

## EMPOWERMENT VS. WELL-BEING: CAN RURAL WOMEN HAVE BOTH?



*Empowerment offers opportunities, but does it enhance well-being? In this blog, Vijayalaxmi Khed explores the challenges rural women face in balancing both.*

### CONTEXT

Gender mainstreaming has been a cornerstone of global strategies to tackle inequality by incorporating gender considerations into policies, programs, budgets, and evaluations. Introduced during the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, this approach has since gained traction among governments and NGOs worldwide. Despite over two decades of efforts, progress remains slow due to what many referred to as an “implementation gap.” [UN Women \(2015\)](#) identifies three critical areas for achieving substantive equality: addressing socioeconomic disadvantages, strengthening women’s agency, voice, and participation, and combating restrictive social norms.



Efforts to address gender inequality and empower women often focus on facilitating women's engagement in economic and social spheres. This approach operates under the assumption that social norms will shift as women increasingly participate in activities outside the home. However, these norms remain rigid, with many women perpetuating them by imposing [similar expectations](#) on adolescent girls, daughters-in-law, and other women in their community, especially in rural areas. Without explicit efforts to address norms, empowerment can inadvertently lead to additional burdens rather than benefits.

In this blog, I discuss the role of social norms in balancing empowerment and well-being. I highlight how norms exacerbate the imbalance, emphasize the importance of intersectional inclusion, and propose practical ways forward. Addressing social norms is a delicate yet necessary form of change as it alters familial and societal dynamics. This requires a sensitive, tailored approach to foster meaningful and sustainable change.

## **WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND WELL-BEING: A DELICATE BALANCE**

I draw on Kabeer's definition of women empowerment as the "process of expanding people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Although well-being is absent from the widely used definition of women empowerment, researchers and policymakers often view empowerment and well-being as complementary. They assume that empowering women enhances their well-being, as well as that of their families and communities, through improved strategic decision-making power. However, in patriarchal societies, where rigid gender roles are defined—women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners—this dynamic can complicate the relationship between empowerment and well-being. While women's roles have expanded beyond traditional household responsibilities, societal norms and entrenched power structures often limit the true impact of empowerment. As a result, empowerment does not always lead to well-being. True progress demands transforming these societal norms and power dynamics to ensure empowerment becomes a tool for enhancing well-being, rather than a [double-edged sword](#).

### **Economic engagement and empowerment of rural women**

Rural women navigate a delicate balance between complex domestic responsibilities and multiple livelihood strategies. Despite their significant contributions to household and community well-being, they often lack agency and decision-making power. For instance, [while women make up 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries](#), their efforts frequently go unacknowledged, with many working as labourers without control over income or resources. This dynamic is often described in the literature as "exploitation" rather than "empowerment."

### **The role of women collectives in women's empowerment**

Women collectives like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as a critical tool for empowering rural women by providing microcredit, income opportunities, and decision-making roles. However, societal norms impose additional burdens, forcing women to balance domestic duties with new responsibilities. For instance, a woman who attends an SHG meeting to discuss group activities may still be judged harshly if household chores are left unfinished.

Fieldwork in Bihar and Kerala reveals that while earning improves family support, women remain overburdened and financially constrained. Male interference in SHGs often limits women's autonomy, as men control loans borrowed from the group, making women more vulnerable to repayment pressure. Deep-rooted patriarchy perpetuates this control, treating women's participation as an extension of



household roles rather than genuine empowerment, weakening their ability to adopt new interventions and exercise agency.



### Women's vulnerabilities at the intersection of different identities

The intersection of different identities like class, caste, ethnicity, race, etc., exacerbates the vulnerabilities of women in rural areas. Women from socioeconomically marginalized communities often face multiple layers of discrimination that restrict their access to resources, services, opportunities, and basic rights. While caste-based hierarchies dictate social status, class influences economic power, creating a compounded disadvantage for women in these groups. These include:

1. Limited access to land and resources
  - Women, especially in marginalized communities, lack land and resource ownership, limiting their economic independence and decision-making power.
  - Caste hierarchies exacerbate this disparity. Landlords typically belong to non-marginalized castes, while marginalized communities either own small, poor-quality plots or are entirely landless. This systemic disparity reinforces economic and social inequalities, placing women from marginalized castes at a significant disadvantage.
  - Discriminatory practices in accessing water, grazing land, and other communal resources further marginalize these women.
2. Exploitation in labour and lower bargaining power
  - Marginalized women often work as agricultural or domestic labourers in unsafe environments, earning meagre wages. Limited access to resources and their subordinate position in the rural hierarchy leave them with little bargaining power.
3. Social exclusion and social norms

- Social norms assign primary responsibility for domestic chores to women, while simultaneously dictating their opportunities for paid work outside the home. Yet, these norms vary across socioeconomic hierarchies.
- For women from non-marginalized communities, social norms limit their employment opportunities. To [uphold family status](#), women avoid paid labour, even in the face of serious financial need.
- Practices such as untouchability isolate marginalized women, limiting their participation in community activities and decision-making, while exclusion from education and healthcare services perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality.

Addressing these vulnerabilities requires targeted interventions that prioritize intersectionality and inclusivity. Policies must consider the unique challenges faced by women at the intersection of different identities like caste and class to ensure equitable access to resources, opportunities, and services.

### Current scenario and policy framework in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in rural India

Often, we talk about changing the status quo, but this is rarely reflected in our actions. For instance, on [International Women's Day \(2024\)](#), the Prime Minister of India announced a reduction of Rs. 100 on LPG cylinder refills. At first glance, this might seem like a step toward empowering women. However, when viewed through the lens of gender equality, such initiatives may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles by affirming that the kitchen remains a woman's domain, irrespective of women's professional achievements—such as India's recent success with [ISRO's Chandrayaan mission](#).



Real change in social norms must trickle down from top to bottom, and it should be visible in actions rather than words. Effective policy interventions aiming to achieve equality require a well-defined Theory of Change (ToC) to outline the efforts needed for inclusive and sustainable outcomes.

Consider the Jal Jeevan Mission, which reduces drudgery, saves time, and provides safe drinking water to all rural households, thereby potentially reducing the workload for women and allowing them to engage in economic activities. While this program saves women significant time previously spent collecting water, it remains unclear how this time is utilized. Structural barriers, such as limited employment opportunities, [inadequate skill acquisition programs](#), and restrictive gender norms, often prevent women from leveraging the saved time productively. Similarly, mechanization in agriculture addresses labour scarcity and reduces the burden of arduous tasks but may inadvertently [displace women labourers](#) especially from marginalized communities who depend on agricultural work for their livelihoods.



Another example is the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), which sought to provide LPG cylinders at subsidized costs or free to Below Poverty Line households. While the initiative initially showed promise, its sustainability faltered when subsidies ceased. [Many households reverted to using fuelwood due to affordability issues](#). Furthermore, decisions to refill cylinders often rested with the household decision-maker, typically men, further limiting the program's effectiveness in empowering women.

To achieve meaningful progress, policy interventions must:

- Define a clear ToC that accounts for the heterogeneous impacts of interventions on diverse populations.
- Prioritize sustainable outcomes by addressing underlying structural barriers.
- Align policies with broader efforts to transform social norms and empower women across economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

### Addressing societal stereotypes and intersectional challenges

To design effective interventions, it is essential to address societal stereotypes that shape gender roles and responsibilities. Focusing solely on impact metrics, such as poverty reduction percentages, often overlooks the nuances of inequality. Understanding stereotypes from an intersectional perspective—considering factors like caste, class, culture, and community—can help tailor interventions to address the unique challenges faced by different groups.



Recent initiatives have attempted to challenge traditional gender roles by introducing examples in textbooks and movies where men are shown participating in domestic chores alongside women. These depictions also highlight women exploring opportunities outside their homes. While this marks a positive start, it is crucial to conduct impact assessments to understand how these changes are perceived by the public. Such evaluations can determine whether these initiatives are effectively influencing societal norms or if deeper interventions are required to foster meaningful change.

### Key considerations for sustainable empowerment

1. Empowerment and well-being as interconnected goals
  - Recognize that empowerment does not automatically translate into well-being, particularly in patriarchal societies.
  - Adopt a system-thinking approach to address interconnected challenges.
2. Highlight women's strengths
  - Focus on areas where women excel rather than framing them as disadvantaged in all aspects.
3. Redefined gender roles
  - Move beyond seeing men as oppressors and women as victims. Treat women as stakeholders capable of driving change.
  - Challenge stereotypes that confine women roles as nurturers and housemakers.
4. Promote intersectionality
  - Analyse societal norms through an intersectional lens to ensure inclusive and equitable interventions.
5. Leverage mass media
  - Utilize television and other media to challenge traditional gender roles and portray women as equal contributors to economic and social progress. Currently, the media often depicts women solely as housewives or as individuals who manage everything, even at the expense of their well-being.

### Participatory research: A path forward

Engaging communities in participatory research can uncover valuable insights into the perceptions of gender roles and empowerment. Such approaches allow both men and women to voice their perspectives and identify pathways for sustainable change. Training programs and demonstrations to women along with men and other family members can further amplify these efforts by highlighting the benefits of shared responsibilities and mutual support within households.

### CONCLUSION

Achieving empowerment and well-being for rural women requires more than policy changes or economic interventions. It demands a holistic approach that addresses deep-rooted social norms, promotes gender equity at the household and community levels, and fosters environments where women can thrive without sacrificing their well-being. By recognizing the interconnected nature of these challenges and prioritizing intersectionality, we can create a future where empowerment and well-being go hand in hand, transforming the lives of rural women and their communities.

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