

From Silence to Strength: Breaking Social Barriers Faced by Rural Women

Preeti^{1*}, Santosh² and Ella Rani³

Ph.D. Student¹⁻², Assistant Professor³,

*¹⁻³Dept. of Extension Education and Communication Management,
College of Community Science, CCSHAU, Hisar, Haryana (125001) India.*

Corresponding Author

Preeti

Email: preetisaini8141@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

Rural women play a crucial role in agriculture, household management and community development, yet their contributions often remain unrecognized due to persistent social barriers. Gender discrimination, limited access to education, economic dependence, restricted mobility and exclusion from decision-making processes continue to hinder their empowerment. These challenges not only affect women's well-being but also impede sustainable rural development and intergenerational progress. However, increasing access to education, skill development, Self-Help Groups, extension education and supportive legal frameworks are transforming their status. Collective action and changing societal attitudes are enabling rural women to emerge as entrepreneurs and community leaders. Breaking these barriers is essential for achieving gender equality and fostering inclusive and resilient rural transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Rural women constitute a vital and dynamic segment of society, playing an indispensable role in agriculture, household management and community development. They provide substantial

contributions to the production of food, the care of livestock, the management of natural resources and the general welfare of their families. Due to strongly ingrained patriarchal norms and sociocultural practices, rural

women frequently continue to be excluded and their efforts go unacknowledged despite their significant contributions. Their personal and professional development is nevertheless hampered by social constraints such as gender discrimination, early marriage, restricted mobility, unequal wage structures and limited access to education. In many rural communities, traditional beliefs and customs confine women to domestic roles, limiting their participation in economic and decision-making processes (Moyo *et al.* 2025).

Now the story of rural women is slowly changing from one of quiet to one of empowerment and strength. Their confidence and self-reliance have increased due to increased access to education, skill development programs and employment prospects. Platforms for group action and financial inclusion have been made available by the establishment of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), microfinance programs and cooperative movements (Ahmed, 2024). Additionally, a favourable climate for their socioeconomic advancement has been established by constitutional protections, gender-sensitive government policies and the active participation of non-governmental groups. Extension education and community-based interventions have played a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge, building capacities and promoting gender equality in rural areas. The growing penetration of digital technologies and mass media has further expanded rural women's access to information, markets and support networks (Novo *et al.* 2014). As a result, many rural women are emerging as entrepreneurs, community leaders and change agents, challenging traditional norms and advocating for their rights. Breaking the social barriers faced by rural women is not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive rural development. Empowered women contribute to improved

household nutrition, better education for children, poverty reduction and enhanced community resilience. Therefore, understanding and addressing the challenges faced by rural women is essential for fostering gender equality and achieving holistic rural transformation (Obi and A. V. 2021). This article explores the nature of these social barriers and highlights the pathways through which rural women transition from silence to strength, becoming powerful catalysts of social change.

Social Barriers

Gender Discrimination

Gender bias remains one of the most significant challenges faced by rural women. Preference for male children, unequal access to education, wage disparities and limited ownership of land and assets perpetuate their subordinate status. Such discrimination restricts their opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Limited Access to Education

Educational attainment among rural women is often lower than that of their male counterparts due to socio-cultural norms, early marriages and economic constraints. Lack of education limits their awareness of rights, access to information and ability to participate effectively in decision-making processes.

Economic Dependence

Although rural women contribute substantially to agricultural and allied activities, their work is frequently unpaid or undervalued. Limited access to credit, markets and productive resources further reinforces their economic dependence on male family members.

Restricted Mobility and Social Norms

Traditional customs and patriarchal values often restrict women's mobility and

participation in public life. Practices such as purdah, social seclusion and societal expectations hinder their engagement in education, employment and community leadership.

Limited Participation in Decision-Making

Rural women are often excluded from household and community decision-making processes. Their opinions are frequently overlooked, reducing their influence on matters affecting their lives and communities.



Fig: Consequences of Social Barriers

Pathways from Silence to Strength

1. Education and Skill Development

Education is a powerful tool for empowering rural women. Literacy and vocational training enhance their confidence, awareness and employment opportunities. Government initiatives such as adult education programs and digital literacy campaigns have significantly contributed to this transformation.

2. Economic Empowerment

Self-Help Groups (SHGs), microfinance institutions and livelihood programs have enabled rural women to become financially independent. Access to credit and income-generating activities strengthens their bargaining power within households and

communities. Pentahelix had develop the model of empowerment to strengthen the women.

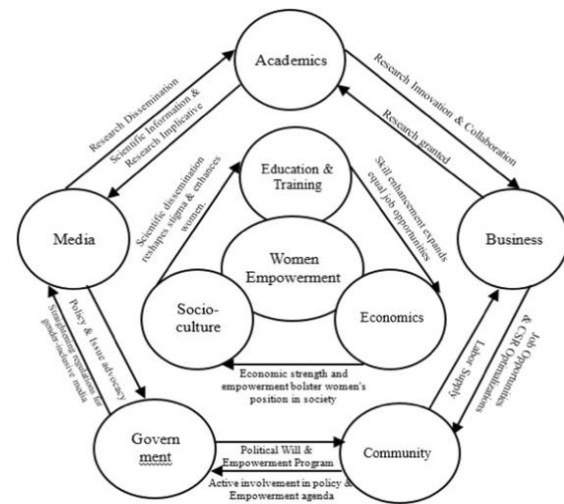


Fig: Modified-Pentahelix Model for Women Empowerment.

Source: Widiastuti et al. (2024)

3. Role of Extension Education

Extension education plays a pivotal role in disseminating knowledge, building capacities and promoting gender equality. Gender-sensitive extension services ensure that rural women gain access to agricultural innovations, training and leadership opportunities.

4. Legal and Policy Support

Various constitutional provisions and government schemes safeguard the rights of women. Laws related to equal wages, inheritance, protection from domestic violence and political representation provide a supportive framework for their empowerment.

5. Collective Action and Community Participation

Participation in community-based organizations, cooperatives and local governance institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions fosters leadership and social recognition. Collective action helps women

challenge discriminatory practices and advocate for their rights.

6. Changing Societal Attitudes

Awareness campaigns, education and media engagement are gradually transforming patriarchal mindsets. Involvement of men and community leaders in gender-sensitization programs is essential for sustainable social change.

CONCLUSION

The journey of rural women from silence to strength represents a powerful narrative of resilience, determination and transformation. Breaking social barriers is not only essential for achieving gender equality but also for fostering inclusive and sustainable rural development. Empowered rural women contribute significantly to the well-being of their families, communities and the nation as a whole. Continued efforts by governments, extension systems, civil society and communities are crucial to ensure that rural women can fully realize their potential and lead the path toward a more equitable society.

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