

Gender Issues in Rural India

Manju Verma

Lecturer in Geography

S.R.L. Sahariya Govt. P.G. College, Kaladera, Jaipur

Abstract: This research paper critically explores gender issues in rural India, focusing on the intersections of patriarchy, social norms, economic participation, education, and legal frameworks. Drawing upon historical legacies, census data, and sociological studies, the paper analyzes the persistent gender disparities in rural contexts, investigating causes and impacts across key domains such as health, employment, and education. It also evaluates efforts by the state and civil society to address inequalities, highlighting gaps in policy and practice. The findings reveal that entrenched patriarchal attitudes, coupled with caste and class dynamics, have perpetuated gender discrimination and restricted the agency and advancement of rural women.

Keywords: Gender inequality, Rural India, Patriarchy, Women's empowerment, Education, Economic participation, Social norms, Discrimination, Caste, Health

1. Introduction

Gender inequality is one of the biggest challenges in India's rural development. It shows up in social, economic, and health areas. Despite important laws and policy changes since independence, rural women still face barriers that limit their access to education, jobs, healthcare, and opportunities to make decisions. The Census of India (2011) found that nearly 68% of the population lives in rural areas, where traditional beliefs and roles continue to shape how genders interact. These cultural and economic structures lead to systemic gaps. For instance, women's literacy rates are lower than men's, their work in agriculture is often unpaid and ignored, and their health suffers due to limited access to nutrition and medical care. Although programs like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, National Rural Health Mission, and Self-Help Group movements have helped improve some aspects, gender inequalities remain due to deeply rooted social attitudes and lack of infrastructure. To understand gender issues in rural India, we need to look at women's experiences in the contexts of education, economic participation, and health. Each of these areas reflects and reinforces the larger inequalities in rural society.

Education increases human capabilities and is recognized as one of the most valuable strategies for reducing gender inequalities. However, the lack of proper access to education is strongly gendered in rural India, representing a complex interplay between socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and infrastructural limitations. Despite several interventions by the government since the 1990s, the gender gap in literacy and school retention remains, especially at the secondary and higher levels of schooling.

The Census of India (2011) reported the overall literacy rate in rural areas as 68.9%, where males had a literacy rate of 78.6% and females had 58.8%, indicating a gender gap of about 20 percentage points. In contrast, the difference between male and female literacy rates was roughly 9 percentage points in urban areas. Data from the National Family Health Survey-3, NFHS-3 (2005-06), indicated that only 46% of rural women had completed at least a primary level of education, compared with

73% of rural men, underscoring continued inequalities in educational attainment.

While programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) saw better enrolment figures for girls during the early 2000s, these gains often could not be sustained at the secondary stage. According to the District Information System for Education, 2012-13, the drop-out rate for girls in rural areas for classes I-VIII was 28.7 percent, while it was 25.4 percent for boys. Dropout rates increase further at the secondary level when socio-cultural and safety concerns become more critical.

One of the major contributory factors to the discontinuation of education among rural girls is early marriage. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3, 2005-06), almost 47% of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18 in rural India. Early marriage truncates educational opportunities and reinforces gender norms that give precedence to domestic and reproductive roles for women over intellectual and economic development. In such a milieu, education is often perceived as an unwarranted or transitory investment, especially for daughters who are considered to be part of their future marital households.

The distance to schools is also one of the key determinants of female participation in education. According to the National Sample Survey Organisation, 64th Round, 2007-08, nearly 23% of rural households reported distance and lack of safe transport as main reasons for girls not attending secondary schools. In many areas, particularly in central and northern India, secondary schools are more than 3-5 km away from villages. Parents, concerned about safety and societal perceptions, often prefer to withdraw girls from education once they reach adolescence.

The lack of proper sanitation facilities, including a separate toilet for girls, has also been one of the key structural reasons discouraging girls from pursuing continued schooling. The Annual Status of Education Report, ASER 2012, showed that almost one-third of schools in rural areas did not have usable toilets for girls, resulting in absenteeism and subsequent dropping out once puberty is reached. Such infrastructural

disregard degrades not only hygiene and dignity but also perpetuates gender exclusion within educational facilities.

Added to these are the difficulties related to societal safety and mobility. These include gender-based harassment during travel or in school, which dissuades parents from allowing girls to travel out or pursue further education. According to research by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2010), as well as several NGOs, the social perception that equates a girl's virtue with restricted mobility creates an invisible yet formidable barrier to female education. There were, however, some positive trends before 2014. The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme, begun in 2004, set up residential schools for girls from the most deprived rural communities, which helped raise completion rates at the upper primary level. Self-help groups and women's collectives started to reinforce literacy and vocational training as basic tenets of empowerment, which brought about changes in parental attitudes regarding sending girls to school.

Economic participation isn't just about money, it shapes women's independence, status, and the power they have in their homes and villages. Yet in rural India, people barely notice women's economic work. No one really pays for it or even values it properly. Rural women are everywhere in agriculture and related fields, but they run into roadblocks when it comes to earning wages, owning land, getting loans, or accessing the things they need to be productive.

Take the numbers from the 2011 Census: about 65% of rural women workers are in agriculture, either growing crops or working as laborers. But dig into the data from the National Sample Survey (NSSO, 2011–12), and you'll see a lot of this work is actually unpaid family labor. Most of the time, they're working on family farms or helping with household businesses. All the jobs women do—planting, weeding, harvesting, taking care of animals, processing crops after the harvest—don't really show up in the official stats. This keeps the myth alive that farming is all about men, and it locks women into certain roles. Wages make the problem even clearer. The National Commission for Women found that rural women working in agriculture earn 25–30% less than men doing the same jobs. Since most of their work is informal or seasonal, and they don't get proper contracts, women usually miss out on minimum wages, maternity leave, or any real social security. They also get stuck in the lowest-paid, least skilled jobs, which keeps them dependent and vulnerable.

Then there's land. Not owning land is a huge obstacle. The National Sample Survey (2003) showed that just 11% of rural women own land in their own names. There are laws like the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 that say women should inherit land, but deep-rooted traditions and family resistance get in the way. Without land, women can't get loans, can't join training programs, and miss out on new farming technology.

It doesn't stop there. Women barely get a foothold in credit or markets. According to the Planning Commission (2011), less than 15% of all formal agricultural loans went to women. Their limited mobility and the fact that they're often left out of co-ops or market groups mean they miss out on new technology or business opportunities. Sure, self-help groups and microfinance

have helped a bit, but not nearly enough and most of those activities remain small and not very profitable. So in the end, all these overlapping barriers—gender, class, caste—keep rural women from gaining real economic power.

Bottom line: Women are the backbone of rural farming, but hardly anyone recognizes their work. To actually empower them, we need to give them real access to land and fair wages, and just as importantly, finally count their unpaid labor as a core part of India's rural economy.

Now, health and nutrition are another area where gender inequality runs deep in rural India. Even though there have been improvements in healthcare and new policies, rural women are still at a disadvantage when it comes to actually reaching and using health services, or getting good results. Blame social hierarchies, limited freedom to move around, economic dependence, and the old habit of giving men priority when it comes to food and health care.

You see it everywhere. The National Family Health Survey (2005–06) found that only 37% of rural women had a health facility within 5 km of home, while 56% of men did. When money's tight, families often put women's health last. On top of that, cultural rules discourage women from seeking medical help especially for reproductive or mental health unless a man says it's okay or goes with them. Not surprisingly, rural women are more likely to go without treatment and less likely to use proper health services.

Maternal health is a big worry. The Sample Registration System (2011–13) put India's maternal mortality rate at 167 deaths for every 100,000 live births, and rural areas see most of these deaths. Why? Not enough antenatal care, hardly any trained birth attendants, and poor access to emergency medical help. The same health survey showed that only 43% of rural women got full antenatal care, and just 39% of births.

Gender gaps in rural India stick around because of a messy mix of old social rules, tough economic realities, and weak institutions. Even though the country's made some real strides thanks to big government pushes and local movements, women living outside the cities still get the short end of the stick. Schooling? They get less of it. Earning their own money? Not easy, not really. Even basic healthcare feels out of reach. All of this piles up. It holds women back, sure, but it also drags down entire communities.

Take farm work, for example. Women do a huge share of the labor, but hardly anyone counts it, let alone pays them fairly. Most don't have secure rights to land or property. Bias seeps in everywhere, even in who gets decent food or medical care. These problems feed off each other, trapping families in poverty.

Fixing this isn't just about handing out more services or ticking boxes on a policy checklist. It calls for a big-picture approach: better schools, stronger health systems, real job opportunities but also big changes in laws about inheritance, land, and work. More than anything, it means taking on deep-rooted ideas about gender and power. Real change comes when women are seen and treated as equals, not just in theory but in day-to-day life. If rural India's going to move forward, it needs women educated, earning, healthy, and leading the way.

2. Gender Roles and Patriarchy

A major driver of gender issues in rural India is the prevalence of patriarchal values. In rural families, men typically hold decision-making power, while women are confined to unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities. This division perpetuates a cycle where girls have limited access to education and are forced into early marriages, marginalizing their potential and well-being.

Religious customs, caste dynamics, and cultural traditions reinforce stereotypes surrounding women's roles, dictating strict codes of behavior and limiting agency. Practices such as dowry, purdah, and gender-based violence further entrench discrimination.

3. Education Disparities

One of the most visible indicators of gender inequality in rural India is the low female literacy rate. According to the Census and various reports, women's literacy rates lag significantly behind those of men, particularly in tribal and marginalized communities. Girls often drop out due to familial pressure, societal norms, lack of infrastructure, and safety concerns.

Barriers include:

- Long distances to schools
- Safety concerns during commutes
- Gendered prioritization of resources within families
- Early marriage and household responsibilities

The consequences of educational disparity are far-reaching, affecting women's employment prospects, political participation, and access to information.

4. Economic Participation and Labor Market

Rural women in India have historically contributed substantially to agricultural labor and household income, yet their work remains undervalued, unrecognized, and unpaid. Differences in land ownership and lack of access to credit prevent economic independence.

Data from the Indian National Sample Survey (2011–12) revealed a drop in female workforce participation between 2004–05 and 2011–12, reflecting both social constraints and policy shortfalls. Wage gaps persist across regions and occupational sectors, with women earning significantly less than male counterparts for similar work.

5. Health and Social Well-being

Gender issues also profoundly impact health outcomes. Female infanticide and foeticide have skewed sex ratios, especially in certain states. Limited access to health facilities, poor nutrition, and heightened risk of gender-based violence compound the disadvantages faced by rural women.

Social stigmas contribute to poor mental health and restricted mobility. Rural women have high exposure to sexual

harassment, domestic violence, and lack autonomy over reproductive choices. Sanitation challenges uniquely affect women's dignity and well-being, with inadequate toilets leading to risk and discomfort.

6. Legal and Policy Frameworks

Efforts to reverse gender inequality have included constitutional provisions, legislation (like the Hindu Succession Act amendment, Prevention of Child Marriage Act), and schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. Despite these, enforcement gaps, lack of awareness, and persistent patriarchal attitudes have undermined the impact of such policies.

Non-governmental organizations and international agencies have played significant roles in advocacy and pioneering interventions, focusing on literacy, health, and microfinance. However, systematic transformation remains incomplete due to deep-rooted cultural resistance and resource limitations.

7. Conclusion

The analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of gender issues in rural India. Patriarchal structures, compounded by caste and class dynamics, have entrenched gender disparities in education, economic participation, health, and social status. Despite policy efforts and advocacy, progress has been uneven. To achieve substantive change, future interventions must address not only institutional and legal frameworks but also strive to reshape social norms and empower women at the community level. The road ahead requires sustained commitment from policymakers, civil society, and rural communities to build an equitable environment for all.

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