

## Empowering Indian Rural Women Beyond Barriers

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### ABSTRACT

Life is a struggle, and our rural women make this phrase true. Rural women are the combination of persistence, resilience, and hard work. They face unique challenges in their daily lives. They are the backbone of their family and community. Rural women work 24/7. Without taking a rest and without complaining about their health issues, they did not even pay to continue taking care of their family or animals or cultivation. According to our social structure, the head of the family should be men because they earn and provide for the family. Women take care of the kids, elders, and home. Women, in many instances, have a lesser or limited right to access education, healthcare, and employment opportunities as compared to men. If we combine the total unpaid working hours of women and the paid working hours of men, we will find that women work more than men. In fact, Indian rural women's life is full of challenges and barriers. These are integrated and nicely woven in terms of religion, culture, and tradition, which are unable to resist. Indian Government with the support of State governments and their agencies, NGOs, private sectors, industries, and individuals, is still trying to uplift their condition. The Indian Government has launched many schemes and initiatives. Private sectors and NGOs are also trying, but still, there is some gap in achieving the target of rural women in the mainstream.

**Keywords:** *Rural women, Challenges, Barriers, Schemes, Skill training, livelihood opportunity*

There are many layers in a rural society. Girls can dream of accessing basic education in villages near a city. But girls can't dream of accessing education, healthcare, and employment in remote villages. Rural women work behind the walls or behind their families. As per social norms, a woman should be two steps behind a man in terms of success in education, identity, personality, individuality, etc. because a man takes responsibility for a woman, kids, and family.

Rural women and girls play an invaluable role in the development of their families and communities in terms of agriculture, income-generating activities, and preserving cultural traditions. Rural women contribute significantly to their families and communities through their perseverance and resourcefulness. However, their efforts are often undervalued and unrecognized. All rural women, no matter from what village, caste, community, tribe, or

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religion, face the same challenges as domestic violence, abuse, harassment, and restrictions. They don't have the right to make household decisions as to what will cook, which school their child will be admitted to, where she can go or to whom she can meet, or whether she should maintain a friendship. If a rural woman earns money whether earning less or more than a man, she can't spend her income without asking her husband, elders, or family. She works and earns and keeps working continuously. Because the family, home, and children are her responsibilities.

Rural women are the custodians in terms of their traditional knowledge: cooking local food, preservation of natural resources and culture, farming, forestry, agriculture, etc. They play a critical role in raising GDP and revitalizing the rural economy. They are the last priority of their family, community, or society.

If a girl or a woman from any rural area tries to build an identity in any field: education, job, sports, arts, design, politics, etc. or wants to pursue their dream, she must face many challenges and cross the barriers. To overcome these challenges and barriers she must struggle.

There are the following challenges and barriers to cross to fulfill their dreams.

**Challenges:** When a girl child is born in a rural family, she starts facing challenges at the same time.

- ❖ **Neglection** is the basic challenge and it starts with family. Most Indian rural families don't want their first baby as a baby girl because according to social beliefs, the family moves forward with the son, while the daughters go to other people's homes. The birth of a daughter or a son by a rural woman in the family gives her a lower or higher status. The baby boy elevates his mother's status in the family, community, and society. So most rural families care less about their baby girl in comparison to a baby boy in terms of parenting, quality food, education, health, and facilities.
- ❖ **Discrimination:** there are many types of discrimination rural girls and women face in their daily lives.
  - **In terms of gender**, in comparison to a rural boy or male, rural girls or females are allowed limited access to education, health, and basic needs- quality food, clothes, and facilities. They may also be subjected to stereotypes and biases that limit their social mobility and reinforce gender-based inequalities. Women are less paid compared to men for the same position and the same work.
  - **In terms of geographical location and cultural norms:** rural areas are far from the city. There are several issues such as limited transportation, quality education, health services, and job opportunities. So, parents of girls or families of rural women don't allow their girls to go to the city to access education and pursue their dreams, career entertainment, etc. due to safety and security. But they allow their son without any hesitation. Rural girls and women can face unequal and unfair treatment in school, college, university, or workplace compared with urban women because of exposure, and confidence.
  - **In terms of religion:** rural women from different religious minority groups can face unequal and unfair opportunities for employment and political representation.

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- **In terms of social status:** women who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face discrimination as biased treatment in access to education, skill training, healthcare, and employment opportunities.
- ❖ **Domestic violence:** due to social beliefs that a man should be head of the family, and every member of the family will respect the head of the family. He has all the rights legal or illegal rights to get his point across. So rural women and girls are at higher risk of experiencing certain types of domestic violence due to factors such as isolation, limited access to resources, and traditional gender roles. In rural areas, some types of prevalent violence are:
  - **Physical violence:** hair pulling, hitting, slapping, kicking, or any other type of physical harm.
  - **Emotional violence:** shouting in front of others, yelling (killing dignity), demeaning, verbal insults, humiliation, threats, and isolation from family, friends, community, and society.
  - **Economic violence:** restricting access to financial resources such as salary, wages, and essential resources such as food, clothes, transport, education, training, entertainment, etc.
  - **Forced marriage:** forced to drop out of studies or career and get married, forced marriage with an older man is equivalent to violence.
- ❖ **Abuse** is a highly sensitive matter to discuss. Girls are considered a liability to a family in terms of taking care, safety, security, responsibility, education, and marriage. In recent years, people have observed that crimes; rape, and sexual, mental, and physical harassment, against girls, are increased.
- ❖ **Exploitation** in terms of lack of toilets and sanitation facilities in the home or school or workplace is the primary kind of exploitation. Eve-teasing, trafficking, early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, forced abortion, forced pregnancy for baby boy, and cybercrime against rural girls are increasing fiercely.
- ❖ **Poverty** is the biggest battle for rural women. This battle badly affects their lives. Especially for girls or women in terms of education, healthcare, and resources. Rural women are the least priority in their families, so all facilities, men avail first, and females have no right to avail of it.
- ❖ **Household chores:** rural girls take responsibility for their small siblings from childhood. They spent most of their valuable time in the kitchen cooking, cleaning, chopping vegetables, serving food, washing clothes, dishwashing, taking care of younger brothers and sisters, etc. Their mother goes to work to earn money and the girl child looks after the whole house. Rural and poor girls have higher domestic workloads than boys. Rural women's responsibilities are to take care of the house, animals, agriculture, kids, elders, income-generating activities, participation in community gatherings, and socializing.

**Barriers:** means in simple words obstacles (physical objects)- barricade, wall, stopper, or anything which can obstruct coming or going on the entrance. Barriers can be used for several purposes (in a good manner): to help, manage, control, relieve, and prevent a huge crowd. But when people use these barriers in a person's life or career path, the result will be the opposite.

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The author has been conducting skill training programs for many years for rural women. These women belong to different castes and communities, especially below the margin line as well as in slums. The author has observed different types of barriers in the lives of these women while conducting the training. From her experience **Barriers can be of several types for a person:** Social, Political, Economic, Religious, Psychological, Geographical location, Cultural norms, and Language. These barriers can change a person's identity, career path, life, etc. Rural women often face these barriers in their daily routines. These barriers stun the life of a rural girl or woman. They struggle against them to access basic human needs.

- **Language barriers** play a key role in building a relationship between a person or community or society. It helps to communicate a person's feelings, emotions, and sentiments to others. Language can create misunderstandings. Misunderstandings can cause violence, frustration, offense, low confidence, hurt feelings, etc.

The language barrier is the biggest hurdle for rural women, particularly when it comes to accessing education, healthcare, and other services. In many rural areas, there may be limited resources available in the local language, making it difficult for women who do not communicate effectively with service providers. It is often seen that if a rural woman wants to access an education or skill training program or job opportunity, she may face understanding problems about the material, and instructions may be not available in her language. This can limit her personal and professional growth and create many hurdles to learning and enhancing her skills. Language barriers can contribute to social and economic isolation for rural women as well as limit their ability to access critical services and resources.

- **Social barriers:** are one of the major challenges for a person, family, community, society, and country. Few are in poverty, illiteracy, gender inequality, casteism, communalism, regionalism, religionism, unemployment, corruption, alcoholism, drug abuse, crime against women, violence, terrorism, etc.

Social barriers can greatly impact rural women and limit their access to opportunities and resources. Cast and communalism have increased in recent years in the field of education and employment and the after-effects of this barrier are not supportive of the ongoing or scheduled skill training and entrepreneurial development program for rural women. Rural women may face discrimination based on their gender which affects their enthusiasm. Crime against young girls is the highest hurdle for any woman, especially for rural women, in fact, after happening this type of crime, the whole rural society takes decisions together and women are stopped from leaving the house to access any skill training, education, or job. Domestic violence and alcoholism are like hail-fellow and where (family, community, society) these buddies are present, where everything is ruined. Poverty and terrorism are also best buddies. Girls and women from poor and terrorist-prone rural areas in Kashmir and Naxalite-prone rural areas in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal are badly affected. They can't think of to access education, health, and employment. If some of the girls and women in these difficult areas want to access education or a career, they migrate to another place. When they migrate to a new place, they again struggle with language, culture, caste, and religious barriers.

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- **Political barriers** also limit rural women's potential in terms of leadership quality in any area like resources, opportunities, and services. In male dominated society keeping women away from the political, communal meetings, and the public sphere by men and confining them to home and family is also a kind of barrier. In many cases, political systems are not designed To meet the specific needs and concerns of rural women, who may face unique challenges related to poverty, isolation, and lack of access to resources and services. One of the political barriers is separate policies and rules for men and women and it also restricts rural women from representing their local community's basic amenities such as toilets, sewer, drainage, drinking water, road, transport, electricity, hospital, school, playground for kids, etc. Rural women's representation in society is less due to the lack of education, confidence, and motivation.
- **Cultural barriers:** in terms of customs, rituals, beliefs, social behavior, social norms, values, symbols, ideas, art, literature, music, etc. The cultural barrier can vary depending on the specific cultural context and geographic location. Indian society's most unreasonable culture is an unequal, distribution of domestic responsibility between men and women. Another unreasonable culture is, that women's countless work is neither considered as work nor paid for it, but it is considered as women's duty.

In many rural societies, women are expected to conform to strict gender roles and cultural norms and expected to prioritize their domestic duties, and take care of the family, which can limit their opportunities for education, employment, and social participation. Some religious and traditional beliefs such as women shouldn't go out alone or women should wake up first in the morning can restrict rural women from accessing education, healthcare, and other resources.

- **Psychological/emotional barriers** refer to different mental states that can deeply affect a human heart and mind such as lack of confidence, lack of support, trust, faith, poor attention, attitude, complexity, uncertainty, doubt, anger, sentiment, ignorance, stress, less mentorship, falls assumption, etc.

These psychological barriers can be especially challenging for rural girls and women. Social, cultural, political, and language barriers can be the main cause of psychological barriers. Rural women face additional obstacles, such as limited access to education, healthcare, social isolation, economic conditions, family structure, gender inequality, and cultural biases that restrict their freedom and opportunities. These factors can contribute to feelings of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

In recent years, the percentage of anxiety and depression in rural areas has increased due to casteism, religionism, and social status, and the impact of these barriers on rural women may be seen as low confidence and depression. An unpaid workload and unequal domestic responsibility can cause frustration, anger, and a negative attitude.

- **Family barriers:** Indian rural women, especially those below the margin line and those who belong to slum areas live a tough life and struggle to get a simple breath or a moment of relief. From sunrise to sunset, they work for their family, kids, and

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elders without any appreciation. Most of them don't go out for work and some of them go out for work as maids or cleaners or guards or peons and get paid, types of challenges and barriers are approximately the same for both types of situations.

In fact, those women who go out to work, do twice as much as work. They need to finish all household chores before going out to work and prioritize their daily responsibilities like cooking, washing clothes, preparing children for school, tiffin for children or husband, lunch for elders, cleaning the house, etc. Then they can go out for a job. After a full day at work, when they return home, they must rush into the kitchen and do all the necessary work at home. As a result, women get frustrated, depressed, disturbed, etc. Either they leave their job, get sick or lose their mental balance.

- **Economic barriers** in terms of poor financial conditions such as a landlord or rich versus landless or poor person and economic discrimination such as job, wages, salary, start-up cost, capital investments, funds, and position.

A rich rural family can access more resources like land, capital, and networks, which can provide them with advantages in the economic sphere. This can make it difficult for a poor rural family to compete with them in terms of job opportunities and economic mobility.

Economic discrimination can take many forms, including job, wage, and salary discrimination, as well as discrimination in access to capital investments, funds, and position of power. This can limit opportunities for certain families, groups, and rural women.

Rural women may face specific economic barriers, including limited access to education, skill training, and resources. This can make it difficult for them to enter the formal workforce or start their own businesses, which can limit their economic opportunities and autonomy.

- **Religious barriers** in terms of traditional and conservative societies, and traditional and religious beliefs. Women are expected to adhere to strict gender roles and norms that are often based on religious beliefs. It may limit rural women from going for a job, employment, or other activities. In some families, communities, and societies, girls or women can't go out without covering their faces or they are not allowed to learn from any men (trainer or teacher), or women are not allowed to take admission in co-training or co-education. There are so many religious beliefs that may restrict rural women from taking a chance to fulfill their dreams. In some cases, few religious beliefs support gender inequality and contradict rural women's education, skill training, or going hospital to meet a male doctor. These barriers can have a significant impact on women's lives, limiting their ability to achieve in society and contribute to their society again.
- **Geographical barriers** such as plains, hills, mountains, deserts, seacoast, and natural disasters: floods, storms, earthquakes, cyclones, fire, drought, extreme temperature: heat, cold, heavy rain, or any tough weather and areas. Some specific examples of geographical barriers that rural women generally face are lack of

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infrastructure such as transport, road, water, electricity, etc. Limited access to education, training, healthcare, livelihood activities, and economic opportunities. The impact of these barriers on rural women or whole affected rural areas can limit to the access of information: Internet and mobile networks and other communications as well as mobility due to lack of basic infrastructure; road, transport, electricity, etc.

### *Schemes and initiatives toward rural women to support their struggles against challenges and barriers.*

Women from rural areas struggle with these challenges and barriers on a daily routine basis. These are part of their lives. They want to overcome or sometimes they need to overcome these challenges and barriers. The government has come out with schemes to convert the struggle of rural women into victory against challenges and barriers.

In 2018 UN Women announced on International Rural Women's Day 15th of October that this year's theme of International Women's Day is "Sustainable Infrastructure, services and social protection for gender equality and the Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls". On this important day, UN Women called many international organizations, and communities and advised them to work with rural girls and women and invest in sustainable infrastructure, social safety, security, and services for their livelihood, well-being, and resilience. It can be revolutionary for everyone in the world.

The Government of India, State Government, NGOs, Individual Personalities, Local Leaders, Industries, etc., have supported overcoming these challenges and barriers.

The Indian government has introduced many schemes to empower them. The government wants more participation in rural women's skill training, education, health, and well-being programs. Some of the schemes and initiatives are:

1. Internet Saathi Program by Google in 2015 an initiative of Digital India to make women acquainted with an online platform under the campaign Helping Women Get Online.
2. The Sakti Vahini organization: works to empower and educate rural women about their rights, health, and well-being. Status of women to fully participate
3. Udyogini is a registered NGO working for women's economic empowerment (WEE)
4. Rural tourism is an initiative of Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan
5. Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP)- It is a scheme launched by the Ministry of Rural Development to empower women in agriculture by providing them with training, information, and financial support.
6. Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)- It is a maternity benefit program that provides financial assistance to pregnant and lactating women in rural areas.
7. Mahila E-Haat- It is an online marketing platform for women entrepreneurs to showcase and sell their products.
8. National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)- It is a poverty alleviation scheme that aims to improve the livelihoods of rural women by providing them with skill development training, access to credit, and other support.
9. Ujjawala Scheme was launched in April 2016 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. It is a comprehensive scheme against the sexual exploitation of women and children (rescue, prevent, rehabilitate, re-integrate, and repatriate).
10. Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMYU)- launched in May 2016, by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. This scheme is for clean cooking fuel-LPG for rural women and children's health.

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11. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) is a famous campaign launched by India Government. This scheme aims to prevent gender bias and sex-selective elimination and to ensure the survival and protection of the girl child.
12. Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen): it is a sanitation program to promote cleanliness and hygiene in rural areas, which has a particular impact on women's health and well-being.

There are many other schemes to support rural women for their personal growth in terms of education, healthcare, and well-being, and professional growth in terms of financial, business, social, and economic skill training, job, employment, wages, salary, etc.

Despite all the efforts, the condition of women is not improving as much as it should have been. There is some gap to achieve the target of rural women's development. We must find that gap and fill the gap to match it with the mainstream.

### **Skill Training Project:**

The project is inspired by:

**Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan"**  
(self-reliant India campaign), &  
**Skill India: Skill development initiative scheme (Learn, Perform, and Earn)**

The author tried bridging this gap with the project "Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands" project. "Shrinkhala" means chain; to connect with each other.

"Holding Hands" means holding each other's hands all the time to share knowledge and encourage each other to learn skills for the betterment of their own family, community, and society.

This is a skill-oriented training program for below-the-margin rural girls and women. The objectives of this project are:

- To organize skill-oriented training programs in related areas to empower rural girls and women and encourage them to research, explore, experiment, and innovate new designs for a sustainable livelihood.
- To know the primary barriers and challenges that come in the way of rural women from related areas becoming empowered.



*Image Source: "Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands" project, Village Kami, Sonipat, Haryana*



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**The expected outcome of the project** is that learners on the completion of the course will be able to present themselves as a confident as well as a self-independent girl or woman, who could get opportunities in terms of jobs in the industry as hand embroiders, crochet knitters, and supervisors. They can take direct orders for hand embroidery and crochet work from the industry or design houses or customers. They can become a trainer in their community.

**To do this the author chose the** nearby villages (convenience sampling) and met with local people to understand the need for rural girls and women in terms of skill-oriented training, and a direct approach to local people.



*Image Source: “Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands” project, Village Kami, Sonipat, Haryana*

The author lives in Sonipat, Haryana. She met many people for this project and visited multiple villages, but no one showed interest in the project. In this order, She met a local person, who was a driver. She tried to convince him about the project, and he listened to the author. The next day he came to the author and said my father wants, you can start in his village, he will provide all the essential infrastructure related to the project free of cost, but he had a condition that he has three granddaughters, and he wanted his granddaughters to be educated and skilled. He is a farmer and a kind person too. He believes in Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Campaign **“Beti Bachao Beti Padhao”**. He lives in the Village Kami, Block-Murthal, District-Sonipat, Division-Rohtak, Haryana, India, 131001

‘**HARYARNV**’ a sustainable clothing brand, and ‘**D’ART Studio**’ a design house has provided all the raw materials for the training such as threads, fabrics, needle, beads, crochet hooks, hand knitting needles, scissors, cutters, embroidery frames, measuring tapes, straight scales, pattern cutting tools, etc.

Both the sponsors wanted a group of women and girls for the handwork permanently.

Both sponsors wanted a group of trained artisans for hand embroidery. Brand ‘**HARYARNV**’ wanted hand embroidery and fabric manipulation and Brand ‘**D’ART Studio**’ wanted hand embroidery and crochet. I tried to design training sessions according to them because, after the completion of training, learners and both the sponsors could deal with each other directly.

The project was designed for hand skills: hand embroidery, crochet, and fabric manipulation for 25 weeks: 2 days per week (Saturday and Sunday) 3 hours per day (6 hours per week) a total of 6 months, and 150 hours with 10 learners.

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Training Session for Hand-embroidery



*Image Source: "Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands" project, Village Kami, Sonipat, Haryana*

Training Session for Crotchet



*Image Source: "Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands" project, Village Kami, Sonipat, Haryana*

Training Session for Fabric-manipulation



*Image Source: "Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands" project, Village Kami, Sonipat, Haryana*

Samples for crotchet as per sponsor demand



*Image Source: "Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands" project, Village Kami, Sonipat, Haryana*



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

During the project “Shrinkhala: The Holding Hands” in village Kami, Sonipat, Haryana, the author gained different types of experiences. Some were challenging, and some were inspiring.

The first Challenging experience was to search for a place/village, where the project could start and to convince someone who could help to manage the meetings with rural women to start this project.

The author faced difficulties like going door-to-door and motivating rural families to learn livelihood-earning skills. During the meetings, people just come to you, listen to you, and go away but don't connect with you, even if you have taken a respectable person with you. It's all about a matter of trust.

For the author, the biggest challenge was “winning the trust of people”.

If we can develop confidence or build trust in them that you are not taking any kind of advantage, and you are different from other people and then those people slowly start getting ready to learn skills.

The second challenge was deciding between a prescribed course and a customer-made course. When learners want to learn a specific course that fulfills their interests, they love to learn. But when we force them to learn a prescribed course, we don't get a good result. We should design a course that appeals to rural women and motivates them to learn, In that case, we can get the expected outcomes.

The third challenge was women's hesitation to work to earn. After learning skills, unless they do not believe that they will get paid. Because some middleman gives work to rural women but when the time comes for payment, people trouble them for a long time and say that quality is the issue or many other excuses.

There are several issues to achieving empowerment goals. But the biggest issue is “Trust”. Without building trust between rural communities, no one can enter a rural community to achieve the empowerment goal.

The author suggests that NGOs, Individuals, Governments, and organizations should, first, build trust between themselves and rural communities.

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