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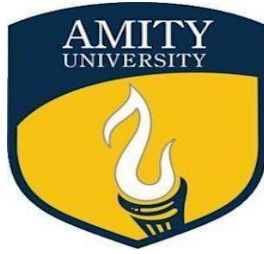


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Women Empowerment in Rural Areas: Laws and Their Implementation

Research Dissertation Submitted to

Amity Institute of Advanced Legal Studies

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In Part of Fulfilment of Requirement for Degree of Masters of Laws

(LLM)

Under the Guidance and Supervision of

Professor Dr. Arun Upadhyay

Submitted by

Lalhmingmawii

LLM (Constitutional Law)

Enrollment no – A0342624027

Batch 2024-2025

DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation titled “Women empowerment in Rural areas: Laws and their implementation” is my original work and has not been submitted, either in part or in full, for any other degree or academic qualification at any University or Institution.

I further declare that this dissertation complies with the ethical guidelines and academic integrity standard of AMITY UNIVERSITY, NOIDA.

Lalhmingmawii

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled “Women empowerment in rural areas I: laws and their implementation” submitted by Ms Lalhmingmawii for award of Master degree is her own work and has done under my supervision. She has worked on the above topic under my constant supervision and guidance to my entire satisfaction and her dissertation is complete and ready for submission. I am satisfied that this dissertation is worthy of consideration for the award of Degree of Master in law. As this dissertation meets the requirements laid down by Amity University, Noida for awarding the Degree of Masters in Law, I recommended that this dissertation may be accepted for evaluation by University.

Date:

Place:

Prof. Dr. Arun Upadhyay

Supervisor

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Lalhmingmawii

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Sl. No.	Abbreviation	Full form
1.	MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act
2.	SEWA	Self Employed Women Association
3.	Art	Article
4.	SSC	Short Service Commission
5.	DPSP	Directive Principle of State Policy
6.	ICC	International Complaint Committee
7.	PIL	Public Interest Litigation
8.	UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
9.	CEDAW	Convention on The Elimination of All forms of discrimination against women
10.	ILO	International Labor Organization
11.	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
12.	SHGs	Self-help Groups
13.	NRLM	National Rural Livelihood Mission
14.	BBBP	Beti Bachao Beti Padhao

15.	RMK	Rashtriya Mahila Kosh
16.	PMMVY	Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana yojana
17.	JSY	Janani Suraksha Yojana
18.	PMUY	Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana
19.	LPG	Liquid Petrollium Gas
20.	NGOs	Non -Government Organization
21.	SBM	Swachh Bharat Mission
22.	PMAY	Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana
23.	SBLP	SHG Bank Linkage Program
24.	PRIs	Panchayats Raj Institution
25.	AIR	All India Reports
26.	SCC	Supreme Court Cases
27.	SC	Supreme Court
28.	i.e.	That is

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ABSTRACT

In many rural areas, women still confront long standing obstacles in many rural communities that restricts their access to leadership, healthcare education, and financial independence. In addition to social standard, these obstacles are exacerbated by the narrow scope of government initiatives and legislation aimed at empowering women. Even while gender equality is promised by the Indian Constitution, programs like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act and Other rural financial inclusion schemes to empower women economically, the reality of the situation tends to be different. That is to evaluate level of implementation of such policies and whether it solves the particular problems concerns of rural women.

Political engagement employment, healthcare and education are the four main facets of empowerment that are the subject. It refers s a comprehensive face of the discrepancies in policy objectives and actual experiences by critically analyzing the performance of various social projects as well as the implementation of fundamental rights like equality and non -discrimination. For instance, despite legal guarantees of equality, deeply rooted patriarchal system and cultural traditions frequently prohibits women from fully engaging in social and economic development. The result demonstrate that many empowerment projects fail by reasons, including lack of knowledge about legal rights, a lack of resources, and inefficiencies in governance. Sociocultural norms surrounding gender roles frequently limit rural women capacity to make decision, obtain resources or take full use of the opportunities that are available to them. It intends to solve such issues by not just enhancing the accountability of community governance, rural women's awareness of the law, and implementation of policy, but also facilitating geared community initiatives. Empowering rural women's capacity to access social structures and occupy their rightful position is the focus of the solutions.

Key words: women empowerment, gender equality, sustainable development, rural women, right to equality, non-discrimination, employment opportunities, MGNREGA.

CHAPTER-1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Inclusive development depends fundamentally on women empowerment, which also underpins equitable gender distribution. Empowerment of women is both a need and a difficulty in rural regions, where traditional socio-cultural values and financial inequality still exist. Empowering women calls improving ability to education, healthcare, economic, and decision making, therefore allowing them to live self-determined life. Although India's constitution assures equality and non-discrimination, women in the countryside still suffer institutional hurdles including illiteracy, limited financial autonomy, and restricted mobility¹.

Such initiatives including the (MGNREGA), BBBP, and rural health projects have been legislated by India for dealing with these problems. These initiatives fit with constitutional clauses like Art 14, 15,16. Still a major obstacle is the difference between policy creation and ground implementation. For rural women, patriarchal social systems, ignorance, and bureaucratic inefficiencies concrete advantages promised by empowerment programs. By examining the enforcement of legal frameworks and welfare programs, it investigates the condition of women's empowerment in rural areas. It looks at how effective these activities have been at increasing women's quality of life and notes major challenges in their implementation. The need of tackling underlying problems and creating sustainable, context sensitive solutions to close the divide between policy and implementation. Ultimately, the empowerment of women is not just a moral imperative but also a pathway to holistic improvement The basis for a more fair and innovative society is laid by women who are empowered and able to contribute greatly to the social and economic development of their neighborhoods. An element in attaining gender equality and promoting sustainable development is female empowerment. Though legal systems, education, and economic programs have produced substantial worldwide development, conditions still are difficult in rural communities, especially

¹ National Commission for Women, Report on Rural Women and Institutional Barriers (NCW 2023)
<https://ncw.nic.in> accessed 3 March 2025.

in developing nations such as India. Women living in rural areas sometimes have particular social, cultural, and economic obstacles that impede their capacity to utilize goods, assert their legal rights, and actively engage with decision-making activities.

India's Constitution gives quite strong regulations for empowering women and encouraging gender equality. Constitutional Article 14, 15, and 16 guarantee legal equality and bar gender based discrimination. More over aimed at systematic problems affecting women are particular laws such as the Protection of Women From Domestic Violence Act 2005 the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006. Notwithstanding this thorough legal structure, the enforcement of these regulations in rural settings has been far from good. Rural women usually do not know their legal rights, battle long-standing patriarchal traditions, and are left out from policy decisions. For example, although the PRA, 1993 sets aside one by third seats for women in the local government, societal beliefs sometimes minimize them to symbolic representation. Dependence of financial² support is on male family members exacerbates the issues by hampering women's ability to use their rights or question unjust practices.

Women empowerment in urban areas has been thoroughly researched already; existing studies have stressed education, employment, and political participation Research on rural settings especially on the disconnect between the legal structures and their execution is, however, still scarce. This disregard of the particular difficulties rural women face has created a major gap in knowledge of the efficacy of legal steps in enabling women at the bottom level.

Also it intends to close the gap by looking at the efficiency of legislation designed to empower women in rural areas and by discovering the obstacles to their application. Ultimately bettering the life of rural women and promoting inclusive development.

² Government of India, National Policy for Women 2016, Ministry of Women and Child Development, available at: <https://wcd.nic.in>.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Achieving gender parity and inclusive development depends significantly on women empowerment. Women, especially in rural areas where gender gaps are more noticeable, are meant to be uplifted by Indian constitutional provisions, laws, and official policies. Notwithstanding these efforts, rural women still suffer several obstacles impeding their autonomy. Their marginalization is worsened by customs like dowry, child marriage, and gender based violence. Moreover, the intersectionality of class, caste, and gender produces levels of discrimination that make it even more challenging for women in underprivileged society to demand their rights. Although government programs like MGNREGA, BBBP, and NRLM have been launched to empower rural women, their execution is frequently compromised by corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of awareness on those who needs. Realization of the objectives of these initiatives is also hampered by administrative obstacles, insufficient monitoring, and socio-cultural opposition. Through the use of doctrinal method, the study will shed some light on the ground realities of rural women's lives and suggest practical measures to close the divide between policy and practice. Sustainable empowerment and equality of rural women in India depend on addressing these obstacles.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL INDIA

Rural India's women empowerment is very important for social justice³, financial development, and sustainable growth. A large section of the population and a key influence on the growth of families, communities, and the country are rural women. Still, their abilities often go unused by institutional obstacles including poverty, lack of education, and gender bias. Depriving women in the countryside is crucial to solving these issues and promoting all-encompassing growth.

1. Advancing Gender Equality Empowering women in rural India helps to reduce gender disparities and ensure equality in access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making⁴.

³ Government of India, Constitution of India, Preamble and Articles 14–17, available at: https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/COI_1.pdf

⁴ Government of India, National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001 (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2001) <https://wcd.nic.in> accessed 3 March 2025.

Empowered women can demand their rights and oppose conventional patriarchal values, hence helping to build a more just society.

2. Improving Financial Development Essential contributors to the informal and agricultural industries are rural women. With knowledge, abilities, and resource access, people are better equipped for job participation and more efficient in their work. This helps national economy expansion and raises home incomes as well. Research indicates that poverty reduction and economic progress have a multiply effect when women are given economic independence.

3. Developing family and community wellbeing. Women who feel empowered are more apt to give first place in their families' wellbeing, health, and education. Studies show that women with decision-making authority often leads to increased spending on healthcare and education, which improves society's results. Furthermore inspiring other women in their neighborhoods to seek out employment and possibilities, empowered women also act as role models.

4. Solving Poverty and Joblessness By helping rural women to participate in income generation activities, entrepreneurship, and self-employment, their situation can be improved by The SEWA, MGNREGA have shown how women's empowerment might lead to financial independence and therefore lower rural poverty rates.

5. Improvement of Governance and Leadership Women's involvement in local administration via Panchayati Raj Institutions has positively affected community growth. Women leaders who are empowered better deal with problems including healthcare, hygiene, education, and domestic abuse. Improvement of their leadership abilities and capacity for decision-making will change rural government and support inclusive development.

6. Breaking the Relocation of Early Marriage and Illiteracy Providing small women in rural areas with knowledge and consciousness helps to stop the downward spiral of child marriage and illiteracy. Early marriage and more investment in themselves and their children's education would provide long-term advantages for several generations by helping to prevent educated women from becoming less likely to marry early.

7. Resolving social problems Empowerment gives rural women the means to fight societal ills including discrimination, dowry, and domestic abuse. Access to justice and legal knowledge enable them to seek legal solutions and channel their rights.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. Investigating how constitutional provisions and legal systems help rural Indian women to be empowered.
2. To determine the socio-economic and sociocultural obstacles limiting rural women's access of schooling, employment, and health.
3. To evaluate how well government initiatives and social security measures are working to enhance the socioeconomic conditions of rural women. To evaluate rural women's knowledge of their legal rights and possibilities for empowerment.
4. To assess how much rural women's empowerment is improved by grassroots organization and self-help networks.
5. To examine the impediments in carrying out policies and initiatives meant to empower rural women and offer recommendations for their enhancement.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTION

1. To what degree do constitutional clauses and legal systems help to advance women's empowerment in rural areas?
2. Which are the main socio-cultural obstacles restricting rural women's engagement in their ability to make decision, work, and schooling?

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Women's Education and Empowerment in Rural India by Jyotsna Jha, Neha Ghatak, Niveditha Menon, Priyanka Dutta, and Shreekanth Mahendiran.

The book examines the contribution of education in empowering rural Indian women, especially through government programs such as the Mahila Samakhyas project. The book provides an insight into the socioeconomic consequences of education on the life of a rural woman, identifying opportunities and impediments to empowerment. The authors utilize empirical evidence to emphasize the learning potential for a departure from the poverty-exclusion cycle. Main Contribution: Identifies the convergence of education and empowerment, and offers an alternative perspective for reading rural development policy.

2) Women Empowerment: Challenges⁵ and Strategies by Dr. Grishma Khobragade. This book addresses multi-dimensional challenges that women encounter in gaining empowerment from societal, to economic, to political challenges. It lays out the ways in which challenges can be addressed and stresses the requirement for a holistic approach in empowering women. Being a practical guide, this book is highly useful for the comprehension of issues at the grassroots level of rural communities. Major Contribution: Pins down obstacles to empowerment and presents implementable strategies, especially in poor communities.

3) Women and Empowerment in Contemporary India edited by Brati Biswas and Ranjana Kaul.

The edited work examines the changing context of women's empowerment in India with specific focus on the ideas such as patriarchy, gender roles, and policy interventions.

It discusses core issues such as the effects of modernization and globalization on rural women and outlines a wide theoretical framework on empowerment. Key Contribution: Presents a theoretical

⁵ Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, National Legal Services Authority Report on Access to Justice in Rural Areas, available at: <https://nalsa.gov.in>

critique of gender relations in current-day India based on theoretical orientations and practical recommendations.

4) Gender and Development in India: The Indian Scenario by Anuradha Mathu

The title focuses on discussing the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of gender inequity within India. The publication analyzes and reviews different governmental policies and campaigns aimed at the subject of gender equality, pinpointing their strong points and pitfalls. The book is especially apt for its emphasis on rural regions and the structural impediments to women's empowerment. Emphasizes the intersection of gender and development, providing critical analysis of the policy effects on rural women.

5) Rural Women Empowerment by Reema Mukherjee's book offers socio-economic analysis of the issue and potential of women in rural India. The book touches upon important sectors like education, health, sanitation, and employment, and analyzes the efficacy of government schemes and initiatives to empower rural women. Mukherjee employs case studies to show the practical impact of these programs and points out loopholes in policy implementation, especially in remote areas. Explores the function of grassroots efforts and government initiatives in changing rural women's lives. Provides realistic suggestions for how to make policy-making and implementation stronger to empower women more successfully.

• ARTICLES

1) Barriers and Interventions on the Way to Empower Women Through Financial Inclusion: A Two Decades Systematic Review (2000–2020) by Saluja, Singh, and Kumar (2023), where authors discuss barriers to the financial inclusion of women. The authors specify a list of significant barriers such as patriarchal norms, low financial literacy, limited access to banking, and income inequality. These are creating challenges for women, especially rural women, to engage actively in financial systems.

2) Empowering Indian Rural Women Beyond Barriers, Archana Ranjan and Dr. Nilmani Kumar

The authors recognize barriers like lack of access to education gender-based violence, and limited economic opportunities, All these are barriers to women's autonomy and inhibit their entry into economic, social, and political spaces. The article highlights the need for holistic interventions to overcome the aforementioned barriers. Ranjan and Kumar talk about the contribution of government schemes like (MGNREGA) and (PMJDY) toward enhancing women's access to financial services and jobs. They also highlight the need for skill development programs and microfinance initiatives which can economically and socially empower women. Ranjan and Kumar contend that awareness campaigns and community-based approaches are needed to fight deeply rooted gender stereotypes and enable women to control their own lives.

3) Empowering Rural Indian Women Through Education: The Role of Teachers in Overcoming Socio-Economic Barriers by Manmeet Kaur, the author highlights the ways through which education can be utilized as a primary tool to empower rural Indian women.

The research brings into light various socio-economic obstacles such as poverty, deficiency in infrastructure, discrimination due to gender and household chores that hinder the rural women's participation at schools and result in lower participation and increased dropout rates from schools.

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5) Empowering Rural Women Through Skill Development: A Pathway to Sustainable Livelihoods by Syed Luftu-ul-Hasnaen, Zubaria Parvez, and Kazim Syed (year), in which the authors suggest the idea of skill development to empower rural women and support their livelihood. They refer to

important barriers like lack of education, limited access to resources, and gender imbalance that are hindering rural women from achieving economic independence.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.

This study adopts a doctrinal method to analyze the laws and policies concerning women empowerment in rural areas and their implementation. The research focuses on secondary data sources, such as books, journal articles, legal texts, government reports, and case studies, to explore the legal frameworks that aim to empower rural women. Since the study does not involve primary data collection like surveys or interviews, it relies solely on existing literature and documents for data analysis.

The secondary data will be systematically analyzed to assess whether existing legal frameworks have been effective in addressing the needs and challenges faced by rural women. Additionally, the study will explore how these laws are enforced, the barriers to their implementation, and any gaps in the existing legal system that hinder women's empowerment.

1.8 HYPOTHESIS

Even as legislative structure and constitutional provision plays a major and positive role in empowering rural women Socioeconomic condition of rural women have enhanced due to government welfare schemes such as MGNREGA and BBBP, through the impact differs with the local level implementation challenges.

Rural women access to education employment and politics is significantly impaired by sociocultural factors such as patriarchy, gender stereotypes, and poor access to resources. Grassroots initiatives and empowerment programs led by communities are more effective than top-down approach in dismantling barriers and ensuring sustained empowerment of rural women

1.9 STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. **Understanding Legal Frameworks:** Develop a thorough understanding of constitutional provisions, laws, and policies designed to empower women in rural India.
2. **Analyzing Policy Effectiveness:** Gain the ability to critically evaluate the implementation and impact of government schemes and welfare programs on rural women's empowerment.
3. **Identifying Challenges:** Understand the socio-cultural, economic, and administrative barriers that hinder rural women's access to education, employment, and decision-making opportunities.
4. **Research Skills:** Acquire practical skills in conducting empirical research, including collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources.
5. **Problem-Solving:** Propose actionable solutions and policy recommendations to address the identified gaps in empowering rural women.

1.10 RESEARCH DESIGN

Chapterization of this Dissertation will be as follows:

Chapter-1	Introduction (Including statement of problem, significance, research objective, research question, literature review, scope of the study, research methodology, hypothesis, student learning outcomes, research design)
Chapter-2	Constitutional and legal framework for women empowerment (including constitutional provision for gender equality, legislative measure for women empowerment, judicial interpretation and landmark judgment, international convention on women empowerment)
Chapter-3	Government empowerment and schemes for rural women empowerment (including overview of policies and program, government policies and schemes for rural women empowerment, assessment of policy effectiveness)

Chapter-4	Socio economic and cultural barriers to empowerment (including, influence of patriarchal norms and practices, intersectionality: class, caste and gender issues in women empowerment, gender based violence and discrimination)
Chapter-5	Role of grassroot Organization and community initiatives (including contribution of NGO'S and Self Help Groups, case studies of successful empowerment initiatives, role of panchayats Raj Institutions in rural women empowerment)
Chapter-6	Challenges
Chapter-7	Conclusion and recommendation

CHAPTER: 2 CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

2.1 CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION FOR GENDER EQUALITY

The Indian Constitution provides a thorough legal framework that preserves the value of nondiscrimination, equality and dignity⁶. The Constitution has explicit provision to preserve women's rights, equal opportunities, and gender base discrimination in recognition of the historical and social difficulties that women have endured⁷.

In addition to being a legal premise gender equality is a basic human right that effects many facts of social, political and economic life. Both formal substantive equality are incorporated into the Indian legal system, guaranteeing women not only legal standing but also te assistance they need to attain true equality.

The Constitutional provision of Gender Equality is focusing on:

1. Fundamental Right that is Part-III of the Indian Constitution.
2. DPSP that is Part-IV of the Indian Constitution
3. Political Representation and Affirmative Action that is Part -IX and IX-A of the Constitution of India.

Basic Rights and Gender Equality part -III of the constitutional rights are enforceable through courts, i.e., they are justiciable. The Basic Rights prevent discrimination and give a guarantee for equality of women before law to enter into fields in education and occupation and for the freedom of an individual life.

Article-14 Equality before law and equal protection of law and women are equated equally according to the law in all legal and civil cases It acts as a protection against discrimination based on gender, particularly in areas such as personal laws, property rights, and employment. Judicial

⁶ Constitution of India 1950, arts 14, 15, and 21.

⁷ (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2001) <https://wcd.nic.in> accessed 3 March 2025.

decisions against discriminatory measures have been considerably shaped by the doctrine of equality under this article. The courts have consistently applied Article 14 to strike down discriminatory law and regulation against individuals on the ground of gender. The Supreme Court analyzed the discriminatory personnel policy requiring women flight attendants to retire at marriage or pregnancy in the case of *Air India v. Nargesh Meerza 1981* as an application case of Article 14. The Court held that the policy was not justifiable and was a contravention of the equality⁸ under the constitution. The principle of law not to discriminate and make unfair gender distinctions was reaffirmed by this decision. Article 14 remains the support structure of gender justice in India by safeguarding the rights of women against biased law, ensuring that legal protection is extended equally and impartially to all citizens.

Article-15 of the Indian Constitution is a basic provision that provides equality by avoiding discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Yet with regard to past socio-economic backwardness of women, Article 15(3) permits special provisions for women through legislation at the hands of the state. This is constitutional justification for a complete chain of affirmative action programs aimed at instituting substantive gender equality. Reservation of seats for women in educational institutions and government services has been one of the important uses of Article 15(3). It assists in securing greater representation of women at the decision-making levels and providing them with better career prospects. Special legislation such as the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, and the Protection of Women From Domestic Violence Act, 2005, have also been enacted under this constitutional provision to prevent gender-based violence and socio-economic exploitation. A leading case that demonstrates the importance of Article 15(3) is *Union of India v. K.P. Prabhakaran (1997)*, where the SC held the constitutional validity of women's reservation in state employment. The Court ruled that Article 15(3) vests authority in the state to take affirmative action, i.e., reservations, to enhance the status of women and ensure equal opportunities to women in society. The judgment reiterated the doctrine that formal equality (treatment as equal) alone

⁸ *Indra Sawhney v Union of India (1992) Supp (3) SCC 217.*

would not be sufficient without substantive equality (empowerment measures). Therefore, Article 15(3) is an extremely crucial instrument of gender justice in India, which enables the government to execute policies that cut across the gender divide in education, employment, and social security. It ensures positive discrimination and turns the historical mistakes around, making it convenient for women to access all spheres of life, pushing the nation's vision of real equality further ahead.

Article 16 – Equality of Opportunity in Public Employment Article 16 of Constitution provides for equality of opportunity in government service and protection against discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth, or residence. The provision provides for equal opportunity to women for access to government service and exclusion from recruitment and promotion on the ground of sex. It is an impetus to bring about an end to gender discrimination in government service and the creation of a climate for inclusiveness and equal treatment under employment policy.

The example of application of Article 16 is the Supreme Court order in *Secretary, Ministry of Defence v. Babita Poonia (2020)*. Under this landmark decision, the Court established the Indian Army women officers' right to be provided permanent commission, a benefit that existed only for males so far. Women officers could not be required to serve for a limited term, restricting their career development. The government cited physiological differences and societal expectations to hold that women were not suited for command posts. The Supreme Court overruled these premises by holding discrimination based on gender on such grounds to be violative of Article 16. The Court once again held that women officers had already proven their talent in most military missions and deserved equal chances for career development. This move also paves the way for other integration of females into combat ranks in the military, emphasizing merit over gender as the basis for professional development. Babita Poonia case in the pursuit of gender equality in public service. It establishes the principle that constitutional protections have to be translated into actual opportunities for women, especially for traditionally masculine areas. This decision solidifies the base for more reforms beneficial to women's inclusion in every variety of public employment.

Art19(1)(g) of the Constitution of India guarantees all citizens, including women, the freedom to pursue any trade, business, or profession. This article is crucial in ensuring economic independence and equal opportunity for women in the labor market. By the assurance of the right to livelihood, it protects working women from discriminatory restrictions that could truncate their economic contribution. This constitutional right not only helps women in the formal sector but also has an important role to play in protecting those in the informal sector, where gender discrimination is most rampant. A good example of this application is the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a grassroot movement established to represent the economic needs and rights of women in the informal economy. SEWA strives to empower women through providing access to just wages, social security, and the right to select work without discrimination. The organization plays a crucial role in advocating the rights of women and empowering them to be economically independent, and thereby ensuring the fulfillment of the fundamental right to livelihood in reality. Through activities like SEWA, not only can women acquire a source of livelihood, but they are also given a sense of empowerment over the course of their economic lives. This is in consonance with the spirit of Article 19(1)(g), wherein it is legislated that every citizen shall have the right to pursue any profession, trade⁹ or business. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution legislates for the fundamental right to life and personal liberty and no individual can be deprived thereof except by procedure established by law. Directive Principle of State Policy and Gender Justice it instruct the state to implement gender equality policy but are not enforceable in a court of law. While Art 39(d) invokes equal pay for equal work, itself the outcome of having brought about such legislation as the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, Article 39(a) extends to men and women equality of opportunity of livelihood. Article 42 was used to bring in the Maternity Benefits Act of 1961, enacted on the premise of compelling the state to promulgate humane and reasonable conditions of work and maternity benefits. One-third of the seats in the assembly of a state legislature and Lok Sabha are reserved for women under the Women's Reservation Bill (Constitution 128th Amendment

⁹ Ministry of Commerce & Indus., Gov't of India, Foreign Trade Policy 2023, <https://commerce.gov.in/foreign-trade-policy/>

Act)¹⁰ that came into force as a law across 2023. As a step towards remedy of age long under representation of women in legislatures, this new legislation is tried to be achieved to increase their numbers in the political domain justice, act as a guiding principle to the state in their attempt to establish a just society.

2.2 LEGISLATIVE MEASURE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

India has increasingly built a robust legal framework to tackle the multi-dimension issues affecting women. The legislative efforts are framed so as to ensure gender equality, safeguard women from gender-based violence and discrimination, and provide equal opportunities to women in all walks of life. The key legislative reforms are addressed to tackle violence, economic inequalities, workplace discrimination, and the conferring of political and social rights. Legislative decrees on empowerment of women regarding objectives, provisions, issues regarding implementation, and their effect upon the women engaged in employment in urban as well as rural places.

1. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976

With a view to eradicating the sex-based wage discrimination of Indian employment, the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 was formulated with an aim that equal payment for men and women should be ensured for work of equal importance. This act encourages gender equality in employment by mandating employers to compensate male and female workers equally for equal or equivalent work. Whatever its objectives, the Act has some issues. The persistent pay gap is a serious issue, particularly in industries such as construction, agriculture, and precarious work where women receive lower pay than men. Most women, especially those who work in the rural or informal sectors, are not informed about their rights under the Act, and this extends this gap. Additionally, since most cases of wage discrimination remain undocumented and untackled, lenient enforcement procedures also increase the pervasiveness of this issue. Although the Act has narrowed wage gaps in the organized sector, its effect has been limited. Information deficits, weak

¹⁰Ministry of Law and Justice, The Women's Reservation Bill, 2023 (Government of India 2023) <https://legislative.gov.in>

enforcement in the unorganized sectors, and deep-rooted patriarchal culture continue to hinder wage parity from becoming a reality. These issues need to be addressed through more effective information campaigns, strengthened enforcement of provisions under the Act, and social changes towards value recognition and respect accorded to women's work.

2. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

In order to prohibit the acceptance, payment, or solicitation of dowries in marriage contracts, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961¹¹ was enacted in India. Dowry is any property or valuable security provided by the first spouse to the second spouse, and it has historically imposed economic burden as well as all types of violence and discrimination on women. Even in spite of the clear prohibition and penalty of a maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment and fine of a maximum of ₹15,000 or the amount of dowry, whichever is greater, to parties to the transactions of dowry under the Act. This is a recurring problem which can be attributed to deeply rooted social tradition and cultural practice which continues to view dowries as an integral part of wedding ceremonies. Additionally, gifts offered without any demonstrable link to marriage are outside the definition of dowry in the Act, therefore are not easy to enforce. The Act is also made ineffective by lack of reporting due to social stigma and weak legal enforcement, especially in rural India.

3. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005

In India, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, came into force in order to protect women from economic, sexual, emotional, and physical violence at home. Apart from creating a comprehensive legal system to protect the rights of women and ensure their safety at home, this act declares domestic violence a criminal offence. The practice persists despite the Act's explicit prohibitions and penalties against dowry exchanges, including up to ₹15,000 fines or the equivalent of the value of the dowry, whichever is greater, and five years' imprisonment. The chronic problem lies in deep-seated cultural conventions and social rituals that point to the

¹¹ The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961.

significance of dowries in wedding rites. Apart from that, gifts bestowed with no apparent relation to marriage are hence excluded from the definition of dowry in the Act, and hence enforcement is not straightforward. Underreporting due to social stigma and lack of legal enforcement is also a hindrance to the effectiveness of the Act, especially in rural regions. There should be extensive public information campaigns to educate the people regarding the provisions of the Act and penal consequences of offenses under the Act for ensuring its maximum efficiency. Prevention of dowry offenses and gender justice in India also involve capacity building of law enforcement agencies and filling gaps in laws.

4. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013 was enacted in an attempt to resolve a developing issue: allowing women to work without harassment, discrimination, and abuse. This legislation was introduced in response to a growing number of high-profile cases that recognized the need for explicit legal protection and created an increasing public alarm about the threats and risks posed¹² to women in the workplace. It responded to the realization that women need safe, respectful and dignified spaces in which to work, and that these spaces must not be undermined by any form of sexual harassment.

One of the fundamental components of this Act is its definition of sexual harassment that gives a general and comprehensive account of behavior which can contribute to an unsafe and hostile workplace for women. It covers physical, verbal, and non-verbal behaviors which destroy a woman's sense of security and sense of well-being. The unwanted physical contact provision of the Act addresses improper touching or physical advances of a sexual nature. But sexual harassment is not only physical attack it also encompasses verbal conduct, such as sexually suggestive comments, jokes, or propositions, which can create a hostile work environment for women. Furthermore, non-

¹² Law Commission of India, Review of Laws Relating to Dowry Prohibition (Report No 243, 2012) <https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in> accessed 3 March 2025.

verbal conduct, such as leering, suggestive gestures, or the showing of explicit material, constitutes sexual harassment. This is an important part of the law because it speaks to the reality that harassment can be subtle and pervasive, and also that non-physical conduct can have the effect of creating a hostile and unsafe environment for women. Another important part of the law is the grievance redressal mechanism. It stipulates that organizations with more than 10 employees should set up an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC). This committee is responsible for addressing complaints of sexual harassment by offering a secure environment for women to voice their grievances. The procedure is such that complaints are handled confidentially¹³ and efficiently. The Act provides for transparent procedures for complaint investigation, ensuring that the complainant and the accused are treated equally in the process. Where a complaint is confirmed, the employer must take corrective action. Suspension or dismissal of the suspected individual, or other disciplinary measures, must be taken to ensure that sexual harassment is not going unpunished. The time-bound action ensures that the process is not delayed, allowing women to obtain speedy disposal of their grievances. Protection from retaliation is maybe the strongest element of the Act. It guarantees that women complaining of harassment will not be retaliated against through loss of employment, demotion, or exclusion in any manner.

2.3 JUDICIAL INTERPRETATION AND LANDMARK JUDGMENT

Judicial interpretations and landmark judgments also play a crucial role in the implementation and development of laws for women empowerment. The judiciary, through its interpretations, has chosen to enlarge the scope of laws encompassing different aspects of gender equality, social justice, human rights. The courts have closed loopholes in law a number of times by providing protection to constitutional safeguards and international commitments, particularly when the law hadn't been exercised correctly. major decisions that have constructed the legal framework of women's rights in India, with regard to their contribution to gender equality, empowerment of women, and protection of rights.

¹³ Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), 42 U.S.C. 1320d-6 (2020)

1. Vishakha v. State of Rajasthan (1997)

The Vishakha case was triggered by a horrific rape case in Rajasthan when Bhanwari Devi, a government social worker¹⁴ in the anti-child marriage campaign, was gang-raped brutally. Though she persisted in her quest for justice, the lack of concrete legal provisions for addressing sexual harassment at the workplace left her exposed, which exposed a vast lacuna in India's law. In this regard, women activists moved a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) before the Supreme Court, highlighting the pressing need to issue guidelines to ensure women's safety against sexual harassment in the workplace. The Court noted that sexual harassment constituted a violation of fundamental rights under Articles 14 Right to Equality, 19 Freedom of Speech and Expression, and Article 21 Right to Life and Personal Liberty of the Indian Constitution¹⁵. Consequently, the Supreme Court established the Vishakha Guidelines requiring government and private sector employers to have mechanisms for prevention as well as redressal of sexual harassment. The guidelines resulted in the passage of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act, 2013, for women's rights to a respectful and safe workplace.

2. Shakti Vahini v. Union of India (2018)

The Shakti Vahini case brought to the forefront the barbaric offense of honor killings, i.e., of women who are inter-caste married. The petitioner, Shakti Vahini, an NGO, produced instances of mass violence against couples who are going against traditional norms, mostly in rural areas. The Supreme Court moved in the chilling atmosphere of fear among young couples, noting that personal choices, particularly marriage, are constitutional rights under Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty) of the Constitution¹⁶. The Supreme Court instructed law enforcement agencies to be proactive to protect these rights from social and family revenge. It also mentioned that bodies like Khap Panchayats, which promote honor killing, are not legal entities. This pioneering judgment reaffirmed women's autonomy in marriage choices, emphasized the state's responsibility to

¹⁴Vishaka v State of Rajasthan (1997) 6 SCC 241.

¹⁵ Constitution of India 1950, arts 14, 19, 21.

safeguard citizens from honor killings, and established the judiciary's role in eliminating regressive social practices.

3. Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India (1978)

In Maneka Gandhi's case, the Supreme Court applied Article 21¹⁷ of the Constitution Right of Life and Personal Liberty, in a broad manner. Maneka Gandhi's passport was taken away by the government, and she had sued the action that it was arbitrary and against her rights. The Court ruled that whatever takes away a person's personal liberty shall be by way of a reasonable, fair, and just process. The Court ruled that the term "life" in Article 21 shall mean something more than mere sustenance and implies the right to live life with human dignity, including personal liberty as well as freedom of movement. This interpretation was the harbinger of an interpretative approach on a broad scale individual liberties, having an important bearing on women's rights by providing their autonomy and dignity in all aspects of life.

4. Joseph Shine v. Union of India (2018)

Joseph Shine's case challenged the constitutional constitutionality of Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code making adultery a crime, but only committed by a man against a woman, treating women as property possessed and controlled by husbands. The petitioner contended that this section discriminated against men and infringed¹⁸ fundamental rights of equality and liberty of the person. The Supreme Court held Section 497 unconstitutional. In the eyes of the Court, legislation holding women as chattels is evidence of gender stereotyping and gender inequality and diminishes the freedom and dignity of women. It was a milestone in the march towards gender equality where it was held that women could make their own choices over their private life without state intervention.

¹⁷ Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India AIR 1978 SC 597

¹⁸ Shakti Vahini v Union of India (2018) 7 SCC 192.

5. Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018)

The case of Navtej Singh Johar was a challenge to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, under which homosexual activities became consensual and criminalized. The petitioners argued that the provision outraged fundamental rights of equality, non-discrimination, and personal liberty¹⁶. India's Supreme Court did away with Section 377, ruling it to be unconstitutional to invoke against adult consenting same-sex relationships. Being gay is a part and parcel of one's identity, held the Court, and criminalization of it violated constitutional rights to equality and freedom. This momentous judgment made all the difference for LGBTQ+ rights in India and re-affirmed the rights and dignity of individuals irrespective of sexual orientation. These cases together show the judiciary's efforts towards promoting gender equality and women's rights in India, such that law is reformed to uphold the dignity¹⁹ and autonomy of all.

2.4 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS

International conventions and agreements have also played an important role in shaping the architecture of women's empowerment and gender equality globally. Not only have the conventions established global norms, but they have also shaped national laws and policies in all countries, including India. They have led the way to addressing the challenges of women in rural areas, where social and economic inequalities are best classified.

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, is a milestone document that set forth basic rights and freedoms for all human beings. Based on the values of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination, the UDHR has played a significant role in the world movement for human rights. Although it does not directly refer to rural women, its articles have influenced legal and policy instruments that promote gender equality and women's empowerment, such as in rural communities where gender disparities are

¹⁹ Law Commission of India, Prevention of Interference with the Freedom of Matrimonial Alliances (in the Name of Honor and Tradition): A Suggested Legal Framework (Report No 242, 2012) <https://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in> accessed 3 March 2025.

wider. The most important function of the UDHR in empowering women may be the reaffirmation of equality²⁰. Article 1 asserts that all human beings are born equal and free in dignity and rights, while Article 2 specifically bars discrimination on the basis of sex. These provisions have given rise to national and international laws attempting to end gender-based injustices. In rural settings where patriarchal traditions tend to restrict women's rights, these provisions have played a crucial role in fighting for the same opportunities in education, work, and in the law. The doctrine of legal equality in Article 7 of the UDHR has influenced²¹ reforms that guarantee women, including rural women, equal protection under the law. In India, for instance, constitutional assurances of equality and special legislative safeguards have been articulated by the UDHR. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, is an instance where rural women received legal relief against domestic violence, which is a frequent occurrence in traditional family homes. The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, granting daughters equal rights over property, has also empowered rural women by enhancing their economic security.

2. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, an international convention that has been greeted as a turning point in the rights of women, and of eradicating gender discrimination around the world. Popularly known as the world bill of rights for women, CEDAW offers a holistic way of realizing gender equality through the requirement of state parties to implement appropriate legislative and policy reforms geared towards ending discrimination against women in all aspects of life. The convention recognizes that discrimination against women poses a major obstacle to their full integration into society and economic development and urges affirmative action for the removal of obstacles. CEDAW is important in empowering women because it treats the multiple faces of discrimination that prevent their development.

²⁰ State of West Bengal v. Anwar Ali Sarkar, (1952) SCR 284 (India)

²¹ Constitution of India 1950, arts 14, 15, 19, 21.

It employs a broad definition of discrimination to embrace any difference, exclusion, or restriction based on sex which interferes with the enjoyment of rights by women on an equal basis with men. The treaty binds state parties to take measures necessary to end discrimination in public and private life, such as by way of legislation and adjustment of policies. This involves legislating to establish gender equality, changing discriminatory legislation, and ensuring that women are accorded equal rights of access to education, health, employment, and political participation as men. The greatest strength of CEDAW is its recognition of the rights of rural women. Article 14 of the convention is cognizant of the specific fate of women in rural parts who tend to be more socio-economically underprivileged compared to their urban counterparts²². It emphasizes that rural women must be accorded equal opportunities to gain access to land, credit facilities, medical facilities, education, and other resources essential to their overall development. Agricultural women are especially susceptible to poverty, mobility restrictions, and no decision-making power, hence the need for governments to embrace some policies that enhance their socio-economic status. By identifying such issues, CEDAW has helped to build national policies to empower rural women.

3. International Labor Organization

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has been at the forefront in promoting gender equality through implementing different conventions aimed at improving working conditions for women. These conventions are aimed at promoting equal pay, maternity protection, and removal of discrimination within the workplace. Perhaps the most important of all the conventions is the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (Convention No. 100), requiring equal pay for men and women for work of equal value. This is a big step towards narrowing the gender pay gap and ensuring that women, particularly those in rural settings where they will likely be doing informal labor, are paid a fair wage. Another important convention is the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (Convention No101), whose purpose is the elimination of discrimination on grounds of gender, race, or other matters in employment. It is highly applicable to rural areas where gender roles may confine women from taking part in various economic undertakings. Maternity

²² Annual Report 2022-23 (Government of India 2023) <https://rural.nic.in>

Protection Convention, 2000 (Convention No. 183) guarantees maternity benefits, employment security, and health protection for women workers in work, which is necessary for ensuring the rights of women workers, especially women²³ agricultural workers or heavy labor women workers. ILO conventions build a firm basis for gender-responsive labor policies, which can improve rural women workers' working lives and support economic autonomy. In most states, these conventions have diluted national labor law that ensures maternity leave, equal pay, and job protection. Despite this, enforcement of the conventions is challenging, particularly in rural regions where informal employment dominates. Most rural working women toil in unorganized sectors of agriculture, domestic service, and handicrafts where there is no strong enforcement system for labor laws or where there are no laws at all. Still, legal measures like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of India have assisted in empowering rural women through assured wage employment. The Self-Help Groups (SHGs) concept has also played an important role in increasing economic opportunities for women, making them financially independent and capable of supporting their families.

²³ Entrepreneurship Development Programs under NRLM (Government of India 2023).

CHAPTER: 3 GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND SCHEMES FOR RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

3.1 OVERVIEW OF POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

The government of India has implemented a number of policies and schemes from time to time which try to empower rural women, solve their problems in daily life, and attempt to bridge the huge gender gap which exists in every walk of life. These policies with social, economic, and political empowerment focus are important in resolving discrimination, poverty, and inaccessibility to resources faced by rural women. The government's efforts are based on the assumption that women empowerment is not only needed by them but for development at the societal level as well. Economic independence is perhaps one of the most important features of rural women empowerment. The government has implemented several schemes which seek to equip women with the financial capabilities and resources they require in order to be economically self-sufficient. The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), for instance, seeks to empower women-headed Self-Help Groups (SHGs), meaning women who economically and socially unite to assist one another. These SHGs give women credit, which otherwise is not easily available under regular banking protocols, as well as entrepreneurship training so that they can start small enterprises and earn a livelihood for themselves and their families. The government's MUDRA scheme also offers the benefit of collateral-free loans to women entrepreneurs, especially rural women. This scheme has proved to be a godsend to many a woman who otherwise would not have been able to muster the capital to establish a business. These economic schemes are necessary, but economic empowerment is a matter of equipping women with the training that will enable them to derive full advantage from these schemes. Government schemes have focused on imparting education and training²⁴ to rural women in handcrafts, agriculture, and small-scale industry.

²⁴ Nidhi Khurana, 'Impact Assessment of Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana in Rural India' (2021) 46(2) Economic and Political Weekly 52.

By providing them with such opportunities, the government is striving to make sure that women are not just getting financial aid, but also have the necessary knowledge and skills for maintaining their enterprises in the long run. Access to education is another major factor which the government has worked towards, in an attempt to empower rural women. In most rural India, gender inequalities in education persist, with girls frequently being excluded from the same degree of opportunity as boys. To check this, schemes like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme have been implemented. BBBP aims to encourage girls' education as well as create awareness about women's empowerment. It is designed to abolish gender-based discrimination that prevents girls from attending school and realizing their full potential. The government also operates scholarships and incentive programs for girls, which expand the access of education to girls who are in disadvantaged groups.

3.2 GOVERNMENT SCHEMES FOR RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

1. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), passed in 2005, is a most noteworthy social security programme towards poverty alleviation and rural empowerment in India. It gives a statutory assurance of 100 days of wage employment during each financial year to all rural families who are ready to undertake unskilled manual work. The scheme is especially important for rural women as it gives their involvement priority and provides economic security to marginalized communities. Another feature of MGNREGA is its focus on women's involvement. The Act requires the employment of at least one-third of its beneficiaries by gender. The provision guarantees rural women, who are otherwise precluded from wage employment by social and domestic duties, access to wage employment. Seasonal unemployment is a major issue in the majority of areas in which agricultural labor is the main occupation. MGNREGA offers a fall-back source of livelihood during off-seasons when farm labor is not available, enabling women to earn money for the family²⁵. Economic empowerment is the most significant effect of

²⁵ International Finance Corporation (IFC), Bridging the Credit Gap for Women Entrepreneurs in India, 2020.

MGNREGA on rural women. By offering a source of income, the Act enables women to contribute towards household expenditure, invest in education for children, and enhance the overall quality of life. Having a wage not only increases their economic independence but also provides them with dignity and self-respect. Women who earlier depended entirely on the wages of their husbands now have their own wages, lessening their economic dependence. The wages received through MGNREGA are deposited in the bank accounts of the workers themselves, providing economic transparency and allowing women to exercise control over their wages. In addition to economic independence, MGNREGA has helped rural women attain social empowerment that was beyond their reach earlier. Rural women, by tradition, had no mobility and decision-making control in the homes. But with MGNREGA providing access to work, they entered public space, moving along with their co-workers in shared activities and challenging the government bureaucrats and local administration.

2. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), 2016

The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), which was introduced in the year 2016, is a major government scheme that involves giving clean cooking fuel to female members of BPL families living in below-poverty-line (BPL) households, especially living in rural areas. The scheme was initiated with the aim to overcome the health risks involved while using conventional cooking fuels like firewood, cow dung, and coal, that have remained a rural family basic staple perpetually. Apart from emitting surplus smoke resulting in respiratory disease, they also stimulate environmental pollution. Opening access to liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) coverage, PMUY aims at facilitating health impacts and socio-economic empowerment²⁶ for women and their dependents. One of the usual characteristics of the scheme is the emphasis on women empowerment. Free LPG connections under PMUY are accorded priority to women-headed families. It acknowledges the role of women in cooking at the family level as important and attempts to wean them away from such polluting fuels. Apart from an overall healthier way of living, the scheme also aims to bring

²⁶ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women art. 3, Dec. 18, 1979, 1249 U.N.T.S. 13

about change to rural society by providing relief to women in the form of reduction in physical workload as well as being able to redirect their time into something worthwhile. The finance provided under PMUY not only covers the initial expense for the LPG connection but also provides a subsidy for refills such that households will be able to comfortably stick to LPG use. One of the greatest advantages of PMUY is its contribution to the health and quality of life of rural women.

3. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana (BBBP), 2015

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana (BBBP) is a scheme launched by the Government of India in 2015, with an effort to counteract the falling child sex ratio and female sex-selective aborting. The program has the objective of providing greater empowerment and education to the girl child so that prejudiced, male-dominating biases can be eliminated. The scheme is especially concentrated in rural and backward regions, where gender discrimination is more apparent because of traditional as well as patriarchal social institutions. Generating awareness regarding the necessity of educating the girl child and eradicating such malpractices as female foeticide²⁷ is one of the most significant goals of the BBBP scheme. Gender discrimination in India starts even before a child is born with an unabated desire for the child to be a male, resulting in illegal sex-selective abortion practice. This has resulted in having an unevenly balanced sex ratio with fewer women being born in comparison to males. The scheme thus focuses on changing attitudes and gender equality from an early stage. By mass media campaign, people's movement²⁸, and community initiative programs, the government has attempted to make people aware of the importance of the girl child and that they also need to provide them with equal opportunity. Provision of financial support to families to promote girls' education is one such important aspect of the scheme. The BBBP scheme is very much connected with schemes like the Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana, which gives economic advantages to families who save money for their girl child's future. Parents can open a savings account in their girl child's name under this scheme, with good interest rates and tax relief. All such economic aid relieves families of the economic burden and makes them spend money on the health

²⁷ Health & Allied Themes (CEHAT) v. Union of India, (2003) 8 SCC 398 (India)

²⁸ Madhu Kishwar, Women's Rights and the Women's Movement in India: Some Observations, 21 FEMINIST STUD. 295, 295-311 (1995).

and education of their daughters rather than viewing them as an economic burden. Apart from financial help, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao programme also emphasizes gender sensitization, community mobilization, and advocacy. Government organizations, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders help run program that are resistance to patriarchal values and uphold gender equality.

4. Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), 2014

Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) launched in 2014 is a national campaign for cleanliness and sanitation in India. The mission is concentrated more in rural regions, where poor sanitation facilities have been a long-standing concern. SBM aims to end open defecation, encourage safe sanitation practice, and raise awareness regarding hygiene, especially among rural people. Through an emphasis on toilet construction in public areas and inside private homes, the mission will help improve standards of living and tackle significant health issues. Swachh Bharat Mission is its impact on rural women, who in the past endured the most due to the lack of sanitation facilities. Prior to the implementation of SBM, approximately million rural Indian women had zero access to private toilets and defecated in open fields. Not only did this expose them to severe health conditions, but it also placed their safety and dignity in serious jeopardy²⁹. Open defecation made them more vulnerable to infections like diarrhea, urinary tract infection, and reproductive health complications, which are raised by unsafe menstrual hygiene several times. Exposure to improved toilets under SBM has raised the rural women's ability to access better and safer sanitation facilities, thereby changing their overall well-being. In addition, having toilets in the house has lessened the physical load on women significantly.

Before, they used to travel a long distance, either early morning or late evening, to a distant place where they could relieve themselves by either urinating or defecating. Not only did this consume most of their time, but it also put them at a very high risk of sexual harassment and assault. With the use of SBM, women no longer expose themselves to risk in order to access sanitation facilities

²⁹ Black's Law Dictionary, 11th ed. (2019), s.v. "Jeopardy."

in the privacy of their homes. This has benefited them directly by providing them with more security, privacy, and dignity to their everyday life. Besides, the mission has contributed significantly to motivating behavioral change within rural communities. Sanitation education campaigns have sensitized women and families to understand why sanitation is important, promoting consistent improvement in hygiene practices. Through information dissemination and access to sanitation to empower women, SBM has collectively empowered women to improve their quality of life as well as achieve gender equality in rural India.

5. National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), 2011

The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), initiated in 2011 and referred to as Aajeevika, is a national mission that focuses on enhancing self-employment and income-based livelihoods among women in rural areas. NRLM has been working primarily through Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which provide forums for women to participate in group financial and entrepreneurial pursuits. This mission is among the most important anti-poverty programs in India to empower women by giving them credit, skill development, and financial empowerment. NRLM is an important scheme which helps rural women's self-help groups by giving them sustainable livelihoods.

It provides microcredit facilities to such groups, which enable women to invest in small enterprises like handicrafts, animal husbandry, agriculture, and rural enterprise. Training and capacity building are also an area of focus for the scheme, as it enables women to acquire the skills necessary to run their businesses successfully. The training courses cover different aspects like financial literacy, electronic commerce, and business management, and help women acquire entrepreneurial skills needed to overcome entrepreneurial challenges. Financial inclusion is also one of the basic goals of NRLM³⁰. By making it easier for SHGs to be associated with banks and financial institutions, the scheme allows women to access loans at reasonable interest rates without the weight of expensive loans offered by unofficial moneylenders. The subsequent finances allow women to increase their business and raise their earning levels and thus gain lasting financial stability. In addition, the

³⁰ Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM): Framework for Implementation (2011), <https://aajeevika.gov.in/en/content/nrlm-framework-implementation>.

mission empowers women to engage in entrepreneurship by providing them with mentoring and counseling to start and operate their own businesses. The influence of NRLM is not limited to financial gains as it reaches a long way in social empowerment. The women gain confidence and strength by their involvement in SHGs. Women obtain a platform on which they can present their grievances, participate in decision-making, and become leaders in society. It enables them to be part of the process of altering conventional gender roles, giving way for increased sensitivity towards the role of women in the home and society. Overall, NRLM has made a big difference in the lives of rural women by making them financially independent and socially empowered. Through its holistic approach, the mission has made a big contribution towards the socio-economic development of rural women in India.

6. Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), 2015

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), which was started in 2015, is the flagship scheme of the Government of India for economically weaker sections' affordable housing. The scheme is available for both the urban and rural sectors with the rural sector being divided into Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G). Arguably the most important aspect of this program is its focus on empowering women, and especially rural women, by ensuring property ownership in their names. In PMAY, only meritorious beneficiaries are provided with financial aid for construction or upgrading houses. The scheme also focuses on women-headed families and mandates that at least one female member of the family should be the owner or co-owner of the property. This is a very important condition in resolving gender differences in property holding, a long-standing issue in rural India where women have no rights over homes and land. By providing them with ownership rights, the scheme³¹ increases their economic security and social standing in society and within families. Consolidation of property rights is one of the important effects of PMAY on rural women. Earlier, women from rural Indian property and land were owned by men and hence economically insecure. But all this is changed due to PMAY because houses constructed through the scheme carry women's names on the certificates. It is not just that they gain a material asset, but

³¹ <https://wcd.nic.in/schemes-listing>

also increased decision-making authority in their households. Property-owning women tend to have a greater say in family and financial matters, thus contributing to their overall empowerment. Besides the economic advantage, the plan also assures rural women with security and stability. Home ownership lessens their exposure to homelessness and social exploitation, particularly when there is marital tension or in the event that they become widows. Home security enhances their living standard through the provision of improved health, hygiene, and protection for themselves and their children. In addition, possessing a house with a fixed address ensures them access to other government social welfare programs, credit schemes, and employment. Overall, PMAY has a revolutionary impact on rural women's socio-economic status. By placing special emphasis on house ownership by women, the scheme not only brings them an important commodity but also empowers them in such a manner as to ensure long-term financial independence and social advancement.

3.3 ASSESSMENT OF POLICY EFFECTIVENESS

The Government of India has imposed various policies and schemes to empower rural women in a step towards the eradication of poverty, increasing access to basic amenities, and transcending the conservative gendered norms which limit their accessibility. The activities transcend areas ranging from economic empowerment, education, health, sanitation, and social protection and all are very important in enhancing rural women's lives. Even with these attempts, the success of such programs has been inconsistent. Some have achieved much change, but others have been plagued by issues of large-scale operation and sustainability. Consider the case of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), enacted in 2005 to offer rural families 100 days of wage employment each year. One of its strongest points is that it is determined to see that at least a third of the recipients are women. This has benefited a substantial majority of rural women into the economy, ensuring that they have a steady source of income. For most, it has acted as a stepping stone towards economic independence from the household economy, allowing them

to voice their opinion in family matters and having an enhanced³² general level of self-esteem. The scheme's potential is however being repeatedly frustrated by wage lag, limited employment during the off-season, and deep-seated social convention that keeps women tied. In other locations, the scope of MGNREGA is untapped, women being unable to avail of the program on account of non-availability or clerical opposition.

The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), launched in 2016, is yet another example of a scheme that has made a remarkable difference in the lives of rural women. With free LPG connections to below-poverty families, PMUY has helped make cooking healthier and safer in lieu of traditional fuels like firewood and coal that were harmful to the health of women. Shift to clean cooking fuel has benefited women's health conditions as much as it has saved them time and energy invested in collecting firewood. In the rural villages, where the access is minimal, this has translated into enormous change in women's life from day to day. But despite the magnitude of progress achieved by the program towards delivering clean cooking fuel, there are constraints. Most women are incapacitated by the occasional expense of resupplying LPG, and the network of distribution required to provide a consistent input of gas is not yet settled in several of the off-grid areas. Those deficiencies constrain the long-run practicability of the scheme. And then there is the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana (BBBP), introduced in 2015, with an explicit intent on reversal of gender discrimination and the education of girls, particularly in rural and backward regions. The initiative aims to enhance the child sex ratio as well as influence families in valuing girls equally with boys. While the initiative has managed to spread awareness on gender matters and enhance school enrollment rates for girls, attitude of society continues to be a strong impediment. In rural India regions everywhere, patriarchal culture is ingrained, and girls are seen as being worth less than boys. While financial rewards like the Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana have induced families to save for the daughters of the future, social attitudes to the value of girls are reticent to change. This makes it more difficult for the larger objectives of the scheme to be met in some communities. The Swachh

³² Naila Kabeer, Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment (2001) 30(3) IDS Bulletin 435.

Bharat Mission (SBM) initiated in 2014 has also contributed significantly to the life of rural women by enhancing sanitation. Rural women previously traveled long distances at night or early morning to look for a secluded spot to defecate, putting them at risk of health and personal safety issues. SBM's emphasis on constructing toilets in rural villages has immediately enhanced the dignity, health, and safety of women. With toilets in their own homes, they have not only decreased their vulnerability to harassment but also increased their overall well-being. However, SBM's success has been uneven, and in certain pockets, there remains a lack of infrastructure for sanitation. Apart from that, although toilets have been built, changing entrenched social customs and influencing individuals to make their use a habit remains a problem. The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) established in 2011 focused on economically empowering women through the provision of support to self-help groups (SHGs).

CHAPTER:4 SOCIO CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO EM-POWERMENT

4.1 INFLUENCE OF PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND PRACTICES

Indian rural women have to contend with a daunting list of socio-cultural and economic limitations, first and foremost shaped by the strongly entrenched patriarchal culture and values that dominate much of their existence. Patriarchy is simply a term used for a description of a social arrangement in which men hold the dominant political, social, and economic position, relegating women's roles to lower secondary levels. This way of thinking has existed for decades, and it continues to decide how women are conceived, governed, and should fit into their homes and communities. Even in rural communities, this is more deeply rooted because old attitudes far too often take precedence over innovations³³. Regardless of numerous government attempts to provide power to women in rural areas ranging from welfare policy to legal reform patriarchy remains to restrain advancement. Rural women, especially, are trapped in a vicious cycle of fewer opportunities, lack of resources, and diminished control over their own lives. Despite a concerted effort to empower women, patriarchal values still prevail in the socio-cultural sphere in rural India and dilute the effect of such efforts. The deep-seated belief systems, social order, and power dynamics create women's limited access to all aspects of life, from education and economic autonomy to political participation. The comprehension of the pervasive nature of patriarchy is vital in breaking such barriers and developing more inclusive systems that will enable women in rural India to break such barriers

a) Limited Decision-Making Power

Perhaps the greatest impact patriarchy has had on women in the country is limiting their decision-making authority. Under patriarchal culture, men—typically fathers, husbands, or brothers—gain first control of significant decisions at home. Ranging from finances to choosing the direction children pursue, men call the shots and women are left out of it for the most part. This is most

³³ Kabeer, N. (2001) 'Resources, agency, achievements

apparent in the case of economic³⁴ decisions. In most rural households, men or husbands control money within the household and make all important decisions regarding spending, saving, and investment. Women are, by default, driven to become financially dependent on men's decisions, depriving them of autonomy and self-reliance. In addition, this absence of participation in decision-making is not limited to financial issues but also applies to other issues such as healthcare, mobility, and education.

b) Domestic Abuse and Gender-Based Violence

Patriarchal values are also irrevocably linked to gender violence in rural India, an endemic and esoteric process³⁸. Domestic violence, dowry harassment, rape within marriage, and even female infanticide are all still too prevalent in most rural societies. Patriarchy perpetuates the notion that women's lives and bodies belong to men. As a result, women simply have to follow their husbands or male kin, not necessarily out of regard for their pleasure or well-being. The acceptance of male dominance and superiority fosters a culture in which violence towards women is acceptable.

Most frequently, rural women silently suffer domestic violence, not only due to fear or physical harm but even due to the stigma of speaking out. Patriarchal culture in such societies provides a higher premium towards maintaining family reputation and honor over women's rights. Abused women stand to be ostracized or blamed for the abuse and are usually told to endure the violence in order to maintain their marriage or family. This culture of silence fosters the continuance of patriarchy at the expense of locking women into violent relationships and away from their right to live without violence or fear.

c) Limited Access to Education

Education is one of the most powerful means to escape poverty and gender inequalities, but the patriarchal structure of the social environment drastically restricts the quality of education for rural girls. In most rural communities, families hold the opinion that there would be more return on

³⁴ Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India, Report on Economic Empowerment of Women 2020–21, <https://wcd.nic.in/>

investment by the education of men because they are considered the only ones who can earn in the family. Girls, on the other hand, will most likely be expected to perform domestic chores—cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings. Girls will, thus, be most likely to leave school prematurely, especially during adolescence³⁵, because their families will view school as less valuable compared to working at home. Besides, the cost of education, such as school fees, uniforms, and transport, is generally out of reach for rural families. Since girls are not regarded as "assets" that will bring in economic contribution to the family in the future, families will not spend as much on educating them. Not only does this reduce their future prospects, but also reinforces inequality because illiterate women are less likely to have high incomes or contribute to the general economic development of their communities. Therefore, the absence of education limits women's capacity to exercise rational choice in matters of their own health, family planning, and even political involvement.

d) Economic Dependence

Patriarchy also supports economic dependence on male kin. Rural Indian women are supposed to put domestic work ahead of engaging in economic activity. Even when women get involved in economic activity, they are normally confined to low-ranking or unorganized jobs, like domestic work, agriculture, or handicrafts. Such jobs are normally without security, social protection, and career advancement opportunities. Also, women are normally paid less than men for performing the same tasks, again supporting their economic dependence. Another important issue is the patriarchal system of rural communities' inheritance. Sons are usually left property, land, and family riches, while women are denied rights to property or economic security in the form of land ownership³⁶. Rural women are still dependent upon their male relatives without any resources or income base and cannot make themselves heard and resist patriarchal domination. The economic dependency, as such, thus gives women no space to maneuver at home or in society.

³⁵ https://archive.org/details/ageofopportunity0000stei_w1t1

³⁶ Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, No. 39, Acts of Parliament, 2005 (India)

e) Imposed Gender Roles and Social Norms

The patriarchal norms also have strict gender roles that restrict women to limited social roles. Women in rural India, for example, are generally restricted to the conventional family caretaker roles: maintaining the household, rearing children, and assisting the husbands. The gender roles restrict women from reaching their full potential to maximize professional and personal development. The perception that women are "better qualified" for domestic chores and men should work and decide still perpetuates the ideology³⁷ that women are second to men. This gendered expectation restricts women's autonomy to pursue education, career, or even other interests outside the home. Women who transgress such traditional roles—by pursuing education, a career, or autonomy—typically become sternly disapproved of by their family and society. They are branded as "unfit" or "defiant" and even shunned. The pressure to conform to these gender roles is too immense for most women, and therefore they typically suppress their ambition and aspirations so as not to be rejected by society.

4.2 INTERSECTIONALITY: CASTE, CLASS, AND GENDER ISSUES IN RURAL WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Intersectionality is an influential theory that explains how different parts of someone's identity—gender, caste, and class—don't exist independently of one another, but instead intersect and form different experiences of privilege and oppression. This concept, originally coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, was first applied to Black women's lives as the convergence of race and gender, but has been further applied to other social identities in the years since. Where women are situated in rural India, where there are deeply rooted gender biases, caste, class, and gender intersect even more strongly. Women here don't just struggle along lines of gender, but also along lines of caste and economic positions, which all together generate compounded disadvantages. Dalit women in rural India experience multiple layers of discrimination³⁸.

³⁷ Ideology, STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (Michael Rosen ed., 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ideology/>.

³⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/discrimination>

These women face not just gender discrimination, but also the suppressive impact of discrimination on a caste basis. This can have an impact on all areas of their lives, from education and health to social standing and economic prospects. For instance, a Dalit woman can have restricted prospects for education or confined to menial jobs that pay low wages, yet be discriminated against simply on account of her caste. This combination of gender and caste complicates and worsens her case in comparison to the women who come from superior castes. Economic class again exacerbates these disputes. Poor rural women, across caste, generally do not possess access to the resources which allow them to escape poverty traps. They will perhaps not have the money to pay for their children to go to school, visit a doctor, or even establish their rights. While wealthier women will suffer some gender discrimination, they will tend to be better standing with access to education, legal assistance, and social mobility. When economic disadvantage is in addition to caste, it is even more difficult for women in such groups to advance.

It is important to understand intersectionality here as it empowers rural women. Gender policy and programs must come to understand that women's lives cannot be captured by gender and that the answers must be for the multi-dimensional discrimination that happens because of caste and class. By doing so, for the first time, we can expect to implement genuinely inclusive policies that empower all rural women, most importantly the most oppressed.

4.2.1 CASTE'S ROLE IN EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN:

a) Double Discrimination against Lower-Caste Women

Dalit women enjoy a double dose of discrimination—first as women and second because of their caste. This is twice their social exclusion in which they are frequently deprived of basic facilities and opportunities available to others on a take-it-for-granted basis. In the rural economy, this discrimination is expressed through limited access to education, health, and economic opportunities that increase their marginalization.

b) Occupational Segregation by Caste

Dalit women are forced to take menial jobs, including agricultural work, manual scavenging, or domestic labor. These jobs are undervalued and poorly paid, and they provide Dalit³⁹ women with little economic independence. Upper caste women, while being discriminated against based on gender, might still enjoy better jobs or resources from a caste perspective.

c) Social Exclusion and Violence

Dalit women are at greater risk of violence, such as sexual harassment, physical violence, and exploitation. They are more exposed to caste violence due to their social status, and there are limited support systems to assist them. The combination of gender and caste discrimination tends to deny these women justice because local officials may turn down their cases on grounds of caste prejudices.

d) Caste Dynamics in Empowerment Programs

Even in women empowerment programs, caste is highly visible. Women belonging to the upper castes have greater access to resources, networking, and information regarding opportunities. Lower-caste women cannot access these schemes, and their problems are not considered, and hence they suffer more to end the cycle of poverty and discrimination.

4.2.2. CLASS EFFECT ON EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN:

a) Economic Insecurity and Limited Resources

Poor class women, in all castes⁴⁰, frequently experience acute poverty-related issues, bad education, and bad healthcare access. These economic weaknesses make it extremely hard for rural women to move out of the poverty trap and get self-sufficient. Shortages in resources exacerbate their oppression with fewer chances to improve their living conditions.

³⁹ Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, No. 33, Acts of Parliament, 1989 (India)

⁴⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/caste-social-differentiation>.

b) Limited Employment Opportunities

Most poor rural women, particularly those who have poor skills or education, are in the informal economy. They are in low-skilled, poorly remunerated farm or domestic service work. It is poorly protected and has little job security, subjecting them to harassment and abuse. Absence of formal employment implies that these women are not entitled to benefits such as health care, maternity leave, or steady income, and thus are even more susceptible to economic and social exploitation.

c) Minimal Access to Legal Aid and Healthcare

Their economic status also determines their access to legal assistance and medical care. Economically less well-off women have very few opportunities in approaching justice or the doctor. Whether it is reporting gender violence, accessing reproductive health services, or contesting gender and caste discrimination, economic impediments make it impossible for most women to gain the assistance they require to combat their rights.

d) Women Have More Opportunities

Wealthier rural women, while also experiencing gender-based discrimination, stand a better chance of having more opportunities for education, improved medical care, and more access to legal services. These advantages hold a higher probability of economic and social empowerment for them, quite different from lower-class women being disadvantaged.

4.2.3 GENDER AS AN EMPOWERMENT FACTOR:

a) Traditional Gender Roles

Rural Indian patriarchal norms place stringent gender roles that restrict women to household domestic work such as childcare and domestic labor. They deny women education, careers, or residence in the public domain. Women are relegated to being wives and mothers, with minimal space for personal development or autonomy.

b) Restricted Autonomy and Decision-Making Authority

Very minimal autonomy over their lives⁴⁵. Patriarchal culture limits their decision-making authority, both within the family and in society. Their lack of autonomy can be seen in domains such as money, healthcare decisions, and birth planning, in which men, either fathers, husbands, or other male relatives, often hold the power over what happens.

c) Gender Violence and Exploitation

Rural women, especially those from marginalized groups, are disproportionately subjected to gender-based violence such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking. The intersection of caste and class gives a double layer of vulnerability since Dalit women in lower castes or economically deprived groups have a double layer of obstacles in seeking protection and justice.

d) Sexual Harassment and Abuse⁴¹

Dalit women, working in farm or domestic labor⁴², endure endemic levels of sexual abuse and sexual harassment⁴⁶. Their accusations are usually undermined, since gender and caste-based prejudice renders them less believable. Such an environment leads such women to fight to achieve justice or even mere protection.

4.3 GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION

This discrimination finds expression in very real, tangible, everyday problems for women, particularly in rural communities, where socio-cultural and economic constraints keep them from fulfilling their potential. They are not abstractions; they tangibly impact the lives of women in profoundly personal ways, suppressing their possibilities and locking them into cycles of disadvantage that many experience.

⁴¹ The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, No. 43, Acts of Parliament, 2005

⁴² International Labour Organization, Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), <https://www.ilo.org/declaration/lang--en/index.htm>

Despite the laws of the country and the constitutional rights that guarantee equality and justice, for most rural women, life is not exactly something to write home about. Legal recourse is usually concealed by tradition and culture, however much in society they are entrenched. Thus, in school, for instance, there are still rural girls who are still made to understand their place is with the family due to the intention of assisting Government of India, National Policy for Women, Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2016. domestic chores or taking care of younger siblings, instead of a classroom. Thus, they are denied the chance to learn and develop, and they have limited choices for the future.

4.3.1 SOCIO-CULTURAL BARRIERS:

a. Women's Traditional Norms and Patriarchy:

Rural women in India are mostly at home. The ideology⁴³ that a woman's place is in the house is a culturally attached position, hence it has become a fact that most women are left with less choice in their personal and professional lives. Girls are socialized from an early age the fact that their major roles are taking care of family members, raising children, and managing the household⁴⁸. This confined definition of womanhood encompasses their agency and choice-making capacities, both within family and community. Patriarchal settings not only determine women's roles but also withhold autonomy for them. Men are typically the ultimate decision-makers in the majority of rural societies, either at home, within the community, or even in politics. A woman's voice is oftentimes dismissed or not heard, and her dreams come second after what expectations are placed on her. Even if women are involved in decision-making, their voices are usually minimized, and their opinions are not given the same level of standing as men's. This systemic gender disparity produces a cycle wherein women are unable to move beyond their roles and are discouraged from seeking personal ambitions or taking up endeavors outside of the home.

⁴³ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* 20–25 (1994)

b. Early Marriage and Childbirth:

Early marriage is one of the most enduring problems facing rural women. In spite of legislation like the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, which mandates that the age of marriage be 18, child marriage continues to be common in rural regions.

Marriage in most societies is viewed as the natural process for a girl, and this is done as early as 14 or 15. This is due to cultural forces, economic forces, and social pressure under which the value of the girl is assessed by the manner in which she marries and bears children. The impact of early marriage is significant. Teenage girls who get married are usually pushed out of school since their work is transferred to their husbands and children. Early childbearing also curtails their prospects for education or work, as the physical, emotional, and economic burdens of motherhood prove too much to bear. Such young mothers often complications, with restricted access to health care, exposing them to maternal mortality and other health complications. The childbearing and early marriage cycle presents a barrier that keeps these girls away from the tools they require to transform their lives education, employment, and autonomy.

c. Limited Mobility:

Limited mobility is another key barrier for rural women. Social custom in much rural existence stipulates that women must be household-based, with little room for mobility or mixing beyond the realm of their household or immediate community. Limited mobility stems from well-established feelings about the modesty and protection of females but also serves to limit female possibilities for growth and empowerment. Limited mobility implies that women have limited access to health care, employment, or even fundamental services such as education. Because they cannot move freely out of their homes, women cannot receive medical treatment, go to school, or work outside their homes. The confinement also maintains gender inequality since women are still reliant on their husbands or male relatives for survival and sustenance.

4.3.2 ECONOMIC BARRIERS

The most difficult hurdles for rural women are perhaps the economic barriers, and they then turn into stumbling blocks to empowerment and financial independence. These obstacles, from partial access to the economy's finance, to devaluing their labor, to the pay differences, hinder the participation of women in the economy and deriving advantage from their labor. These are not abstractions; they form part of rural women's day-to-day lives, constraining their options and locking them into dependency and poverty traps.

a) Restricted Access to Economic Resources:

Restricted access to financial resources is perhaps one of the most apparent economic obstacles faced by rural women. In rural areas, women are denied access to credit, land ownership, and banking services, all of which are vital in a bid to achieve economic independence and entrepreneurship. In a world where financial capital can make or break a business, this lack of resources is a giant step backward for women who would want to go into business or get loans for agricultural or business investments. For most women, access to credit or a loan will be based on the men in their households, usually their fathers or husbands⁵². Even when women have entrepreneurial ideas, they cannot access funds since they are not good borrowers because of their roles in society as assigned to them.

b) Unpaid Labor:

Another major economic barrier is that women in rural areas, and especially in agricultural activities, are carrying a great burden of unpaid labor. Farming activities involve women in rural India from plowing and harvesting to raising cattle and processing agriculture. However, their work does not normally go recognized or appreciated. This work, though essential to the farm economy, is regarded as part of a woman's household responsibilities and therefore remains unrewarded.

CHAPTER: 5 ROLE OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

5.1 CONTRIBUTION OF NGOS AND SELF-HELP GROUPS

Empowerment for women in rural areas isn't necessarily about having rights on paper, but about having access to information, resources, and support to make those rights functional in day-to-day life. While there are laws on the books meant to advance gender equality, too many rural women don't know about their legal protection or have the confidence and means to access it. It is here that institutions such as NGOs and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) act as a link between government policies and ground reality. These institutions deal directly with women residing in their villages, making them self-confident with legal knowledge, economically empowered, and encouraging them to defy social norms. NGO⁴⁴s are instrumental in empowering rural women by providing legal assistance, conducting awareness programs, and fighting gender disparity.

The majority of NGOs provide legal assistance to emancipate women from domestic violence, office harassment, and disputes over property so that they may access justice securely. Apart from legal service, NGOs engage themselves in education, vocational training, and medical services to empower women with the requisite skills and apparatus to lead their lives independently. Since they work at the grassroots level, NGOs tend to reach women who are most vulnerable— those not otherwise in contact with official government support mechanisms. While NGOs deal with legal and social empowerment, SHGs deal with economic independence. SHGs are small, community-based groups where women can come together, save money, and take small loans to begin businesses or sustain their families. This financial autonomy frees them from their dependence on male kin, and they exercise greater autonomy in their lives. But SHGs are not just about finance; they also provide women with the experience of being a group and a sense of security in numbers.

⁴⁴ Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), UNITED NATIONS, <https://www.un.org/en/civil-society/non-governmental-organizations>.

In certain rural villages, SHGs have become sites of security where women support each other, share issues like domestic violence or child marriage, and unite to demand improvements in their villages.

5.1.2 DEFINITION AND NATURE OF NGOS AND SHGS

Empowering women in rural areas is not an issue of legislation alone—it's a matter of effective support structures that make women self-sufficient to access resources, become economically independent, and hold decision-making authority. That is where Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) step in. Grassroot organizations such as these serve as catalysts to effect change, enabling women to fill the gap between provisions of law and enforcement in reality. While NGOs emphasize legal literacy, education, and vocational skills training, SHGs prioritize economic empowerment and group decision-making. They complement each other in empowering rural women to assert their rights, earn economic independence, and create social change.

What Are NGOs? Their Role in Rural Development

NGOs, or Non-Governmental Organizations, are self-governing, non-profit-making organizations that seek social development and, many times, supplement government action by bringing it to marginalized groups. NGOs come in as the bridge between policy and practice, making legal rights and welfare schemes inclusive of women, in rural India. Most rural women are not aware of their constitutional and legal rights, through illiteracy, poverty, and ingrained traditions. NGOs inform women such as these about their rights, provide legal assistance, and promote gender equality. In addition to the provision of legal assistance, NGOs operate in fields of education, health, vocational training, and economic empowerment to enable women to have opportunities to break conventions and lead lives of their own. The mark of NGOs is their grass-roots orientation. Unlike government bureaucracies, which may have a rigid organization, NGOs involve women directly and familiarize themselves with their concerns before tailoring interventions to address their needs. Whether it's ensuring access to justice for a domestic violence survivor, training women in

financial skills, or helping create microenterprises, NGOs provide an all-encompassing package so empowerment is not theory but reality.

What Are SHGs? How They Work and Empower Women

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are women groups based at the local community level who save, take credit, and assist each other in economic as well as social issues. SHGs are typically 10–20 women of the same economic and social statuses, who pool their savings⁴⁵ to a common kitty and form a joint fund on which money is lent to members when needed. The groups rely on mutual trust, cooperation with each other, and joint decision-making and hence lead to financial and social empowerment. To rural women who are mostly not positioned to access conventional banking, SHGs introduce money security and inclusion. SHGs enable women to access small loans without collateral, and this creates entrepreneurship, self-sufficiency, and investment in family well-being. Most SHGs have succeeded in opening small-scale enterprises such as handicrafts, dairy farming, tailoring, and organic agriculture, greatly improving their economic status. Apart from economic independence, SHGs are also safe havens where women are free to air and solve social problems. SHG women are able to comfortably support each other in instances of domestic violence, dowry harassment, or discrimination, leveraging their collective power to force their calls for justice. Most SHGs have become potent advocacy movements, fighting their local patriarchal cultures and calling for improved healthcare, education, and governance in their places of residence.

Legal and Policy Framework Facilitating NGOs and SHG⁴⁶s

SHGs and NGOs are supported by legal and policy frameworks that provide them with legitimacy as well as funding. There have been various constitutional provisions, legislative laws, and government schemes developed to promote their contribution towards empowering women. Promotes involvement of SHGs in rural employment schemes, making the women economically secure.

⁴⁵ Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India 20–25 (1994)

⁴⁶ <https://nrlm.gov.in/shgOuterReports.do?methodName=showShgReports>

These legislations give a legal framework to NGOs and SHGs, wherein their activities are recognized, nurtured, and regulated by the state.

5.1.3 ROLE OF NGO'S IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL AREAS

NGOs are a source of hope for rural women, empowering them to face the challenges of inequality, economic dependency, and denial of access to resources and education. Though there are laws for the protection and empowerment of women, few know what they are entitled to or lack the means to enforce them. NGOs bridge this gap, working on the grassroots level to offer legal aid, economic empowerment, skill acquisition, and a voice for women to regain their agency. In the most important way, NGOs' most effective contribution is legal awareness⁴⁷.

Women in most villages suffer from domestic violence, land conflicts, or exploitation at work without knowing that they can fight for their rights. NGOs conduct campaigns of awareness, stage legal literacy workshops, and conduct free counseling to enable women to be aware of and assert their rights. Through accompanying them through judicial processes and making direct interventions on their behalf, these organizations enable women to refuse to be exploited and demand fair treatment. Financial independence is the next important milestone towards empowerment. Most rural women are capable but resource-starved to earn a sustainable ⁴⁸income. NGOs provide training in tailoring, agriculture, handicraft, and other vocational skills so that women are able to earn their own livelihood. By providing access to microloans and self-employment initiatives, NGOs enable them to start small businesses and become self-independent from financial dependency to become a contributing member of their families and society. In addition to economic and legal assistance, NGOs promote social transformation by empowering women to contest leadership positions, engage in local government, and break cultural norms. They provide women with a shelter where they can express themselves, exchange experiences, and gain confidence. By empowering

⁴⁷ National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), Legal Literacy and Legal Awareness Programme, <https://nalsa.gov.in/lsap/legal-literacy>

⁴⁸ Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India, (1996) 5 SCC 647

women at the grassroots level, NGOs change individual lives but also build more unified, inclusive communities where women are heard, seen, and counted.

5.1.4 SHG ROLE IN EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AT RURAL LEVEL

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have become a key change agent at the village level, making women confident, financially empowered, and having a sense of belongingness so that they become capable of building improved lives for themselves and their kin. For most villages, women are under economic dependence, limited access to opportunities, and hard-core social constraints which function as hindrances for their blossoming with their complete potential. SHGs provide a route out of poverty by forming small, close groups of women who save together, assist one another, and invest in livelihood ventures. It is not just a finance cooperative; the group also becomes a sense of belongingness and community through which women gain ownership over their future. Availability of money is most likely the greatest obstacle rural women face.

They don't have bank accounts, and conventional lenders will not lend to them because they don't have collateral. SHGs reverse this by getting the women to save small sums periodically and then to use these as a source of loans for group members when the need arises. Whether it is to set up a small tailoring operation, purchase livestock, or support a child through school, the loans allow women to make decisions about themselves and their families themselves. With time, control of money instills confidence, and women who formerly had little role in family decision making begin to join actively in decision making. But SHGs are not money. They empower women with voice. Among these groups, they get a place to call their own where they can air their grievances, either domestic violence, ill health, or discrimination. Most but a handful of SHGs have adopted social causes, agitating for improved healthcare, sanitation, and education for the villages. Women who once would avoid speaking out in public begin to take up meetings, bargaining with the local administration, and asserting their rights. With economic empowerment, support for each other, and action together, SHGs are changing not only individual lives but lives in entire communities. They demonstrate that women, when collectively empowered, are strong enough to drive change, overcome antiquated limitations, and forge a future where they are equal partners in society.

5.2 SUCCESSFUL CASE STUDIES OF EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES

Empowerment of rural women isn't all policy debates and government schemes—it's about actual, measurable change in the lives of women who've been socially, economically, and educationally marginalized for generations. Rural women have been held back for generations in subservient roles, with minimal or no control over their money, education, and decisions. Grassroots movements and government programs, though, have been successful in empowering them as economically independent citizens, gaining leadership skills, and being actively engaged in local area development. Here are some case studies of initiatives that have impacted the lives of rural women significantly to show how with proper intervention, it is possible for women to overcome systems and become change-agents at home and society.

1. *Kudumbashree: Kerala's Women-Led Model of Development*

Since its launch in 1998, Kerala's Kudumbashree programme⁴⁹ is, without a doubt, one of the most successful India-wide women's empowerment programs. It is not merely a poverty alleviation programme; it is an empowering movement that has transformed the lives of dozens of women from all over the state. The Kudumbashree scheme operates on a path-paving three-tier system of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) at neighborhood, ward, and community levels. With this step, the women manage their own economic and social empowerment as self-initiative community members and not as acceptors of favors as passive individuals. Financial sustainability is one among the main contributing factors to Kudumbashree's success. The women in the program learn different livelihood skills ranging from agriculture to tailoring, handicrafts, and small-scale food production⁵⁰. Through such skills, women have been empowered to establish their own businesses, employing themselves and others in their communities. Microfinance products are also provided by the program, through which women are able to save, access credit, and invest in earning-generating activities. Economic independence is core to their empowerment since it enables them to gain the

⁴⁹ Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM): Aajeevika, <https://aajeevika.gov.in/en/nrlm>

⁵⁰ <https://www.fao.org/food-production/en>

ability to earn a secure future. But Kudumbashree is not just about money—political and social empowerment. The project pushes women into the leadership path, particularly within Kerala's Panchayati Raj system. Hundreds of women, who hitherto had to settle for household work, have battled and emerged victorious in local elections and have become decision-makers with powers within their own domains.

2. SEWA: Organizing Women in the Informal Economy (Gujarat)

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) formed in Gujarat in 1972 has been a trend-breaking movement with an agenda to unionize women workers of the unorganized sector. They are mostly street vendors, farm wage laborers, artisans, and home-based workers—who typically have uncertain incomes, no support, and zero legal aid access. SEWA has also tried to break down such barriers, giving training, microcredit, and an organized voice to such women to agitate for higher wages, better working conditions, and social security. Another primary method through which SEWA has operated is through establishing women's cooperatives. Such women who were earlier employed in exploitative environments have formed groups to be their own bosses, mostly in textiles, handicrafts, or food processing. These cooperatives are not just a supply of a sustainable income source; they are support and relationship with each other. Women share information, resources, and experience and create a system that empowers them as individuals and as a whole. Other than these cooperatives, SEWA is also a major force when it comes to financial inclusion. It empowers rural women with access to bank accounts, microcredit, and financial education. For the majority of these women, it is a life-changing experience—first time in their life, they can save, invest in their children's education and plan a better future. Economic independence is the source of empowerment, empowering women with the ability to start building a better future for themselves and their kin. In addition to economic empowerment, SEWA has also been involved in policy advocacy. SEWA has mobilized informal women workers to be brought under labor laws and social security schemes, platforms on which these women have been denied historically. SEWA has been able to lobby successfully at the national and international levels, demonstrating the power of grassroots movement to influence policy-making and achieve systemic change. SEWA's

work has enabled thousands of rural women to emerge from exploitation and live proud, independent lives. Through economic support, legal awareness, and social activism together, SEWA has enabled these women to claim their rights, gain more freedom, and live a better life. SEWA's achievement is proof that where women organize, unite, and agitate, great things can be achieved.

3. Mahila Samakhya: Social Transformation through Education

Education has been renowned for an activity where women empowered for decades, and the Mahila Samakhya programme launched in 1988 is the greatest reflection of this reality. This scheme was envisioned under the National Policy on Education to provide non-formal education for women, primarily rural women who did not have the right to education in the first place. For many of these women, Mahila Samakhya is a chance to gain literacy training, vocational training, and knowledge about their legal rights—each one of which is a vital instrument in transforming their lives. Mahila Samakhya has worked particularly well with marginalized women like those of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who often live under multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion. Mahila Samakhya goes to these women where they are, catching them in their villages and providing learning opportunities in non-formal education centers. There, women who perhaps never went to school at all learn to read and write, and acquire useful information in areas like health care, reproductive rights, and management of money. This is not only making women skilled all of a sudden, it transforms their lives within their homes and communities. The majority of women who previously only did housework are today teachers, community health workers, and entrepreneurs, testament to the tremendous difference that education makes in unlocking a woman's potential. It lifts their confidence as they are able to see the options that education opens for them. Another important area of work by Mahila Samakhya is the problem of gender-based violence.

5.3 ROLE OF PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS IN RURAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) are the pillars of rural local self-government⁵¹ in India, giving the people a direct stake in local development. From the decentralization philosophy, these institutions offer a guarantee that decision-making authority is not restricted to higher levels but reaches down to the people themselves—the villagers. Rural people, with the assistance of PRIs, become directly involved in the governance process, thus making it more transparent, inclusive, and accountable to their needs. In their very intrinsic core, PRIs are asked to envision and plan such schemes of development, for example, education, health, sanitation, and most importantly, women empowerment. PRIs have a crucial role to play in linking policy making for social development with its implementation at the grass root level.

PRIs are governed by a systemized three-tiered administrative system which provides ease of administration:

Gram Panchayat (Village Level) – Most bottom-line level, solving problems on a daily basis at a local level and delivering minimum facilities.

Block Level Panchayat Samiti – A collective body of a group of Gram Panchayats which facilitates implementation of development schemes at a wider scale.

Zilla Parishad (District Level) – Topmost, consisting of district-level planning, distribution of resources, and large rural development schemes.

By involving citizens at the grass root level, PRIs make local communities take decisions on their own development. It is particularly appropriate for empowering women because PRIs provide a platform where women can participate in governance, put forward their problems, and involve themselves in policy-making. As more women gain access to these schools, PRIs have also contributed to breaking down traditional gender distinctions, so that more access is given to assets,

⁵¹ Panchayati Raj, MINISTRY OF PANCHAYATI RAJ, GOV'T OF INDIA, <https://www.panchayat.gov.in/>.

and there are now opportunities for women to occupy leadership positions and make important decisions in the community. Whereas PRIs are already a beneficiary of the reservation policy, the bill does this much too as well making even stronger pleas in favor of women's representation in all strata of governments so that consistency in their political career from ground to higher tiers is assured. In Bihar, some women Panchayat members collectively made efforts to enhance sanitation and provision of clean drinking water. In Kerala, a woman Panchayat leader utilized her power to implement vocational training courses among rural women to empower them economically. These cases reveal how provisions of the law, if executed in the right manner, can cause real changes towards enhancing the life of women and society. The journey to full empowerment is still far away, but the distance covered till now cannot be overlooked. Women in the PRIs are no longer symbolic representatives; they are making policies, governing communities, and altering traditional power dynamics. The constitutional and legal framework provides the platform, but actual change is brought about by sustained efforts towards educating, training, and empowering women leaders at the grassroots level.

5.3.1. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION IN PANCHAYATS RAJ INSTITUTION

The transformation of women in India's Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been simply revolutionary. It has been a long tradition in rural India in which men have always been dominant and no or zero role in decision-making by women has been ever played. But the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 transformed this reality by reserving one third of each seat in PRIs for women, which quota has been raised to 50% by many states later on. The transition not only brought women to the leadership but also brought radical change to rural governance. In spite of the effect of their participation, their path is far from easy. Women leaders still struggle against entrenched social and cultural⁵² obstacles, but their determination and resilience are slowly transforming the political landscape of rural India. The policy of reservation has opened up

⁵² B.K. Roy Burman, Tribal Peoples and Cultural Rights in India

opportunities for women to become active participants in governance, introducing new ideas to problems that had been ignored for decades.

In most villages, women sarpanches and members have given importance to education, sanitation, and healthcare—sectors that have a direct impact on the lives of their citizens. There are many instances of villages where womenled panchayats have ensured effective implementation of welfare schemes, increased girl students in schools, and formed self-help groups that ensure women's economic independence. Their leadership has been the answer to solve local issues that were earlier overlooked. In Rajasthan, for example, a sarpanch woman named Sunita ruled an open-defecation-plagued village with all the health risks that come with it. Resisting protests from villagers, she kept demanding toilets to be fitted, knocking on doors to educate families on sanitation. Her work eventually bore fruit, and her village is now open-defecation-free. This is just one of many such stories of women leaders who, in the face of resistance, have triggered irreversible change. The presence of women in PRIs has also impacted society immensely. It has shattered traditional gender stereotyping⁵³ and provided young girls with role models of examples that demonstrate leadership is not man's work. Women politicians have been shown to be able to govern, make tough choices, and administer good governance. This change of mind is important to gender equality in the long run because it motivates generations of women to work towards holding top jobs. Nevertheless, while such achievements are motivational, women's experiences in PRIs should not be written off. One of the largest obstacles is the prevalence of "proxy representation," or more popularly known as the "Sarpanch Pati" syndrome. In most instances, women are being elected as sarpanches but the actual power is in the hands of their husbands or their male relatives. In some cases men make decision on elected women on their behalf and make them figureheads. This is against the spirit of reservations and an example of how patriarchy refuses to let go. Whereas a few women are able to stand up for themselves and assume their rightful places, others remain relegated to the periphery, unable to transcend male hegemony. The second broad problem is deep-seated social opposition to women as leaders. Men in most villages still think of administration as

⁵³ Anuj Garg v. Hotel Ass'n of India, (2008) 3 SCC 1 (India)

their prerogative and resist female rule by women leaders. Women sarpanches and ward members are similarly frequently subjected to hostility, disdain, or active exclusion from serious deliberations. They are mocked for criticizing, and others are kept away from collaboration that they must employ to have successful policies. Women leaders are even attacked or threatened for speaking out against entrenched power. Illiteracy is another major hurdle. The majority of women coming into PRIs are illiterate, and they struggle to learn governance systems, budgets, and legislation. This illiteracy also subjects them to dependency on male administrators or bureaucrats, further restricting them from making their own decisions. Even training modules to inform representative women of their rights and obligations are of no avail or only reach representative women in inaccessible areas. They are not merely paper chiefs; they are leading transformation in ways that were unthinkable a short while ago. Their issues aside, they are not allowing them to deter them from attempting to alter the status quo. Through proper guidance, policy, and society's acceptance, these women can bring about a concrete change in power-sharing in rural India. The promise of people's democracy hinges on empowering them, and their quest, though long and painful, is leading the way to an egalitarian and just society.

CHAPTER-6 CHALLENGES

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Empowering women of rural India is a deeply embedded problem despite law and policy instruments that are set to ensure the rights and advancement of women. In rural areas, where there is the prevalence of patriarchal orders and traditions, women suffer from a cluster of problems deterring them from exercising basic rights, accessing goods and services⁵⁴ as well as opportunities. Despite legal measures aimed at enhancing gender equality and protecting women from violence, the laws never reach rural women due to inefficiencies in the enforcement mechanism. Issues among rural women are complex. From poor enforcement of law and unawareness of rights to core socio-cultural barriers, these issues are justifiable in terms of gender discrimination. Political and administrative settings being generally unfavorable and opposed to gender issues further restrict women from participating in political activities and also in making decision arenas.

6.2 LEGAL AND POLICY GAP

India boasts a robust legislative framework in terms of women's empowerment, yet because of gaps in enforcing laws and policies, rural women remain beset with many hindrances even as legislative measures and constitutional safeguards exist, they may not necessarily feed into a perceptible impact on the ground. Rural women cannot assert their rights in full measure because of social constraints, weak enforcement, and information deprivation. These disparities render the individual vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation by limiting their social security, economic independence, and justice. One of the largest hurdles is the lack of gender sensitive law that addresses the specific issues of rural women. Article 14, 15, and 16 of the constitution ensures equality, and the directive principles of the state policy lay strong emphasis on the empowerment and safeguarding of women. But most of the law do not consider the fact of rural life, where patriarchy is

⁵⁴ Leaving No One Behind: Access to Goods and Services, UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (UNDP), <https://www.undp.org/publications/leaving-no-one-behind-access-goods-and-services>.

embedded. For instance, girls were given equal right of inheritance in Hindu succession (amendment) act 2005 never the less its implementation is still deficient in rural area. Women are usually persuaded by family members to relinquish their legitimate share of ancestral property. In the year 2020 case of Vineeta sharma vs rakesh sharma, the supreme court reiterated the daughter rights equality never the less the application of ruling s is still limited in rural areas where legal provision are overridden by the custom. The lack of proper enforcement of legislation aimed at protecting women is another significance challenges, even though they have gender discrimination, employment harassment, and domestic violence prohibition laws, they are poorly enforced in rural regions. For example, battered women are entitled to legal remedy in the name of domestic violence act 2005 PWDVA. But the greater percentage of rural women are not that well informed about the law or concerned about being ostracized when they approach for assistance, The Supreme court of Laxmi v. union of India admitted that despite strict legislations being placed, officials had not been able to prevent acid attacks. This case illustrates how even strong legal framework can fail if they are not enforced properly, particularly in rural areas where social pressures discourage women from reporting abuse and legal awareness is low. Statutory protection are overridden by customary and personal laws, which further complicate the situation. Traditional customs continue to regulate inheritance marriage, and property right in most rural societies, largely at the expense of women. For instance, in areas where the laws are meant to safeguard their rights, women cannot own property. However, women are still reluctant to seek justice due to a lack of female lawyers and women-focused legal awareness programs in rural areas. The majority of the women are deterred from taking legal recourse by the daunting nature of the law, which includes long delays, exorbitant costs, and social boycott.

6.2 ABSENCE OF EDUCATION AND AWARENESS: GREATEST OBSTACLE TO EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

One of the greatest obstacles to empowering rural women is ignorance and absence of education. No matter how many laws and policies there are favoring gender equality, millions of women in rural areas are not worry about of the rights that they must have and how they can access the benefits made available to them in the interest of social program. This cycle of exclusion is then compounded further by low levels of literacy⁵⁵, limited access to information, and difficulty in accessing legal representation. Since the same women that laws are meant to protect are not even aware of how to claim the benefits to which they are entitled, even the most well-conceived schemes all too frequently fail to bring about meaningful reform. Rural women get either no or negligible formal education even though education is an instrumental part of empowerment.

Family patriarchal ideology gives more significance to the education of men and, as such, restricts the education of girls. Due to the constraints of society, domestic work, or mere fear of the long distances they might have to cover to find a school, women are largely school-dropouts. Most families think that since a girl is to be married and work at home, she does not require an education. The long-term consequences of the absence of this education are restricting the ability of women to read legal documents, communicate with government institutions, and even exercise their basic rights. Most rural women are unable to read, write, or receive social benefits. file grievances or pursue legal recourse, and they are subject to their male kin who will not always behave in their best interests. In addition to education training, women's capacity to oppose injustice and discrimination is also limited by their unawareness of their legal rights.

India Government has enacted a series of progressive laws to protect the women rights such of MBA of 1961, the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005, and POWFDVA 2005. Almost all rural women are unaware of these acts or are scared of what will happen if they enforce their rights.

⁵⁵ National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), Legal Literacy and Awareness Programme, <https://nalsa.gov.in/lsap/legal-literacy>

For instance, traditional social norms⁵⁶ tend to deny women the right of inheritance even after the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act has given daughters must have equal rights over family property. Not knowing that the law is in their favor, they are typically forced to surrender their rights over property to male relatives. Since this, women also fail to report domestic violence because they lack knowledge of the legal avenues that are open to them or because they fear being stigmatized, even when there is a PODVA that provides them with legal protection against abuse. Even major court rulings like *Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma 2020*, where daughters' right to equal property was established, have had little impact in low legal literacy regions.

Non-availability of legal aid schemes is another major issue. Free legal assistance to vulnerable groups such as women is provided under the LSAA 1987. However, the majority of rural women are ignorant of this right or lack access to these treatments. In remote villages, there are usually not enough institutions providing legal assistance, and even if they exist, social and cultural practices discourage women from seeking help.

Women also are not going to go to courts or the police because the legal system itself might be intimidating to someone who does not understand legal processes. males who dislike going to the police or courts. In addition, the absence of women lawyers and police officers in rural areas prevents women from demanding justice since most of them are uncomfortable discussing sensitive issues with male lawyers or police officers. Even government efforts to bridge the awareness gap, such as community outreach and legal literacy programs, typically fail to reach the women who most need them. Most of them are poorly implemented due to a shortage of funds, challenging logistics, or insufficient marketing. Most of the time, legal awareness campaigns are conducted in urban areas or in regional government offices, which leaves rural women out of the picture.

⁵⁶ Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, (1973) 4 SCC 225 (India)

6.3 SOCIO CULTURAL CHALLENGES TO EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN

Internalized sociocultural norms continue to be strong barriers, particularly in rural areas, even where there are laws and policies that promote women's empowerment. Due to unhealthy traditional practices, patriarchal traditions, and social expectations, women are typically dissuaded—and in certain cases, forbidden—by the environment from applying their rights. These cultural barriers typically gain the upper hand against legal protection, denying rural women access to justice, economic opportunities, or education. The dominant patriarchal norms that dictate the status of a woman in society are one of the most profound barriers. The men will still have to make all the financial and family decisions in most rural households, while the women will have to keep themselves limited to the domestic work. Girls are socialized early on that their initial responsibility is to take care of their families, which restricts their freedom of movement, decision-making power, and lifetime economic dependence on male kin. Women are typically coerced, even forced, to sacrifice their right over property to be handed over to the male successors⁵⁷ even though daughters have been granted an equal inheritance right under the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005. Social conditioning disfavoring women in exercising their legal rights only makes current inequalities in wealth dependence and vulnerable more serious

Other than economic restraint, women must deal with social shame and resistance to law reform. Interference by the law in gender issues is regarded by most rural communities as an invasion into their cultural tradition. Women attempting to report instances of property conflict, harassment in the workplace, or domestic violence are normally stigmatised as disrespectful or disobedient. Although the PWFDVA 2005 to protect women against violence, domestic violence is not considered a criminal offense but a personal issue in most rural families. The victims, when they attempt to respond, are blamed, stigmatized by society, and held responsible for the shame of their family. They are placed at risk to endure abuse in the name of "maintaining family honor," instead of being

⁵⁷ Vienna Convention on Succession of States in Respect of Treaties art. 2(1)(b), Aug. 23, 1978, 1946 U.N.T.S.

protected. Women are intimidated by the threat of isolation, which discourages them from reporting and allows the abuse cycle to continue unchecked and justice to remain elusive.

6.4 POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE OBSTACLES TO EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN

In spite of constitutional and legal measures to promote the political participation of women and administrative representation, rural women still have tremendous obstacles that hinder them from being actively involved in governance. Institutional insensitivity, political interference, and entrenched societal norms constrain their capacity to exercise leadership and make policy impacts. While legislation like the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments has opened windows of opportunity to women in local self-government, most of these efforts fail due to systemic barriers that put women on the margins of political power. One of the largest problems is the underrepresentation of women in government and policy-making. Though a constitutional requirement guarantees a one-third representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) for women, this has not always been translated into political empowerment in reality. Even where women are elected in most rural societies, they do not have real decision-making authority. Rather, male family members—often husbands or fathers—are the de facto authority behind the throne in what is popularly known as the "proxy system" or Sarpanch Pati phenomenon. These women representatives can go for meetings and sign papers, but real ruling in their households is done by men, and hence their occupation is nothing more than ceremonial. This system guarantees us that women are not fit for leading and denies them experience and assurance to shift to active leadership. Secondly, in higher governmental levels, women's representation is still disproportionately minimal, and it is hard to lobby for gender equity as well as women's welfare-oriented policies. Political interference and genuine lack of commitment towards gender are a major hindrance.

While political parties do include empowerment of women in their agendas, on-the-ground action is usually lacking. Most policymakers and politicians view gender-based policies as secondary because they prefer to address economic growth and infrastructure development first. Though there are programs set aside to advance gender equality, the programs fail because they lack sufficient

funds through poor financing, political will, or institutions' support. Political patronage and corruption also hinder the progress, in that the resources allocated for the women's welfare programs end up elsewhere, e.g., misused or diverted to politics. In the absence of solid political support, policy and law made to empower women do not work, and rural women struggle to continue searching for space and sustenance in the political world. Social and cultural attitudes also limit women from becoming actively involved at the grassroots level in governance. Despite provision of their integration through the 73rd Amendment in PRIs, rural women generally face opposition by their family members and rural community when they strive to engage as leaders. Public speaking and self-initiative decisions are discouraged from women within patriarchal orders.

CHAPTER: 7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

7.1 CONCLUSION

Empowering women in rural areas is not just about laws and policies—it is about changing lives, breaking barriers, and ensuring that every woman has the freedom to shape her own future. Over the years, India has taken many steps to promote gender equality through constitutional provisions, legal protections, government schemes, and judicial interventions. But despite all these efforts, most rural women still grapple with deeply entrenched social norms, economic dependency, and restricted access to education and healthcare. The distance between legal rights and day-to-day realities is still wide, and the path towards real empowerment is still a challenge. Indian Constitution guarantees a robust framework of gender equality by guaranteeing equal rights under Art 14, 15, and 16. These articles assure non-discrimination and equality of opportunity for women. Directive Principles of State Policy also emphasize equal remuneration, maternity leave, and overall welfare. Although these constitutional provisions are critical, their success would rely on the implementation at the grassroots level. Women in most villages are ignorant of their rights, and therefore it becomes a challenge for them to exercise their legal rights. DPA, POWFDVA and MBA have been formulated to safeguard women against exploitation and discrimination.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment reserving seats for women at the local government level has facilitated many women to enter decision-making forums. Legislation cannot overcome centuries of in-grained tradition that stifles women's mobility, economic autonomy, and leadership. Even if women enter the local government, they are frequently battled by male opponents and social pressures that hold back their power. Initiatives launched by the government⁵⁸ like BBBP, MSK and NRKLM have changed the mindset positively through finance assistance, vocation training, and self-employment. It freed many women from stereotypical roles and helped them establish their own career. In the majority of cases, though, the facilities⁵⁹ reach none other but get entangled in

⁵⁸ Government of India, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), <https://nrega.nic.in>

⁵⁹ <https://ab-hwc.nhp.gov.in>

the red tape of bureaucracy, corruption, and lack of general awareness. In order to truly witness progress, these programs need to be scaled up even more, with a commitment to ensure rural women are aware of and making use of their entitlements. Perhaps one of the largest obstacles to empowerment in rural women is the entrenched patriarchal mindset that still dominates their place in society. Most women continue to have limitations on their right to work, go to school, or decide for themselves. Gender violence is a brutal reality, and most incidents of domestic violence, dowry crimes, and sexual harassment at the workplace go unreported because of fear and society

Delays in justice and lack of availability of legal assistance deter women from approaching the courts. In spite of all these hurdles, there are tales of warmth of rural women who have broken tradition-bound roles and set up their rights. Women self-help groups, community movements, and grass-roots organizations have been the most powerful driving force behind empowering rural women, demonstrating that change is possible if society unites in support of gender equality. All this will have to actually make a difference only if there is increased commitment from society, government departments, and police forces towards supporting them so that women do not just have rights on paper but are actually able to practice them. A wholistic approach is needed to bridge the gap between policy and real effect.

7.2 RECOMMENDATION

1.Strengthening Legal Enforcement and Accountability

Let's envision a reality where women's rights laws on paper are also a promise fulfilled every day. To achieve this, the officials—judges, police, and local councils—must be trained to know the special needs of rural women. Through the establishment of local, speedy courts, cases involving domestic violence and harassment can be disposed of rapidly, so that women are assured of safety and protection when approaching the authorities for assistance.

2. Creating Awareness and Legal Literacy

Rural village women are unaware of their full rights or even services to them. Attempt to imagine a village where local courts' hearings, rural radio, and even folk-drama are utilized for imparting knowledge in simple terms that can be read by laymen. Establishing local legal advice centres can facilitate the women obtaining access to free consultancy facilities, thereby allowing them easily to claim whatever they need.

3. Constructing Women's Participation in making decision

If women are included in local decision-making, their voices introduce a new voice for all. As much as law ensures that they are there in local councils, the majority of them feel they do not have the wherewithal to be able to access these systems. With training in leadership and governance, coupled with mentoring by older women, rural women can build confidence and ability to participate actively and influence policies that impact their communities.

4. Enhancing Access to Education and Training

Learning is a great change maker. Picture the entire population of girls in a village community highly educated to gain access to an ocean of endless possibilities. Combining formal school education, vocational training, and computer literacy, young women can be given invaluable skills pertaining to local needs. This twin action not only enhances their confidence level but also empowers them for quality jobs and a better tomorrow.

5. Bolstering Economic Empowerment and Financial Inclusion

Financial autonomy has the potential to transform lives. Imagine self-help groups where women gather, discuss their experiences, and support each other financially. With microfinance, subsidized low-cost loans, and government subsidy, women are able to set up small enterprises or increase the size of the ones already operating. This economic empowerment not only bolsters their economic status but also renders them more vocal on domestic and local issues.

6.Enabling Improved Delivery of Government Schemes

There are lots of well-intentioned government schemes in favour of rural women, but usually the bureaucratic delays make benefits unattainable⁶⁰. Streamlining these procedural bottlenecks and enhancing inter-agency coordination has the potential to change many lives. Imagine an efficient, easy-to-use process for women to lodge claims for benefits and grievance redressal, sure that they would be helped swiftly and effectively.

7.Fighting Gender-Based Violence and Social Stigma

For too many rural women, risk of gender violence and its humiliating stigma is one they endure on a daily basis. Bolstering prevention measures and having safe havens—a woman's shelter and a crisis helpline hot line for women—can be a lifeline for those in danger. Community-based interventions that recognize and modify deeply ingrained gender role-related beliefs can potentially erode such life-destroying norms, on the way to a future of a healthier, more tolerant society.

8.Empowerment is founded in good health.

Picture rural clinics providing quality reproductive and maternal healthcare, led by empathetic women health workers aware of the women's special concerns in these localities. Easy-to-afford sanitary towels and monthly menstrual program schemes can free women to live healthy and positive lives and stay ready to avail themselves of opportunity in all they do.

9.Increasing Male Participation in Gender Equality Programs

Collective change works better. Men, being brothers, fathers, and community⁶¹ leaders, have a special role to play in upholding gender balance. By involving men through awareness camps and dialogue at the community level, we can get them to take up domestic duties and become active promoters of women's rights. If each one of us contributes together, communities can become a more balanced and fair place to live.

⁶⁰ Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity v. State of W.B., (1996) 4 SCC 37

⁶¹ The Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, No. 40, Acts of Parliament, 1996 (India)

10. Building Grassroots and Community-Based Initiatives

Most frequently, most effective change begins on the local level, at the grassroots level. Local networks of women's organizations, neighborhood groups, and NGOs are often the initiators of change. Imagine communities getting together to check up on and advocate for local women's welfare programs to verify that aid goes to the most vulnerable women. By supporting and building the strength of these grassroot networks by funding and through capacity-building workshops, a foundation, locally-founded support system is created that informs and advocates each woman's possibilities.

All these suggestions are steps towards a future where all rural women know not only their rights but can live them every day. It's about building an enabling environment where change is created from below, where women and men in their communities come together to create a future that is secure, participatory, and full of opportunities for all.

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COMPLETION CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that **Ms LALHMINGMAWII** with Enrollment Number **A0342624027**, a student of Programme **LLM (Constitutional Law)** Batch **2024-2025** Semester at **Amity Institute of Advanced Legal Studies** has pursued **Dissertation LWDS600** on topic **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN RURAL AREAS : LAWS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION** under my guidance from **07/01/2025** to **07/04/2025**. The Student has submitted **13** out of total **13** Weekly Progress Reports. **Ms LALHMINGMAWII** has completed the project-related work and the work done is satisfactory.

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