

# *Barriers and Pathways to Empowerment Among Rural Women in India with Reference to RGSA*

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## **Abstract**

Rural women in India continue to face multiple socio-cultural, economic, educational, and political barriers that limit their participation in development and governance. Despite constitutional provisions and reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), challenges such as patriarchal norms, low literacy, proxy leadership, limited access to resources, and inadequate digital skills hinder their empowerment. The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA), a centrally sponsored scheme aimed at strengthening PRIs, provides significant pathways to enhance women's leadership, participation, and decision-making at the grassroots level. Through targeted capacity-building programmes, digital literacy initiatives, inclusive Gram Sabhas, and convergence with rural development schemes, RGSA fosters gender-sensitive and participatory governance. This paper examines how RGSA addresses key barriers faced by rural women and explores the extent to which RGSA interventions create opportunities for empowerment, autonomy, and meaningful engagement in local governance. The study highlights the transformative potential of RGSA in promoting women-centric development and strengthening their role in community planning and administration.

**Keywords** \_\_ *Rural Women, Empowerment, Barriers, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Capacity Building, Gender Inclusion*

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## **Introduction**

A woman is the nucleus of the family, particularly in rural India. She not only collects water, fuel wood, fodder and food but also plays a significant role in preserving the culture, grooming the children and shaping their destiny.

Rural women form a vital part of the economic and social fabric within rural communities, especially in developing countries. They are usually in charge of agricultural production, food security, household management, and care work; thus, they hold a central place in rural economies. In spite of their crucial contributions, rural women continue to face myriad challenges

that hinder their potential for empowerment (*P.V. Nandhini and B.Nandhini ,2025*). The rural areas of the country are highly characterized by agrarian economics, traditional values, and a unique set of challenges. However, beneath their tranquil veneer often lies a complex web of issues, especially regarding the women who form a major part of rural populations. The need to address issues affecting women in these areas cannot be underestimated; it is through the well-being and empowerment of rural women that true sustainable development and progress are assured (*Kombe,2025*). The Sustainable Development Goal

leads to inclusive and eco-friendly progress without any sort of discrimination or, fifth of these goals is "Gender Equality" which is a single that deals with various issues and problems of the women. Women have been discriminated against, sexually abused, and exploited, have had unfair labor and wage distribution, and have been subjected to unpaid domestic work, which are all instances of human rights violations. A number of indicators have been set up to gauge the level of gender equality in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals SDGs. These indicators are free of any type of violence against women, the elimination of discrimination of women and girls in all aspects, the eradication of harmful practices and domestic work, the participation of women and the assurance of equal opportunities for leadership and decision-making at the political, economic level, as well as the right to ownership and control over land and other forms of property UNDP, 2019 The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) is an important initiative that was started in India with the prime objectives of strengthening grassroots democracy and revitalizing rural governance. The RGSA is an extraordinary program developed and launched by the government of India to fulfill its promising aspirations to empower rural communities and enhance inclusive development in rural areas in India. A significant dimension of RGSA is its focus on the empowerment of rural women, recognising their central role in grassroots democracy and rural development. This research paper critically explores barriers faced by rural women and analyses how RGSA provides pathways for strengthening their leadership and participation at the grassroots. The Government of India Report states that "Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power." Within this paradigm, women must be empowered in the social, economic, educational and political areas so as to be able to make independent decisions about self-education, self-mobility, self-economic independence, political engagement, public discourse, and awareness in order to uphold and assert one's right. Women's NGOs and the women's movement have inspired and initiated numerous projects for the women's

empowerment due to their extensive networks and strong presence at the grassroots level. Women are trying to locate their position in the social structure and more than ever are conscious of the sexual inequalities existing in every field of life and are actively seeking to combat these inequalities with dignity and self-respect (Lama 2014).

### **Literature review**

**Khedikar,2021** highlights how the Panchayati Raj Institutions are enhancing the participation and empowerment of women in rural governance after the 73rd Amendment. It also points to ongoing socio-cultural and capacity barriers, stressing the need for stronger training and gender-sensitive support.

**Ranjan and Kumar 2023** clearly portrays the resilience of rural women and the weight of their unpaid labour, despite limited access to education, healthcare, and employment. It highlights how social, cultural and traditional norms continue to restrict their empowerment. The author notes that, although various government and NGO initiatives exist; substantial gaps remain in fully uplifting rural women into the mainstream.

**Radhika Kapur 2018** effectively highlights how traditional norms and patriarchal structures historically limited women's rights and exposed them to discrimination and violence. It shows how human rights frameworks have gradually evolved through activism and state efforts to address gender-specific violations. The review also notes that Kapur clearly emphasizes the deep-rooted social and power structures that continue to shape women's access to rights, opportunities, and overall empowerment.

### **Objectives**

The purpose of this paper is to find the biggest obstacles to women empowerment in rural India. To assess the influence of RGSA on deepening women's participation and leadership in local governance. In order to disentangle the mechanisms by which RGSA fosters social, economic, and political empowerment for analysis.

### **Methodology**

The current research adopts a scientific content analysis approach. The research involved the collection of secondary

data sourced from governmental documents, RGSA guidelines, national and international articles, research papers, and books/modalities and sources of relevant literature within the realm of rural women's empowerment, Panchayati Raj Institutions, and RGSA interventions. The thematic analysis method helps us identify significant barriers faced by rural women, while exploring the modalities of the RGSA and identifying that demonstrate how RGSA initiatives meet the barriers for rural women's empowerment. The barriers that are indicated within existing academic literature review are linked to socio-cultural, economic, educational, and political barriers, while the RGSA is linked to pathways for capacity building, leadership training, and the contribution of all citizens to the notions of inclusive governance.

### **Barriers to Empowerment of Rural Women in India**

**a. Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Women are frequently confined to subservient roles in the family, tasked with caregiving and housework, and men are cast as the "primary decision makers" (Sen, 2001). The importance of family structures in which patriarchal systems define power relations and duties (Kabeer, 1997). Religious practices and traditions also reinforce gender roles. Such as *purdah* and seclusion in these is also a factor which limits when and how women can move about and participate in the public (Visvanathan, 1997). And caste-based hierarchies intersect with gender to create different levels of exclusion for women belonging to different castes. (Narayan, 2000). Barati et al. (2016) and Buddhapriya (2009) presented the problems and challenges faced by Indian women in career development. Few jobs are most challenging for women and require long working hours to complete the task, resulting in a lot of work pressure and stress. It can also be caused due to the lack of knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the job, which is referred to as occupational stress. The traditional viewpoint on women in society in handling tasks is seen as unskilled, incapable and inefficient when compared to men. Such presumptions discourage women to accept any manual jobs and include gender discrimination, remuneration differences, deprivation of promotions and career growth

opportunities. In many countries, there exists gender segregation at work. Normally, women are preferred for soft jobs and men for hard and high-productivity jobs like the manufacturing division.

**b. Educational and awareness barrier:** The major educational problem faced by girls from rural areas is that although they may be enrolled at the beginning of the year, they do not always remain in school. It is estimated that 45 percent of girls drop out of school between grades 1 and 5. Girls are often taken out of school to share the family responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings, etc. Girls are also likely to be taken out of school when they reach puberty because of the high premium placed on virginity. India has the highest rates of child brides in the world. School attendance data shows that the proportion of girls attending school decreases with age. Families generally choose to educate a son rather than daughters due to financial restrictions. Negative parental attitude towards educating daughters is also one of the barriers to a girl's Education. Many parents consider educating sons an investment, as sons will look after aging parents. In contrast, parents regard education of daughters a wastage of money, as daughters after marriage go to live with their husband's families, and parents are not benefited directly through their education. Moreover, daughters with higher levels of education probably incur higher dowry costs since they desire a comparably educated husband. Lack of female teachers is another barrier to girl's education. Girls are more likely to attend school and have higher academic achievement (Devi et al., 2017). Lack of knowledge and awareness regarding their rights, schemes and reservation among rural women becomes a barrier.

**c. Economic and political barrier:** Research indicates that women in rural areas are thought to possess fewer social and economic advantages and liberties to engage in responsibilities and activities than women in urban areas (Dhamija, 2023). Limited access to financial and other services is a widespread barrier for rural women across the planet. Rural women are less likely to access government and development supports and financial services discussed above, including financial credit,

loans, and crop, livestock, and other productive resources, insurance (UN WOMEN 2022). From this it can be inferred that engaging in economic opportunities, like entrepreneurial activity, becomes difficult. (Malima 2024).

Even though women are guaranteed a seat at 33% in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), they do not enjoy political empowerment due to various structural and cultural factors. Proxy representation, where elected women representatives act on behalf of male relatives, remains widespread (Khedikar, 2021). Most women lack the self-esteem, training, and exposure needed for effective participation in decision-making settings. Furthermore, restricted mobility, bans on attending meetings, and ignorance of certain procedures cause limitations on their ability to lead. A gender insensitive institutional environment, and the influence of local elites in the PRIs, further inhibits their full political participation. Political participation is even more difficult for women from marginalized castes, marginalized tribes, and minority communities where discrimination intersects with gender-based boundaries.

**d. Digital barriers:** Digital barriers severely limit rural women's empowerment in India in an increasingly technology-driven landscape of governance and service delivery. Barriers to digital inclusion are established by constraints in access to smartphones, poor internet connectivity, and high digital costs. Basic digital literacy is lacking for many women, making it difficult for them to engage with online platforms, government portals, digital payments, or e-governance. Cultural norms often privilege men's access to technology, leaving women in need of male family members to engage in technology.

Similarly, low confidence, fear of device engagement, and lack of exposure to these programs prohibit engagement as well. These barriers hinder rural women from engaging in RGSA digital training modules, online capacity-building programs, and the e-Gram Swaraj portals. The digital divide ultimately reinforces existing socio-economic and educational inequalities and diminishes the chances of women benefitting from governance processes and development schemes.

## **Pathways to Empowerment Through RGSA**

The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan has various institutionalized channels in support of rural women's empowerment:

1. **Capacity Building and Leadership Training:** RGSA works to strengthen the capacities of elected women representatives (EWRs) through a series of structured training modules on governance, budgeting, social audits, or participation in Gram Sabha meetings. Skill building builds the confidence of women, assertiveness, and skills in leadership.
2. **Gender Inclusive Gram Sabhas:** RGSA has a requirement for women to be part of Gram Sabha and discuss issues around education, health, livelihoods, sanitation, and gender-based violence. Special Gram Sabhas designed for women also create safe spaces to voice their concerns.
3. **Digital Literacy and Access to Technology:** Both the digital empowerment programs developed under RGSA support women by having them learn to use smartphones, online governance platforms, and digital financial services. These types of activities reduce women's dependency on intermediaries and increase transparency.
4. **Strengthening Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Convergence with NRLM:** RGSA supports PRIs to be converging with SHGs in order to better access livelihood programs, micro credit, and entrepreneurial opportunities. Convergence of SHGs and PRIs strengthens the collective voice of women at the grassroots level.
5. **Promoting Participation in Planning and Monitoring:** Women are involved in the development of the Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP). RGSA also trains women in social audits, scheme monitoring, and participation in village-level committees.
6. **Raising Knowledge About Rights and Entitlements:** As part of community mobilization activities, RGSA raises awareness of legal rights, government schemes, reservation policies, and entitlements, allowing rural women to make informed decisions.

## Key Findings

- Women in rural areas experience entrenched socio-cultural and economic constraints that persist even with the benefit of legal and constitutional protections.
- Gaps in educational access and low levels of awareness of government schemes inhibit the ability of women to use government schemes or engage with governance.
- Proxy leadership and patriarchal hegemony continue to act as significant political barriers in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- The RGSA serves as a robust institutional mechanism for women's empowerment through capacity-building, digital literacy, and exposure to leadership experience.
- Women participating in RGSA training are more confident, speak more easily in public, and participate in Gram Sabha proceedings to a greater degree.
- Despite these positive outcomes, there are still gaps in implementation, digital access and skills, mobility, and social acceptability of women as leaders.

## Conclusions

Empowering rural women is vital to improving grassroots democracy and fostering inclusive development in India. The Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan represents a transformative mechanism to tackle these challenges while overcoming socio-cultural prejudice, economic marginalization, and patterns of limited political participation that still affect women and girls. While RGSA's emphasis on capacity building, digital empowerment, gender-sensitive planning, and institutional strengthening has led to enhanced participation by women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, ensuring long-term empowerment requires ongoing support, community awareness, and gender-responsive implementation policy. Enabling women's political leadership and engagement in the village council and other community development processes will enhance governance and result in sustainable rural development.

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