

Unleashing The Power Within: Exploring Rural Women's Engagement in Community Empowering Scheme and Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

This study centers its focus on the rural women actively involved in village development endeavors within the state of Haryana, India. The overarching aim is to address the prevailing issues of gender imbalance, women's status, declining sex ratios, and the pervasive lack of awareness concerning fundamental rights. To catalyze change and foster progress, women-led groups, known as Sakshar Mahila Samooh (SMS), were meticulously established across each village. The primary objective of these groups was to facilitate mass education initiatives encompassing crucial topics such as health, legal literacy, social awareness, and targeted programs addressing the needs of women and children. Crucially, the members of SMS underwent comprehensive training programs, intended to heighten their awareness levels and enable their active participation as a valuable resource pool within their respective communities. By assessing the impact of SMS, this study seeks to comprehensively evaluate the empowerment of women at both the social and psychological dimensions. It is firmly acknowledged that individual empowerment serves as a fundamental prerequisite to effectuate communal empowerment, thereby underscoring the significance of nurturing personal empowerment as an antecedent to broader societal transformation.

Key Words: Rural Women, Schemes, Empowerment

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Empowering rural women stands as a pivotal component in the pursuit of sustainable development and all-encompassing progress. Within rural communities, where limited access to resources, gender-based inequalities, and social marginalization prevail, targeted interventions become essential to uplift and empower the women residing there. Enter community empowerment schemes, emerging as potential catalysts for transformative social change and development. The purpose of this investigation is to delve into the engagement of rural women in such schemes and assess their impact on individual empowerment, community development, and the pursuit of gender equality.

According to Kabeer's definition, empowerment entails expanding individuals' capacity to make strategic life choices within contexts where such abilities were previously denied. To empower women effectively, it becomes imperative to confront and overcome patriarchal practices, dispel myths, and challenge biases prevalent within family, community, caste, religion, and society.

In numerous rural areas, women confront distinct challenges that impede their active participation in communal life. These hurdles may manifest as limited access to education, economic opportunities, decision-making power, and healthcare facilities. Acknowledging the transformative potential that lies in empowering rural women, a variety of schemes and initiatives have been implemented to provide them with training, capacity-building opportunities, and supportive networks. These endeavors aim to enhance the skills, confidence, and leadership abilities of women, enabling their active engagement in community development processes.

This study endeavours to explore the first-hand experiences of rural women engaged in community empowerment schemes, delving into the factors that facilitate or hinder their active participation. Furthermore, the study aims to identify the outcomes and changes wrought at both the individual and community levels. Additionally, it seeks to evaluate the contribution of rural women's engagement to the realization of gender equality and the cultivation of sustainable development within rural areas.

The focal point of this study lies in rural women who became involved in village development, breaking free from the confines of their homes and domestic responsibilities. Their primary purpose was to address gender imbalances, such as the marginalized status of women, dwindling sex ratios, and the lack of awareness regarding their rights, in the state of Haryana. As members of women-led groups known as *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* (SMS), they actively participated in initiatives encompassing mass education on health literacy, legal literacy, social awareness, and knowledge of schemes and programs tailored for women and children, among other subjects. These women-led groups were established in every village of Haryana, serving as agents of social awakening within a deeply entrenched patriarchal social structure. The members underwent training to heighten their awareness and prepare them to function as a valuable resource within the village community. Organizing educated and literate rural women into such groups to educate society at large represented a remarkable stride towards empowerment. Therefore, it is assumed that prior to community empowerment, individual empowerment of the members through their participation in the SMS must occur. Consequently, this study plays a vital role in comprehending and evaluating the impact of the SMS on the social and psychological empowerment of its women members.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon theoretical frameworks and concepts from gender studies, empowerment, community development, and rural empowerment. By employing a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative and quantitative methods, such as interviews and focus group discussions, the study aims to investigate the experiences, perspectives, and outcomes of rural women who have actively participated in a community empowerment scheme. This scheme holds unique characteristics, highlighting the importance of capturing women's experiences within it to gain a comprehensive understanding of its impact on women's empowerment. Recognizing that women's empowerment encompasses multiple domains and is a dynamic process, the study seeks to identify and explore these domains to shed light on the scheme's influence on the empowerment of rural women.

The formation of *Sakshar Mahila Samoohs* (SMSs) in every village across the districts of Haryana is of particular significance. According to the Haryana Development Report, a total of 5,829 SMSs were established by January 2007 and remained actively functional until 2017. Given the declining sex ratio in certain districts, it becomes imperative to examine the impact of this scheme in those specific regions.

According to the latest Census in 2011, the total female sex ratio in India is 940 per 1,000 males. However, the sex ratio in Haryana is below the national average, with 877 females per 1,000 males. Furthermore, certain districts in Haryana exhibit very low sex ratios (refer to Table A)

Frbd	Gurm	Hisar	Jhajr	Jind	Pankla	Papt	Snpt
871	853	871	861	870	870	861	853

TableA; Districts with Low Sex Ratio, Haryana

(Frbd- Faridabad, Gurm- Gurugram, Jhajr- Jhajjar, Pankla- Panchkula, Papt- Panipat, Snpt- Sonapat)

Within this specific contextual framework, it assumes paramount importance to investigate the ramifications of the scheme on the empowerment of *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* (SMS) members, which play a pivotal role in fostering awareness regarding critical social issues, including the declining sex ratio and female feticide. The present study was conducted in three districts, namely Sonapat, Panipat, and Jind, which were purposively chosen due to their demonstrated decrease in sex ratio over the previous decade. A targeted sampling approach was employed to identify nine villages that possessed active SMS groups, which served as the study's focal points. Each SMS group comprised a total of 25 members, consisting of one leader and 24 members. Consequently, the overall sample size across the nine SMS groups amounted to 225 individuals, comprising nine leaders and 216 members. The selection process for the active SMS groups was meticulously carried out in consultation with pertinent regional government officials from the Department of Women & Child Development and the Department of Health, who played instrumental roles in the establishment of SMS groups and the allocation of funds for diverse activities.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study indicate that social empowerment plays a crucial role in women's ability to exercise their freedom and develop a sense of autonomy. This, in turn, affects their social status within various institutions such as their community or family. Psychological empowerment, on the other hand, pertains to inner changes in individuals, including increased competence and a sense of empowerment. The information collected in this study, both at the social level and the psychological level, is as follows:

Impact on Decision for Recreation

The findings of the study indicated that a noteworthy proportion (25%) of SMS members experienced a notable transformation in their capacity to make decisions pertaining to their personal recreation subsequent to their involvement in the *Samooh* (refer to Table 1). For instance, individuals hailing from *Narayana* village in *Panipat* District reported a gradual development of close bonds and an active engagement in a local festival (*Mela*) following their enrolment in the *Samooh*. Similarly, in the SMS group situated in *Amerheri* village of *Panipat* district, members successfully organized regular yoga and sports activities as part of a health awareness initiative and recreational endeavours. These activities primarily aimed to target the youth and adolescents within the village. A comprehensive overview of the empowerment experienced by SMS members in terms of their decision-making capabilities regarding personal recreation, both pre and post their participation in the scheme, can be observed in Table 1.

	Impact	Unit	EMP				
			To a great extent	To some extent	No Change	Don't Know	All
Overall	Before	N	43	123	43	17	225
		%	18.95	54.45	18.97	7.63	100.00
	After	No	57	116	38	14	225
		%	25.30	51.60	16.90	6.20	100.00

Table 1: Impact on the Decision for Recreation

Impact on the Decision to Refuse Veil in the Family:

The tradition of veiling one's face as a sign of respect in the presence of older family members has long been established, and the refusal to adhere to this practice may be viewed as disrespectful. However, the study revealed that certain elderly individuals involved in the scheme no longer cover their faces entirely, and they do not impose this practice on their daughters-in-law either. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the custom of wearing veils in the presence of males remains unchanged.

SN	EMP	To a great Extent	To Some Extent	No Change	Don't Know	ALL
Age						
1	19-29 Years	No	26	24	8	78
		%	33.30	30.80	10.30	25.60
2	30-49 Years	No	22	64	21	117
		%	18.80	54.70	17.90	8.50
3	50 Years & >	No	9	2	9	23
		%	39.10	8.70	39.10	13.00

Table 2: Impact on the Decision to Refuse Veil in the Family and Age

The empirical findings demonstrate that the decision-making capacity of members to abstain from wearing a veil (*pardah*) in the presence of elders exhibited a notable degree of variation, with only 25.3% of women being able to fully abandon this practice. A closer examination of the age distribution data reveals that among members aged 50 years and above, a substantial proportion (39.1%) reported a significant impact, indicating a considerable decision to forgo wearing the veil when in the company of older family members. Within the age group of 19-29 years, this transformation was observed among 33.3% of the members. Conversely, the lowest percentage of change was noted within the age group of 30-49 years, comprising merely 18.8% of the members. It is worth noting that the age group of 30-49 years constituted the highest percentage of participants in this study and actively engaged in various activities under the SMS. As this age group represents the middle-aged category, individuals within this cohort have already internalized family customs and traditions, thereby rendering the process of cultural transformation more challenging (refer to Table 2).

Impact on the Decision to Refuse Veil in the Community:

Within the framework of the SMS scheme, women actively engaged in community participation by assuming responsibilities such as organizing meetings, coordinating events, and conducting rallies. These activities aimed to disseminate information regarding health, social concerns, government initiatives, and welfare programs. Consequently, it was customary for all married SMS members within the same village to adhere to the practice of wearing a veil when interacting with individuals outside their immediate households and neighbouring villages.

The decision-making capacity of members in rejecting the practice of veiling within the community yielded significant impacts, particularly within two specific age groups: individuals aged 19-29 years and those aged 50 years and above. Among members aged 19-29 years, a substantial 43.6% reported experiencing a profound impact, indicating a noteworthy degree of transformation. This age group demonstrates a greater receptivity to change and actively seeks personal and environmental evolution. In the age group of 30-59 years, the impact was observed to some extent in 50% of the members and to a great extent in 26.5% of the members. This particular age cohort, being more adaptable, has become accustomed to various cultural practices, thus rendering the process of change more challenging (refer to Table 3). It is worth noting that the membership from this age group constituted the highest proportion, accounting for 52% within the SMS. Furthermore, members aged 50 years and above demonstrated a considerable impact to a great extent, comprising 39.1% of the total, while 26.1% of the members reported being impacted to some extent. This finding is noteworthy since post-middle age, especially in rural areas, tends to be characterized by greater rigidity and resistance to change. However, the initiatives taken by women in this age group, such as refusing the veil in the community, may serve as an exemplar for women across other age groups.

S.N	EMP	19- 29		30- 49		50 and >		Overall	
		(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
1	To a great extent	34	43.60	31	26.50	9	39.10	74	32.90
2	To some extent	24	30.80	59	50.40	6	26.10	89	40.00
3	No Change	1	1.30	11	9.40	4	17.40	16	7.10
4	Don't Know	19	24.40	16	13.70	4	17.40	46	20.00
	All	78	100.00	117	100.00	23	100.00	225	100.00

Table: 3: Impact on the Decision to Refuse Veil in the Community and Age

Impact on member’s decision in children's education, marriage etc.

A significant majority of approximately 90% of the members reported experiencing a positive impact on their decision-making in the aforementioned areas. Merely 4% of the members indicated no discernible impact, while 7% expressed uncertainty in evaluating the impact in these specific domains. The members expressed that their participation in the *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* empowered them as informed citizens within the community.

As active participants of the *Sakshar Mahila Samooh*, the members gained recognition and respect from individuals residing in their vicinity. The community sought their insights and guidance on various

personal matters, including contraception, immunization, healthcare, and personal hygiene. Newly married women, in particular, approached the members for assistance with family-related concerns. In villages such as *Chatiya Aulia, Nagar, Amarheri, and Patti Kaliyana*, SMS members noted that villagers held them in high regard and sought their advice on matters that were not adequately addressed by the *Panchayat* members.

Impact on the decisions to influence family planning

The impact of the scheme on the members' decision-making ability in the context of family planning is noteworthy. Among the surveyed members, a substantial 68% reported a significant impact, while 20% indicated a moderate impact. However, 12% either perceived no impact or were unable to assess the impact accurately on their decision-making capacity. The ability to make informed choices regarding family planning empowers women and enables them to exert control over their own bodies. Remarkably, a mere 2% of the members reported no impact on their decision-making ability in matters of family planning, either for themselves or others (refer to Table 4).

Table 4 provides insights into the age distribution of the members and the impact of the scheme on their decision-making related to family planning. Notably, the age group of 50 years and above exhibited the highest level of impact, with a significant 78.3% of the members experiencing a substantial impact. Following this, the age group of 30-49 years demonstrated a considerable impact, with 76.9% reporting a noteworthy effect. Comparatively, the age group of 19-29 years displayed a slightly lower impact at 59%. This finding is intriguing as it suggests that women in the age group of 50 years and above actively engaged in promoting and educating the community on various family planning methods.

S.N	Impact	>18		19- 29		30- 49		50 and >		Overall	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	To a great extent	0	0.00	46	59.00	90	76.90	18	78.30	154	68.40
2	To some extent	2	28.60	21	26.90	18	15.40	4	17.40	45	20.00
3	No Change	0	0.00	0	0.00	4	3.40	0	0.00	4	1.80
4	Don't Know	5	71.40	11	14.10	5	4.30	1	4.30	22	9.80
All		7	100.00	78	100.00	117	100.00	23	100.00	225	100.00

Table: 4 Impact on the Decisions to Influence Family Planning and Age

Impact on the decision to acquire further education or skill for the self:

The findings of the study indicate that a substantial 71% of the members attributed their decision to pursue skill-based education to their participation in the scheme. They expressed that the scheme had facilitated their personal growth and provided them with opportunities for exploring broader and more promising avenues. Analyzing the impact of the scheme on the decision to pursue education and skill development based on the members' current educational level, it was observed that the scheme had the greatest influence on members with a primary education background. Among members with primary

education, an impressive 83.3% reported a profound impact. This was followed by members with senior secondary education and post-graduation. During the discussions, members shared their belief that further education would enhance their social standing as educated individuals. Some members also acknowledged that while their education might not have been extensive, they had acquired valuable employable skills through their involvement in the scheme.

Member's opinion – SMS, a platform to discuss personal issues

The present study investigates the extent to which members of the *samooh* utilize this platform as a forum for addressing personal problems. Results indicate that the *samooh* plays a pivotal role in fostering a supportive social environment, serving as an initial stepping stone for members to discuss their personal concerns before expanding their influence to the wider community. Remarkably, across all SMSs, women exhibit remarkable agency by undertaking various proactive initiatives, including celebrating the birth of girls, voicing opposition against alcohol outlets, and combating domestic violence. These initiatives are made feasible by the strong orientation and favorable atmosphere fostered within the *samoohs*. Leaders within the *samoohs* have been instrumental in addressing diverse family-related issues faced by the members, ranging from challenges related to familial constraints on attendance at meetings and activities, instances of domestic violence, and caste-based discrimination encountered within the SMS. In terms of the members' perceptions regarding the utilization of the *samooh* as a platform for discussing personal problems, the study findings are enlightening. A substantial majority, 61% of the members, expressed strong agreement in their ability to engage in discussions concerning their personal concerns within the *samooh*. Furthermore, an additional 33% of the members agreed with this sentiment. These findings underscore the significance of the *samooh* as a safe space for members to openly address their personal issues, fostering a culture of open dialogue and support. Only a negligible proportion, comprising 4% of the members, reported disagreement with this notion, while a mere 1% were unable to provide a conclusive opinion on the matter. These outcomes demonstrate the efficacy of the *samooh* in facilitating discussions around personal problems, thereby consolidating its role as a vital component of the members' social support network.

Member's opinion-SMS helped to increase alertness and curiosity to learn

The SMS scheme has emerged as a significant platform for members to actively engage in educational endeavors aimed at raising awareness about government programs and schemes targeting various segments of society, including women, children, the elderly, and diverse castes and communities. Within this context, the present study sought to explore the impact of the scheme on members' level of alertness and curiosity towards novel initiatives and administrative procedures. Remarkably, the findings revealed a highly positive response from the members, highlighting the profound influence of their participation in the SMS scheme. A substantial majority of 78% of the members strongly expressed their agreement with the statement, underscoring how their involvement in the scheme has ignited a sense of curiosity within them, propelling them to delve deeper into understanding and exploring new schemes and procedures. Furthermore, an additional 19% of the members acknowledged their agreement with this sentiment, further substantiating the notion that the SMS scheme has generated a genuine curiosity among members, fostering an environment of continuous learning and engagement. The activism demonstrated by these women within the SMS scheme stands as a testament to their proactive approach in driving positive change and enhancing their own empowerment within the community. Through their

involvement, they have exhibited an unwavering commitment to taking action and improving their social standing, consequently shaping themselves as influential and empowered women in their respective communities. These outcomes attest to the transformative potential of the SMS scheme in nurturing a spirit of agency, curiosity, and activism among its members, ultimately contributing to their personal growth and societal impact.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The limited recreational opportunities available in rural areas pose a significant challenge for rural women, depriving them of the chance to participate in local festivals and events. As a result, engaging in recreational activities becomes a privilege, denying them the benefits of stress relief and rejuvenation. Rural youth clubs, initially established to promote recreation, often suffer from a lack of functionality. However, these clubs play a vital role in redirecting the energy of the youth and safeguarding them against detrimental influences such as substance abuse. The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* (SMS) has effectively addressed these challenges by creating a positive and supportive environment for the youth, consequently empowering rural women to exercise autonomy in decision-making. The practice of *purdah*, wherein women cover their faces in the presence of elders, is often perceived as an oppressive symbol and a significant factor influencing the empowerment process. This practice, more prevalent among certain castes, particularly those in higher castes, can impact other castes within the community. The state of Haryana, with its deeply rooted patriarchal society, continues to perpetuate such patriarchal practices (Chowdhary, 1994). The study findings indicate that women participating in the SMS scheme acknowledge the adverse health consequences associated with the practice of wearing a veil. However, discussions within the SMS groups revealed that these women do not universally perceive the practice as a manifestation of social oppression.

Active engagement in health programs, particularly those focusing on women's health, plays a crucial role in enhancing members' knowledge and awareness regarding contraceptive methods. The *Sakshar Mahila Samooh* (SMS) scheme aimed to elevate the social status of rural women, with the utilization of contraception serving as a significant measure. Conversations with SMS members revealed their familiarity with various contraceptive methods, including sterilization, intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUCDs), and condoms. Moreover, members received training on advocating for condom use to prevent sexually transmitted infections and diseases.

Within the context of women's empowerment, emphasis is often placed on women being strong, self-aware, and mindful of their roles within their households and communities (Jejeebhoy, 2000). In India, women's empowerment involves challenging traditional male dominance within the family (Pamei, 2001). Through the SMS scheme, women have gained the agency to make decisions regarding their children's education, the employment of elder children, and even marriage. Family members frequently seek the advice and guidance of SMS members when making significant decisions, including marriage arrangements. Supportive partners and appreciative family members recognize the valuable contributions of SMS members to the community. Additionally, community members turn to them for guidance on government schemes, such as inquiries regarding pensions and other relevant matters.

Rural women face vulnerability stemming from limited awareness and access to contraception and family planning services. To address this issue, the National Health Mission has prioritized family planning and birth control, utilizing community-based services provided by Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers. Within the SMS scheme, a dedicated health program has been implemented

by trained members who actively engage with newlywed women in the community to disseminate knowledge and promote awareness. To facilitate discussions on family planning within the community, SMS members gather information about newlywed women through collaborations with ASHA workers, conducting health surveys in villages, and participating in regular community activities. Effectively promoting family planning and fostering open conversations among women in the community requires the active involvement of women who are convinced of its importance and willing to engage in these discussions.

Sakshar Mahila Samooh actively collaborated with elderly women's groups in the village, aiming to address pressing issues such as induced abortions, infanticide, and the declining sex ratio. Discussions within these groups revolved around raising awareness about maternal health indicators, including cervical cancer, menopause-related concerns, and other reproductive health issues faced by elderly women. The significance of using contraceptives to mitigate health risks was strongly emphasized by the elderly women. These discussions were regarded as beneficial in promoting overall health and providing support to daughters and daughters-in-law through a positive and informed approach. The SMS scheme has played a pivotal role in empowering women to acquire livelihood skills and pursue further education. Members have displayed remarkable motivation in enrolling in schools and higher education institutions, as well as initiating personal efforts to acquire computer skills. Through interactions and informal discussions, they have explored various employable courses, leading to participation in para-medical training, master-trainer programs, vocational skill development, and higher education degrees. Some members have even pursued post-graduate degrees in fields such as psychology and social work, having been informed about potential job opportunities as counselors or within non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally, leaders of the *samoohs* in *Dhathrath Khurd* and *Jhanj Khurd* villages have taken up positions in a local NGO, seeking to gain valuable knowledge and experience in NGO management. Empowerment encompasses multiple dimensions, including pre-empowerment, intra-personal, inter-personal, and institutional aspects (Busch & Valentine, 2009). Civil society movements and participatory mechanisms play a critical role in the process of empowerment (Friedmann, 1992; Chambers, 1997). Women's empowerment is a dynamic process that necessitates well-planned actions to bring about positive social change. This involves implementing innovative programs and strategies that challenge discriminatory norms and values. By recognizing their strengths, addressing their weaknesses, and engaging in individual, group, and community activities, women gain access to new information and resources, enabling them to assert control over their circumstances. Batliwala (1994) defines empowerment as having agency and influence over external forces for one's own well-being.

The findings of this study have profound implications for the formulation of policies, the design of programs, and the strategies employed in implementing initiatives aimed at empowering rural women. A comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of engagement and the impact of community empowering schemes can provide valuable guidance to stakeholders involved in developing interventions that effectively address the specific needs and aspirations of rural women. Moreover, this research contributes to the scholarly discourse surrounding gender empowerment and community development, augmenting the existing body of knowledge concerning the agency and transformative capacity of rural women. By incorporating these findings into future endeavors, we can foster sustainable development, inclusive growth, and gender equality in rural areas. The utilization of this research can inform policy

decisions and programmatic approaches to empower rural women, resulting in positive and lasting outcomes for individuals and communities alike.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the profound importance of community empowerment schemes in effectively engaging rural women and facilitating their individual empowerment as well as broader community development. By recognizing and harnessing the immense potential of rural women, and by providing them with avenues for growth and meaningful participation, we can cultivate inclusive and resilient communities. Gender equality ceases to be merely an idealistic aspiration, but rather transforms into a palpable reality that significantly contributes to the overall advancement and well-being of society. Consequently, through sustained dedication and support for the empowerment of rural women, we can forge a future characterized by greater equity and prosperity for all members of society.

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