

Socio-Economic Empowerment Of Rural Women

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Introduction:

Skills development is a key factor in improving rural productivity, employability and income-earning opportunities, moreover it can also be effective enhancing food security and promoting sustainable rural development. Despite all these rural women has to face many barrier related to agriculture and other rural activities, higher barriers in education and training limit their participation. Targeted action is needed to dismantle these barriers.

Why is action needed?

Education and training are essential components of any strategy to improve agricultural and non-farm productivity and pull households out of poverty. Learning about improved production technologies and methods, new products and markets, business and life skills (such as health management, decision making, self-confidence, or conflict management) can make a big difference. Skills development is particularly important to rural women who are more likely to be contributing family workers, subsistence farmers or home-based microentrepreneurs in the informal sector, or performing low-paid, unskilled work as seasonal workers. Women often have different training needs than men, linked to their domestic work and care responsibilities, as well as to genderbased divisions of labour for managing or undertaking specific tasks in crop, livestock, forestry or fish production and processing.

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Barriers In Socio-Economic Development Of Rural Women**1. Gender inequality in education and training.**

Primary and secondary school enrolment has improved significantly for rural girls in many countries. Yet, rural girls generally continue to suffer disadvantages in access that tend to accumulate throughout their lives as basic education is often a prerequisite for further skills development. Thus, women receive less vocational training than men. Women make less use of formal or informal apprenticeship systems, which often operate in male-dominated trades. Self-employed women are not regarded as entrepreneurs in many rural communities and thus have difficulty accessing entrepreneurship development training and services.

2. Social, cultural and economic constraints limit rural girls and women's education and training.

Social norms: some household decision makers have negative attitudes towards educating girls and give lower priority to girls' education, especially if women's remuneration is lower than men's and employment opportunities are scarce. In addition, girls are seen as relatively "transitory assets", not worthy of long-term investment, as they often leave their parents' household upon marriage. As families tend to rely significantly on girls to help with household chores, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for younger siblings, there are also higher opportunity costs for girls' education in most cultures.

Women's triple work burden: Women's reproductive responsibilities (household and farming cycles) restrict their time for training and economic activities and may be incompatible with fixed training times and duration.

Gender-insensitive facilities: Long distances to schools/training institutions, lack of public transport, lack of safe and accessible boarding, and sanitary facilities in schools/training

institutions, as well as lack of female teachers and trainers, are factors which can greatly impede female education and training in rural areas.

High cost for untailed curricula: Higher education and training fees may be prohibitive to women who often have little cash of their own and limited bargaining power to access household money for training. Furthermore, education and training curricula and delivery are not always adapted to women's learning needs.

Unsuitable attitudes among trainers: Trainers and educators sometimes have discriminatory attitudes towards girls and women who often fear sexual harassment and insecurity in attending schools and training institutions.

3. Lower work status traps women in a vicious circle with limited development perspectives.

Rural women's limited access to productive resources, lower educational levels, and social norms about appropriate work for women tend to confine them to lower paid, lower status work where opportunities for skills training and advancement are reduced, thus perpetuating their lower status. Widespread patterns of insecure employment and temporary and precarious contractual arrangements in many rural enterprises discourage employers from offering training to women. Vocational education and training for rural women are often limited to a narrow range of female-dominated fields that reinforce their traditional roles and responsibilities. While improving their opportunities to generate income, such training limits the chances to benefit from newer, non-traditional fields, such as information and communication technologies (ICT), renewable energy and Non-Traditional Agricultural Export (NTAE) industries. These can offer women higher earnings, more skilled technical or managerial jobs.

Policy Options Related To Rural Women Empowerment

Policy makers should design and implement a package of complementary measures to address the specific needs of rural people at different levels. Skills development for rural women and men often requires a combination of training in formal settings (such as schools and training institutions) and non-formal ones (such as community groups, NGOs, and learning from family and peers). It can comprise basic education, vocational and life skills training, entrepreneurship training, and agricultural extension services.

1. Gender-Sensitive Approaches.

- Extend girls' participation in free, quality basic education on an equal basis with boys by promoting a gender-responsive learning environment which includes:
 - Safe school facilities and separate sanitation facilities; safe and genderfriendly transport to schools and/ or building of schools in strategic locations near underserved areas.
 - School times and hours that allow for seasonal agricultural or household work.
 - Incentives for teachers (including female ones) to work in rural areas.
 - Legislation and/or school rules against sexual harassment¹⁶ and gender awareness training for teachers.
 - Improved curricula that respond to rural realities, such as combining agricultural training with conventional subjects. The Junior Farmer Field and Life School in Mozambique, for instance, has its own learning field where pupils grow vegetables. This "local curriculum" improves diets by introducing new vegetables to the community and teaches children practical skills.
 - Gender sensitive curricula to improve the classroom environment and "dismantle" stereotyped profiles of rural

women and men that reinforce inequality and inequity in households and the world of work. For youth and adults, the Ministries of Agriculture, Rural Development, Labour and Education should work closely, together with strategic local partners (local governments, schools and private institutions, extension services, employers' unions).

2. Integration of educational and training strategy with national policies.

- Develop a gender-responsive strategy for education, training and entrepreneurship development that responds to the needs of rural girls and women
- Establish clear objectives, indicators and evaluation mechanisms to plan and assess the education and training programmes for both rural women and men.
- Collect sex-disaggregated statistics and qualitative data on rural and urban women and men in education and skills training to improve programme design and evaluate progress.
- Conduct gender-sensitive analyses of economic opportunities, assessments of the related skill needs, and ensure that rural skills development takes into account the local socio-economic contexts.

3. Increase Participation in Gender Aware Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Rural Areas.

- Increase the quality and quantity of gender-responsive vocational education and training institutions in rural areas.
- Support, design and deliver gender responsive community-based training initiatives, including skills training in employment-intensive infrastructure programmes, especially in areas lacking formal educational institutions.
- Develop targeted strategies to allow rural women to access formal and non-formal vocational education and training.

These include: – Reducing financial barriers for rural women to access skills training (for example, through stipends). –

Considering the timing and location of training and developing flexible curricula that fit rural women’s needs. – Increasing the number of women trainers and agricultural extension workers, and providing gender awareness training to trainers and other staff of training institutions (including on issues related to sexual harassment and to gender stereotypes in households and the world of work). – Providing infrastructure support and facilities, including accommodation, safe and female-friendly transport facilities, childcare services and tool kits. – Developing curricula that match rural women’s needs, taking into account the different kinds of local or indigenous knowledge and skills they have, and complementing them with up-to-date knowledge and technology. – Raising awareness among rural women, their families, communities, and training institutions, about the benefit of training women in nontraditional trades, in using new technologies, and in traditionally male occupations. – Developing gender-sensitive delivery mechanisms that match rural women’s and men’s different needs, such as mobile training units and extension schemes and distance learning using mobile phones, radio and internet. – Designing interventions to include the most disadvantaged women (such as women with disabilities, from ethnic minorities, or those associated with armed forces or ex-combatants).

· Expand rural women’s access to science, technical education, mobile phones, computers, and other information and communication technologies to facilitate their access to quality education and training, such as distance learning. Encourage girls to study technical subjects, for example, through scholarships.

· Complement vocational and technical training with numeracy

and literacy training for those rural women who need it. Women, particularly the most disadvantaged, may also need training on gender issues and life skills, such as health and nutrition, confidence building, negotiation and leadership skills.

- Link women with mentors/masters via apprenticeship systems. Upgrade traditional and informal apprenticeship systems by improving working conditions or combining apprenticeship with formal vocational training or links with business associations.

4. Support women's self-employment and encourage linkages between national training systems and socio-professional networks.

- Combine technical and entrepreneurship training, for example through community-based initiatives, as many rural women make a living through self-employment.

- Strengthen the capacity of entrepreneurship service providers to better address the needs and capabilities of rural female entrepreneurs.

- Provide post-training services such as access to credit or savings programmes, business development services, training in product design and marketing, and linkages to new markets. New markets, especially value chains, can also provide women opportunities to adopt new technologies and production practices.

- Support rural women's networks and groups, such as cooperatives. Groups can lead to informal learning of skills and provide the collective power that may be required to reach new markets.

Conclusion

India as a country is still recovering from years of abuse in the time of the Raj and more years of economic suffering at the hands of the License Raj. It is only now that globalization, liberalization and other socio-economic forces have given some

respite to a large proportion of the population. However, there are still quite a few areas where women empowerment in India is largely lacking.

To truly understand what rural women empowerment is, there needs to be a sea-change in the mind-set of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier rather than later, for our own good.

Swami Vivekananda once said “*arise away and stop not until the goal is reached*”. Thus our country should thus be catapulted into the horizon of empowerment of women and revel in its glory.

We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday. We shall overcome.

According to Diane Mariechild...

“*A woman is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform.*”

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