives across rural ecosystems have given a fillip to rural women participation in economic activities and improved quality of life. Hence, empowering rural women is vital to boost economy, food security, poverty alleviation, reducing impact of climate change and support in achieving the UN- millennium goals by 2030.



Rural Women Participation in Agriculture and Allied Sector

In the last decade, there was an absolute increase in population, primarily in urban area. The rural and urban population recorded in 2001 was 74.3 crore and 28.6 crore respectively; whilst in 2011 it was 83.3 crore and 37.7 crore, respectively (Census, 2011). At the same time, workforce participation rate for urban male and rural male was at par while participation of rural women was significantly higher than urban women. In 2011-12, workforce participation rate for urban male and urban female are 54.6 percent and 14.7 percent respectively whilst rural male and rural female are 54.3 percent and 24.8 percent, respectively (MoSP, 2017).

In rural communities, agriculture and allied sector is the primary source of livelihood of 80 percent of all economically active rural women. Thirty-three percent among them constitute agricultural labour force and 48 percent are self-employed farmers. Women are working extensively in farm activities like production of major grains, sowing, manure preparation, fertilizer/pesticide application, seed selection and seedling production, weeding, transplanting, threshing, winnowing, etc. Also, they are engaged

in allied activities viz. management of livestock, milk collection, fish processing, collection of non-timber forest produce (NTFP), etc. However, several impediments are limiting productive capacities of rural women viz economic disparity, coupled with low levels of education, being unskilled, tradition limitations, unequal distribution of work, inequality in average wages, etc.

There has been a significant defeminisation of rural workforce in the year 2004-05 and 2011-12 as female workers withdrew from agriculture work in large numbers (Chand et al., 2017). Despite the reported decline, female participation is still higher in agriculture (Bhogal and Kamal Vatta, 2020). The traditional farming skills amongst rural women had significantly helped in enhanced farm productivity and lowered poverty and starvation. Hence, adoption of women-oriented reforms at grassroots level with ensured access to resources, skill development and opportunities in agriculture would increase agricultural output in developing countries between 2.5 and 4 percent (FAO, 2011).

Mainstreaming Women Farmers

Concept of 'Gender Mainstreaming in Agriculture' was laid by the present government to encourage participation of rural women in agriculture. The mission was propagated to ensure access to ongoing women-oriented schemes and resources across rural setups. Beneficiary-oriented schemes with special provisions for rural women are acquainted by Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare. These special schemes provide for States and other implementing agencies to incur at least 30 percent expenditure on women farmers. Also, research programmes have been conducted to understand the major barriers and gaps amongst women farmers. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research through one of its institute i.e National Research Centre for Women in Agriculture (NRCWA) have been conducting several research programmes to improve rural setups and remove impediments for women engaged in farming activities. Exclusive research projects in aspect of gender equality in agriculture and household economy, management of coastal agro-eco system, extension methods for farm women, standardisation of women specific field practices, occupational health hazards, reducing drudgery of women in agricultural operations, eco-friendly

pest management technologies, evaluation of interactive learning modules, etc. are undertaken by NRCWA. With pro-women initiatives, percentage of female operational holding in the country has increased from 12.78 percent during 2010-11 to 13.78 percent during 2015-16 (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2019). Besides agricultural practices, studies have revealed that rural women are earning extra income from sale of products viz. dairy products, dung cakes, eggs and meat.

Evolving Rural Setup for Women Empowerment: Safety, Security and Ease of Living for all

The status of rural women is evolving since the inception of reforms in area of rural development. The schemes like Prime Minister's Employment Generation Program (PMEGP), National Livelihoods Mission, Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) etc. have made significant contributions in improving stature of rural women in India at the grassroots level. The setting up of Mahila Shakti Kendras (MSK) at district level has provided safety and security to rural women.

Also, "Ease of living" led woman empowerment initiatives have been undertaken by the Government of India to improve well-being, environment and life style of rural women. Under its aegis, clean cooking fuel and drinking water is provided to all rural household through schemes i.e Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) and Jal Jeevan Mission. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana was launched in May 2016 and aimed to provide clean energy fuel of Liquified Petroleum Gas (LPG) to 80 million rural women in India. Studies have shown that all the dimensions of PMUY significantly influenced socio-economic aspects of women empowerment (Yadav 2020). Usage of LPG was meant to replace the use of traditional smoky *chulhas* that causes several health hazards. Combustion of biomass and coal is estimated to have caused approximately 780,000 premature deaths a year in India in 2016 (Pillarsetti et al., 2019). Hence, this initiative would help in reducing health disorders, indoor air pollution and deforestation in rural regions.

A flagship programme for providing tap water connectivity to rural household was implemented as Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) under Ministry of Jal Shakti. The mission aimed to provide tap water connection to every rural household in country by 2024. About 101 districts, 1,159 blocks, 67,473 Gram Panchayats and 1,39,366 villages have achieved 'Har Ghar Jal' in the country. In the year 2021, Telangana, Goa, Haryana, Puducherry, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Dadar and Nagar Haveli, and Daman and Diu have achieved 100 percent tap water coverage (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2022).

Further, the drive for clean sanitation facilities in every rural household was initiated under SBM (G) (Swachh Bharat Mission-Grameen). The focus of the mission was to maintain Open Defecation Free (ODF) behaviour and solid and liquid waste management for clean rural environment. These measures have boosted self-confidence amongst rural women.

In the recently announced Union Budget 2022, funds allocation has been increased to scale up these missions towards public health and well-being of people living in rural areas. The fund allocation for JJM has been increased from Rs. 45,000 crore in 2021-22 to Rs. 60,000 crore in 2022-23. For SBM (G), Rs.7,192 crore have been allocated in budget for the year 2022-23 (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2022).

Safety, security and socio-economic parity are important for rural women empowerment. In this direction, Mission Shakti, an umbrella scheme is implemented by Ministry of Women and Child Development. This scheme includes setting up of National, State and District level Hubs for empowerment of women, women helplines, one stop centres, Sakhi Niwas or working women hostels, shakti sadan's or homes for destitute and troubled women, crèches, etc. The Anganwadi Services are set up in rural areas to provide health services and to raise awareness towards health and nutrition. Through National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and Public Health Infrastructure, a package of six services is available for pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under the age of 6 years viz. (i) Supplementary Nutrition programme (SNP); (ii) Pre-school non-formal education; (iii) Nutrition and Health Education; (iv)

Immunisation; (v) Health Check-up and (vi) Referral Services. POSHAN Abhiyan, Scheme for Adolescent Girls and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana are major initiatives to address malnutrition and provide timely access to maternity facilities and awareness to rural women.

To protect rural women against violence and abuses, Sakhi Centres or One Stop Centres (OSCs) are established to facilitate with a range of integrated services under one roof such as police facilitation, medical aid, legal aid and legal counselling, psycho-social counselling, temporary shelter etc. (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2021; 2021a).

Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Opportunities for Rural Women

Participation of rural women in workforce is significant for economic development of the country (MoSPI, 2017). For this, capacity building and development of skills would be crucial for creating better livelihood opportunities for rural women. As per Invest India (2022), effective awareness generation campaigns are prerequisite to bridge the gap between the available options for vocational education and skill training. These awareness campaigns may encourage rural women to opt for non-traditional professions such as information and communication technology (ICT).

Several inter-ministerial initiatives of Government of India are focused on promoting women farmers to enhance their livelihood, social and economic gains. The Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and Ministry of Rural Development have been encouraging the participation of rural women farmer through various schemes. The Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) is one of the major initiatives for skilling rural women farmers. MKSP was introduced as a sub component of DAY-NRLM (Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana — National Rural Livelihoods Mission) by the Ministry of Rural Development. It is implemented through State Rural Livelihoods Mission (SRLM) across India. Under DAY-NRLM scheme, trainings on use of latest agricultural techniques, agro-ecological best practices, etc. are being imparted to women farmers through community resource persons and extension agencies. Under DAY-

NRLM, about 58,295 *Krishi Sakhi* were trained by 735 State Level Resource Persons (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2021a). Skill training courses in agriculture and allied areas (of minimum 200 hours duration) are conducted for farmers including women farmers through National Training Institutes, State Agricultural Management and Extension Training (SAMETIs), Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and State Agricultural Universities (SAUs), across the country. Apart from these, women farmer specific training programmes on topics like household food security by kitchen gardening and nutrition gardening; design and development of low/minimum cost diet; designing and development for high nutrient efficiency diet; minimisation of nutrient loss in processing; processing and cooking; rural crafts, etc. are organised through extension bodies (Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, 2021).

With the engagement of Farmers Producer Organisation (FPO) and women Self-Help Groups (SHG), community level awareness on women-oriented programmes is reaching out to remote rural regions. Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) implemented by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship provides several short duration skill training programmes for rural youth and women to earn their livelihood. Sixty-six per cent of total trained candidates under the Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (RSETI) programme are women. The RSETI provides several skill trainings on making of homemade incense sticks (Agarbatti), soft toys, *papad*, pickle, masala powder, beauty parlour management and costume jewellery, etc. Under the RSETI scheme, 10 training courses out of the total 64 are exclusively for women candidates. Under this programme, about 26.28 lakh women candidates have been trained since inception (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022a).

Several projects aimed to generate entrepreneurship opportunities for rural women are being undertaken by the Government of India. The Start-Up Village Entrepreneurship Programme (SVEP), implemented under Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) provides self-employment opportunities, financial assistance and training to create local community enterprises. Under SVEP, about 75

percent of the enterprises are owned and managed by women (Ministry of Rural Development, 2022).

Also, a nationwide placement-linked skill training program for rural youth was initiated as Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY). The Mahila Shakti Kendra (MSK) developed by Ministry of Women and Child development has empowered rural women through community participation and raising awareness on girl education, maternal care, health, etc.

Financial Empowerment

The financial inclusion and accessibility to banking through Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has boosted prospects of rural women participation in formal sector. Jan Dhan campaign has ensured access to financial services viz. banking, savings and deposit accounts, remittance, credit, insurance, pension, etc. in an affordable manner to rural women. Through financial inclusion, transparent mode of transaction and timely access to financial services through direct benefits transfer (DBT) are provided to rural women. Since the implementation of this scheme, 43.04 crore accounts have been opened in the country. Further, this constitute 55.47 percent (23.87 crore) women account holders and 66.69 percent (28.70 crore) are Jan Dhan accounts in rural and semi-urban areas (Ministry of Finance, 2021).

This financial inclusion has helped rural population to fight the crisis during COVID-19 pandemic outbreak with uninterrupted access to financial aid. Other initiatives like Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY), Stand-Up India Scheme, and Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) are additional supporting steps towards financial empowerment and entrepreneurship development of rural women. Over nine crore women have benefitted jointly from MUDRA and Stand-Up India (Ashish Kumar, 2019).

Conclusion

Rural transformation can be expedited by scaling up programmes for rural women's empowerment. Skill development, access to education, healthcare, safe and secure environment, ownership rights, and new technology can play a significant role in improving

lives of rural women. Empowering women farmers will enhance agriculture productivity and help in building an empowered nation.

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