



EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL NORMS ON RURAL WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS

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Abstract :

This abstract encapsulates a qualitative research endeavor focused on unraveling the intricate interplay between cultural norms and the involvement of rural women in entrepreneurship and empowerment programs. In societies worldwide, cultural norms wield substantial influence over gender roles and expectations, often posing challenges to women's access to economic opportunities and participation in decision-making processes. This research embarks on a journey to delve into the depth of this phenomenon, aiming to provide nuanced insights into

how cultural norms impact rural women's engagement in entrepreneurial activities and their participation in empowerment initiatives.

Keywords : Rural women, Entrepreneurship, Women Empowerment, Cultural barriers

Introduction :

In societies around the world, the empowerment of women has emerged as a critical agenda for sustainable development and societal progress. As gender disparities persist, particularly in rural areas, understanding the multifaceted factors that influence women's participation in various spheres of life becomes imperative. Cultural norms, deeply rooted in societal structures, exert a profound influence on women's lives, shaping their roles, opportunities, and aspirations. This research embarks on a journey to explore the intricate relationship between cultural norms and rural women's participation in entrepreneurship and empowerment programs. By delving into the interplay of these norms, the study seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which they influence women's engagement in



initiatives aimed at enhancing their agency, economic independence, and overall well-being.

The empowerment of women has long been recognized as a crucial factor in achieving sustainable development and societal progress. However, despite significant strides in recent decades, gender disparities persist, particularly in rural areas where cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping women's lives. This research delves into the intricate relationship between cultural norms and the participation of rural women in entrepreneurship and empowerment programs. By shedding light on the influence of these norms, this study aims to contribute to the design of more effective and contextually relevant interventions that foster women's agency and promote gender equality. Cultural norms are the unwritten rules, beliefs, and values that govern behavior within a given society. These norms are often deeply ingrained, serving as the foundation upon which social interactions, expectations, and roles are constructed. In many societies, these norms dictate the division of labor, allocate decision-making power, and prescribe acceptable behaviors for both

men and women. Particularly in rural settings, where tradition and community hold significant sway, cultural norms play a substantial role in shaping women's lives. These norms, while sometimes acting as a source of cohesion and identity, can also serve as barriers that hinder women's participation in economic and social spheres.

Research Objectives :

The objectives of the study aims the following :

1. National Rural women empowerment programme in India.
2. Challenges in Implementing Rural Women Empowerment Programs.
3. Global Approaches to Rural Women Empowerment and Entrepreneurship Development.
4. Barriers and Opportunities for Rural Women's Participation in Entrepreneurship.

Research Methodology :

The research methodology used in the descriptive research method. This approach focuses on describing and interpreting the characteristics of a



particular phenomenon or population, without manipulating or controlling variables. secondary data was gathered from the government's reports, various articles to obtain information about the cultural norms and the involvement of rural women in entrepreneurship and empowerment programs.

National Rural Women Empowerment Programme in India

In India, rural women have historically faced multifaceted challenges stemming from socioeconomic disparities, cultural norms, and limited access to resources. Recognizing the importance of empowering rural women to drive equitable development, the Indian government has implemented following national programs aimed at enhancing their participation in economic, social, and political spheres..

One of the pivotal initiatives is the **National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)** launched in 2011 under the Ministry of Rural Development. NRLM strives to alleviate poverty by promoting sustainable livelihoods among rural communities, particularly women. Through self-help groups (SHGs),

NRLM empowers women to save, access credit, and engage in income-generating activities. It provides capacity-building training, financial support, and market linkages, enabling rural women to establish and manage micro-enterprises.

Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana - National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY - NRLM) is being implemented by the government in a mission mode across the nation with the aim of uniting the rural poor women into Self Help Groups (SHGs), nurturing and supporting them continuously until they achieve appreciable increases in incomes over time, improve their quality of life, and escape extreme poverty. The Mission is being carried out in 6,789 blocks spanning 707 districts in all 28 States and 6 Union Territories (UTs) as of February 2022. 8.16 billion women have joined more than 74.98 million SHGs overall. More than 74.98 lakh SHGs made up of 8.16 crore women have been formed. In the past three years, 2.78 crore women, or 34%, have been mobilized.

Additionally, the **Mahila Kisan SashaktikaranPariyojana (MKSP)**



acknowledges the vital role of women in agriculture. Launched in 2010, MKSP aims to enhance the participation of women in various stages of agricultural value chains. By providing training in modern agricultural practices, access to inputs, and establishing women-friendly farm technology centers, MKSP empowers rural women as confident and informed farmers.

Approximately 38 lakh female farmers have received training so far via the Mahila Kisan SashaktikaranPariyojana (MKSP). Under the Annual Action Plans of States/UTs, the MKSP intervention learning has been extended to many regions of the nation. As a result, DAYNRLM has so far provided coverage for 1.44 crore Mahila Kisan (women farmers).

To bridge the gender gap in education, the **National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL)** was initiated in 2003. This program targets the education of girls from marginalized communities, emphasizing retention and enrollment in elementary schools. It also aims to address cultural barriers by sensitizing communities to the value of education

for girls and enhancing the overall learning environment.

Recognizing the importance of maternal and child health, the **Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)** was launched in 2005. Although not exclusive to rural areas, this program has a significant impact on rural women. JSY incentivizes institutional deliveries, aiming to reduce maternal and neonatal mortality rates. By offering cash incentives, the program encourages pregnant women to seek proper medical care, thereby improving the health outcomes of both mothers and infants.

The programme focuses on helping low-income pregnant women, with specific consideration given to the states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Rajasthan, Orissa, and Jammu and Kashmir, which have low institutional delivery rates. The remaining states are referred to as High Performing States (HPS), whereas these states have been designated as Low Performing States (LPS).

A comprehensive approach to rural women's empowerment is embodied in the **National Mission for**



Empowerment of Women (NMEW) initiated in 2010. NMEW focuses on enhancing the overall status of women by addressing their socioeconomic, health, and education needs. It coordinates and monitors various women-centric programs and initiatives, promoting a holistic and synergistic approach to women's empowerment.

The **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)** program, launched in 2015, aims to counter the declining child sex ratio and promote the education of girls. While not exclusive to rural areas, this initiative holds special significance for rural communities where the gender gap in education and health services is often pronounced. BBBP combines advocacy, awareness campaigns, and direct incentives to create an environment conducive to the survival, protection, and education of the girl child.

The national sex ratio at birth has increased by 19 points, from 918 in 2014-15 to 937 in 2020-21. Girls' secondary school enrollment has climbed from 75.51% in 2014-15 to 79.46% in 2020-21. The percentage of first-trimester ANC registration has increased from 61% in 2014-15 to

73.9% in 2020-21. The percentage of institutional deliveries increased from 87% in 2014-15 to 94.8% in 2020-21. The national sex ratio at birth increased by 19 points, from 918 to 937. Girls' secondary school enrollment grew from 75.51% to 79.46%. The percentage of women who registered for ANC in the first trimester increased from 61% to 73.9%. The proportion of institutional deliveries increased from 87% to 94.8%.

India's national rural women empowerment programs reflect the government's commitment to addressing gender disparities and fostering the holistic development of women in rural areas. By targeting economic, educational, health, and societal aspects, these initiatives aim to uplift rural women, enhance their agency, and enable them to contribute significantly to the nation's progress. While challenges persist, these programs represent vital steps toward a more inclusive and equitable society.

Challenges in Implementing Rural Women Empowerment Programs

Rural empowerment programs aimed at uplifting women in underprivileged communities play a pivotal role in



driving sustainable development and social progress. However, the successful implementation of these programs is often hindered by a range of challenges that arise from complex socioeconomic, cultural, and logistical factors. The following key challenges in implementing rural women empowerment programs and suggests strategies to overcome these obstacles.

Socioeconomic Barriers: Rural areas are characterized by high levels of poverty and limited access to resources. Many women lack formal education and essential skills, making it challenging to engage them effectively in empowerment programs. The lack of financial resources also prevents women from fully participating, as they might be unable to afford transportation, materials, or the time required for training. Overcoming these barriers necessitates tailoring programs to fit the specific needs of the target community, providing financial support, and offering flexible scheduling to accommodate women's existing responsibilities.

Cultural Norms and Gender Bias: Deep-rooted cultural norms often perpetuate gender inequality and limit

women's opportunities. Traditional gender roles might discourage women from pursuing education, work, or leadership positions. Empowerment programs must engage with community leaders and influencers to challenge these norms and promote the value of women's participation. Sensitization workshops, awareness campaigns, and mentor-ship initiatives can contribute to changing perceptions and encouraging greater gender equality.

Limited Infrastructure and Accessibility: Many rural areas lack basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity, and communication networks. This poses significant challenges in terms of program delivery and access to information. Implementers must find innovative ways to deliver training and support, such as utilizing mobile technology, establishing local centers, or organizing community gatherings. Infrastructure development efforts should run in parallel with empowerment programs to create an environment conducive to success.

Geographic Dispersal: Rural communities are often dispersed over large areas, making it difficult to reach



all potential participants. This dispersal can lead to isolation and hinder effective program coordination. To address this challenge, collaboration with local organizations and leveraging community networks is crucial. Mobile units, community-based facilitators, and online platforms can help bridge the geographic gap and ensure wider reach.

Limited Access to Financial Services:

Access to credit and financial services is a critical factor in rural women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. Many women lack access to formal banking institutions and are vulnerable to exploitative lending practices. Empowerment programs should collaborate with microfinance institutions to provide women with affordable credit options and financial literacy training. This helps build women's financial independence and promotes sustainable businesses.

Sustainability and Long-Term

Impact: Rural empowerment programs often face challenges in maintaining their impact over the long term. This can result from inadequate resources, dependency on external support, or insufficient community ownership. To

enhance sustainability, programs should focus on building local capacities, promoting entrepreneurship, and involving local communities in program planning and decision-making.

Lack of Data and Monitoring:

Measuring the impact of empowerment programs can be challenging due to the absence of reliable data in remote areas. Monitoring and evaluating program outcomes is essential to identify successes, areas for improvement, and to justify continued investment. Implementers should prioritize data collection and establish robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure programs are on track and to make informed adjustments as needed.

Resistance to Change:

Resistance to change is a common challenge when introducing new ideas or practices in rural communities. People might be hesitant to adopt new approaches due to fear of the unknown or concerns about disrupting established norms. Engaging community leaders, involving local influencers, and showcasing success stories from within the community can help overcome resistance and garner support for the empowerment initiatives.



The rural women empowerment programs hold immense potential for transformative change, they also face a host of challenges rooted in socioeconomic, cultural, and logistical factors. To overcome these obstacles, it's essential to tailor programs to local contexts, build partnerships with community leaders, provide adequate resources, and engage with local organizations. By addressing these challenges head-on, empowerment programs can make a meaningful and lasting impact, contributing to gender equality, poverty reduction, and holistic community development.

Global Approaches to Rural Women Empowerment and Entrepreneurship Development

Rural women empowerment and entrepreneurship development have gained international recognition as critical components of achieving gender equality, poverty reduction, and sustainable development. Governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses around the world have adopted various approaches to uplift rural women and enable them to thrive

as entrepreneurs. This essay explores some of the global approaches that have proven effective in advancing rural women empowerment and entrepreneurship development.

Education and Skill Development:

Education is a fundamental tool for empowerment. Globally, initiatives focus on providing rural women with access to quality education and skill development programs. These programs not only enhance women's employability but also equip them with the skills needed to start and manage businesses. Vocational training centers, literacy programs, and online courses have been established to cater to the diverse needs of rural women. UNESCO's emphasis on girls' education and literacy campaigns in partnership with local organizations exemplify such approaches.

Microfinance and Financial Inclusion:

Access to finance is a key challenge for rural women seeking to establish or expand businesses. Microfinance institutions and initiatives that promote financial inclusion play a crucial role in providing women with credit, savings, and insurance services. Grameen Bank's



model in Bangladesh, which focuses on lending to women, has been replicated globally and has enabled millions of rural women to access capital for entrepreneurial endeavors.

Technology and Digital Inclusion:

Technology has the potential to bridge gaps in information, communication, and market access. Efforts to promote digital literacy and provide rural women with access to mobile phones, internet connectivity, and digital platforms have gained prominence. Organizations like the GSMA's Connected Women program work to close the gender gap in mobile phone ownership and internet usage, empowering women to access information, connect with markets, and manage businesses more effectively.

Capacity Building and Entrepreneurship Training:

Entrepreneurship training programs tailored to the needs of rural women have been widely adopted. These programs offer business management, financial literacy, marketing, and leadership skills. They empower women with the knowledge and confidence required to navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship. The International

Labour Organization (ILO) runs programs like the Women's Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality (WEDGE) program, promoting women's entrepreneurship globally.

Market Linkages and Value Chain

Integration: Linking rural women entrepreneurs to larger markets and value chains is crucial for expanding their reach and increasing income. Initiatives that establish market linkages, provide access to distribution networks, and facilitate partnerships with urban businesses enable rural women to tap into broader markets. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) works on strengthening value chains and connecting rural producers, including women, to markets.

Policy Advocacy and Legal Reforms:

Advocacy for policy changes that support women's rights, land ownership, and access to resources is an essential approach to rural women's empowerment. Organizations like the World Food Programme (WFP) and CARE International engage with governments and stakeholders to promote legal reforms that secure



women's land tenure and economic rights.

Collaborative Partnerships: Effective rural women empowerment requires collaboration between governments, NGOs, businesses, and local communities. Public-private partnerships and cross-sector collaborations facilitate resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and the implementation of comprehensive programs. The 10,000 Women initiative by Goldman Sachs and the International Trade Centre's SheTrades initiative are examples of partnerships that promote women's entrepreneurship globally.

Data Collection and Impact Measurement: Robust data collection and impact assessment are critical for designing evidence-based interventions. Organizations like the World Bank and the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) conduct research to understand the barriers faced by rural women and to measure the outcomes of empowerment initiatives.

The global approaches to rural women empowerment and entrepreneurship development are diverse and adaptable to specific contexts. These approaches

address challenges ranging from education and financial inclusion to technology access and policy advocacy. Effective strategies often combine multiple approaches to create holistic, sustainable change. As international recognition of the importance of rural women's empowerment grows, collaborative efforts will continue to shape effective strategies for uplifting women in rural communities worldwide.

Barriers and Opportunities for Rural Women's Participation in Entrepreneurship

Rural women's participation in entrepreneurship is a crucial pathway to their economic empowerment and the overall development of rural communities. However, this journey is often hindered by a complex interplay of barriers rooted in socioeconomic, cultural, and structural factors. Simultaneously, there exist opportunities that, if harnessed effectively, can pave the way for transformative change. This essay delves into the barriers and opportunities that shape rural women's engagement in entrepreneurship.

Barriers:



Socioeconomic Constraints: Limited access to financial resources is a significant barrier for rural women aspiring to become entrepreneurs. Many lack collateral, credit history, or knowledge of financial institutions, preventing them from accessing loans or investment capital. This scarcity of funds hampers their ability to initiate or scale up their businesses.

Gender Norms and Cultural Beliefs: Deep-seated gender norms often confine rural women to traditional roles, portraying entrepreneurship as outside their sphere. Cultural expectations around family duties and care-giving responsibilities can discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures, as their roles are primarily perceived as homemakers.

Limited Education and Skills: A lack of formal education and vocational skills restricts rural women's access to information, market trends, and business management know-how. Without adequate training, women may struggle to develop sustainable business models, manage finances, and navigate market complexities.

Inadequate Access to Information and Technology: Rural areas often suffer from limited connectivity and access to technology, depriving women of the information, market insights, and digital platforms that could facilitate business growth and innovation.

Unfavorable Policy Environment: Policy frameworks that fail to address gender-specific barriers can exacerbate challenges. Lack of supportive policies related to land ownership, property rights, and access to markets further marginalize rural women entrepreneurs.

Lack of Networking and Mentorship Opportunities: Entrepreneurial success is often fueled by networking and mentorship. Rural women may lack access to professional networks, role models, and mentorship programs that could provide guidance, encouragement, and valuable connections.

Opportunities:

Microfinance and Financial Inclusion: Microfinance institutions and innovative financial products targeted at rural women are crucial opportunities. Tailored microloans, savings accounts, and group lending models enable women to access capital and financial



services, breaking the cycle of limited resources.

Skill Development and Training Initiatives: Skills training programs can empower rural women with the tools they need for successful entrepreneurship. Training in areas such as financial literacy, business management, and marketing equips them with practical skills and boosts their confidence.

Supportive Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: Developing supportive ecosystems that include access to information, mentorship, and networking opportunities can play a pivotal role. Local entrepreneurship hubs, incubators, and women's collectives provide platforms for learning, collaboration, and innovation.

Technology Adoption and Digital Literacy: Advancements in technology offer rural women unprecedented opportunities. Digital platforms, e-commerce, and mobile applications enable them to reach wider markets, access information, and manage their businesses more efficiently.

Advocacy and Policy Reforms: Advocacy efforts to influence policy change can address systemic barriers. Engaging with policymakers and lobbying for gender-sensitive policies related to land ownership, access to credit, and market entry can create a more conducive environment for rural women entrepreneurs.

Strengthening Community Networks: Capitalizing on existing social networks within rural communities can enhance rural women's entrepreneurship. Women's self-help groups, community-based organizations, and cooperatives provide a foundation for collaborative ventures and mutual support.

Promoting Gender-Responsive Education: Investing in education that challenges traditional gender roles and emphasizes entrepreneurship can shift societal attitudes. Empowered by education, young girls can aspire to become future rural women entrepreneurs, contributing to a more inclusive economy.

Conclusion: The empowerment of women has long been recognized as a crucial factor in achieving sustainable development and



societal progress. However, despite significant strides in recent decades, gender disparities persist, particularly in rural areas where cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping women's lives. This research delves into the intricate relationship between cultural norms and the participation of rural women in entrepreneurship and empowerment programs. By shedding light on the influence of these norms, this study aims to contribute to the design of more effective and contextually relevant interventions that foster women's agency and promote gender equality.

As societies strive for gender equality and inclusive development, understanding the role of cultural norms in shaping women's participation is paramount. This research aspires to contribute to this understanding by shedding light on the intricate dynamics between cultural norms, rural women's engagement, and empowerment initiatives. By uncovering the nuanced interplay between these factors, the study aims to inform the design of interventions that are not only effective but also sensitive to the cultural contexts within which rural women navigate their aspirations and challenges. This research is poised to drive positive change by

informing the development of interventions that empower rural women to overcome cultural barriers, exercise agency, and realize their potential as transformative agents of change.

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