



International Day of Rural Women: Triple burden & major challenges of rural women in India

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ABSTRACT

The International Day of Rural Women is celebrated on October 15 every year which highlights the crucial role rural women play in agriculture, food security, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development. As farmers, caregivers, and community leaders, they manage crops, livestock, and natural resources, preserve traditional knowledge, and adapt to climate change. Despite their contributions, rural women face challenges such as limited access to land, education, healthcare, and financial resources, along with triple household and community responsibilities. Literacy among rural women in India has improved significantly, rising from 4.87% in 1951 to 57.93% in 2011, reflecting efforts to empower them through education and skill development. Initiatives like Bio-resource Centres engage women in converting household and agricultural waste into vermicompost, promoting organic farming, reducing pollution, generating employment, and sustaining biodiversity knowledge. Complementing these efforts, Bihar's Lohia Swachh Bihar Abhiyan (LSBA) integrates the Swachh Bharat Mission–Gramin and Lohia Swachhata Yojana to achieve Open Defecation Free (ODF) villages and transition to ODF-Plus by 2025 through sanitation infrastructure, awareness campaigns, and community-led waste management in which rural women play an integral part. These strategies collectively underscore the importance of women's empowerment and community participation in achieving clean, healthy, and sustainable rural development.

INTRODUCTION

The International Day of Rural Women, observed every year on October 15, recognizes the vital role and contribution of rural women in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security, and eradicating poverty. Women in rural areas are the backbone of households and communities, working tirelessly in farming, livestock rearing, water and fuel collection, and family care.

Despite their immense contributions, they often face social, economic, and cultural challenges such as limited access to education, healthcare, land, credit, and decision-making opportunities. This day serves as a reminder to honour their resilience and to advocate for gender equality, empowerment, and policies that support their well-being and livelihoods (Shukla et al., 2022). Reaching gender equality and giving women more power is not just the fair thing to do, it is also very important for fighting extreme poverty, hunger, and climate change. Women produce about half of the world's

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food and also take care of the environment and biodiversity (United Nations, 2024). As farmers, many women have found ways to deal with climate change by using eco-friendly farming methods, planting drought-resistant seeds, managing soil in natural ways, and even leading projects like tree planting and forest restoration. Indigenous women play a big role too, as they share important traditional knowledge about protecting nature. In addition, rural women have been taking the lead in both local and global climate movements, making sure people take action today for a better future.

History of International Day of Rural Women

The International Day of Rural Women was first observed on October 15, 1995, initiated and promoted by the Women's World Summit Foundation (WWSF) to recognize the vital contributions of rural women in agriculture, food security, and community development. This early celebration helped draw global attention to the often-overlooked role of women in rural economies and societies. A decade later, the importance of this observance was formally acknowledged at the global level. On December 18, 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 62/136, which officially established October 15 as the International Day of Rural Women. The resolution underscored the crucial role rural women play in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security, and eradicating poverty, while also highlighting the need to address the persistent inequalities they face, including limited access to land, credit, health care, education, and decision-making processes.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on a secondary data research method to explore the significance and impact of the International Day of Rural Women in promoting gender equality, rural development, and women's empowerment. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from authentic and reliable sources such as academic journals, books, government publications, policy reports, MoSPI, UN Women and FAO documents, and materials from other international agencies. Statistical data, case studies, and global as well as national reports were reviewed to evaluate the challenges faced by rural women, the initiatives undertaken to improve their socio-economic conditions, and the progress achieved so far. The collected data were analysed thematically to identify patterns, strategies, and outcomes related to rural women's roles in agriculture, food security, poverty reduction, and

sustainable development. Special attention was given to policy measures, international commitments, and community-level interventions that highlight the importance of celebrating the International Day of Rural Women in advancing the global agenda of equality and sustainable rural development.

Recognizing the Role of Rural Women in global Progress

Rural women play a key role in driving economic, social, and environmental changes needed for sustainable development. However, they face many challenges such as limited access to credit, healthcare, and education, which are worsened by food crises, economic issues, and climate change. Since women make up a large part of the agricultural workforce, empowering them is vital for food security, community well-being, and economic growth. In Telangana, where 61.12% of the population lives in rural areas (Census of India, 2011), the Rural Development Department runs programs like MGNREGS, Watershed Development, and Self-Help Groups (Ali & Kamraju, 2023).

Women in poor rural families have a big responsibility to take care of their households. In many cases, they are the main earners, and in families led by women, they are often the only providers. But their ability to support their families is limited because they don't get enough resources. These problems come not only from poverty but also from gender inequality. Women often receive fewer basic needs within families, face unfair treatment in the job market, have little access to land or farming tools, and are badly affected when common resources like forests or land are reduced or privatised. Still, rural women are not always silent or powerless. Many have spoken up and taken part in local movements. In times of crisis, poor peasant and tribal women have led eco-friendly initiatives to save nature. The knowledge and experiences of these women are very important for creating sustainable development in the future. Rural women are at the centre of progress worldwide. Women form the backbone of the rural agricultural workforce, and their hard work in farming, ensuring food security, protecting the environment, and strengthening community life is invaluable.

Connecting Gender Equality with National Development

In today's world, where crises are increasing and development aid is shrinking, supporters of gender equality and women's rights must stay committed by working together more closely and putting in stronger efforts. Years of experience and evidence clearly show that empowering women and

ensuring gender equality are essential for economic growth (Brookings., 2025). Gender equality plays a crucial role in driving economic development by boosting productivity and expanding overall output. When women are given equal access to education, employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities, they become active contributors to the workforce, strengthening both local and national economies. Their participation leads to higher levels of innovation, increased consumer spending, and greater economic diversity. In sectors ranging from agriculture to business, women's involvement fosters entrepreneurship and enhances production. With improved access to knowledge, skills, and resources, women help create more balanced and competitive workforces (Kumari et al., 2022). This not only supports sustainable growth but also reduces poverty and paves the way for long-term national prosperity.

The Vital Role of Rural Women

Rural women are the real strength of villages because they work hard both outside in the fields and inside their homes. They do two jobs at once—growing food for their families and also taking care of their children with love and strength. From farming, looking after animals, cooking, cleaning, to collecting water and firewood, their work is endless but often not noticed. Even though they face problems like lack of education, health facilities, and proper resources, they still play a big role in farming, family life, and community progress. If we support and respect their efforts, it will not only improve their own lives but also help in reducing poverty, making food secure, and building a better future for all. Valuing their work means giving them equal rights, respect, and opportunities (UN Women, 2013).

Triple burden of women

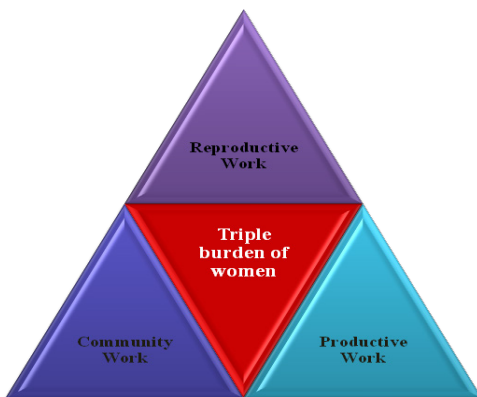


Fig. 1. Triple burden of women

Reproductive work:

This form of work receives neither payment nor proper acknowledgment, yet it remains crucial for maintaining

the household and supporting the family's well-being. Ex- Cooking, cleaning, fetching water, taking care of children, elderly care, and other domestic chores.

Productive Work:

This type of work is economically recognized because it produces goods or services that can be sold, but women often perform it alongside reproductive duties without adequate support. Ex- Farming, running a small business, wage labour, handicrafts, or other income-generating activities.

Community Work:

This work is socially beneficial but rarely compensated, adding to women's total workload and contributing to their "triple burden". Ex- local governance, school committees, community health programs, or disaster relief efforts.

Three Challenges of rural women

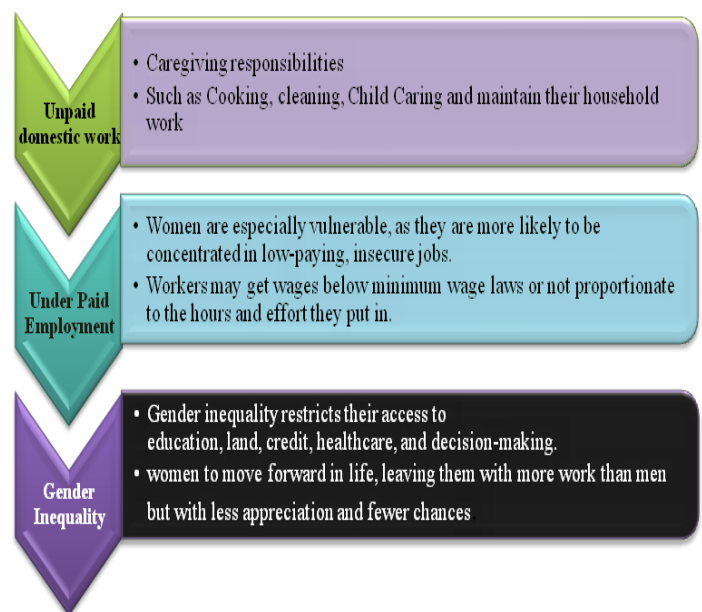
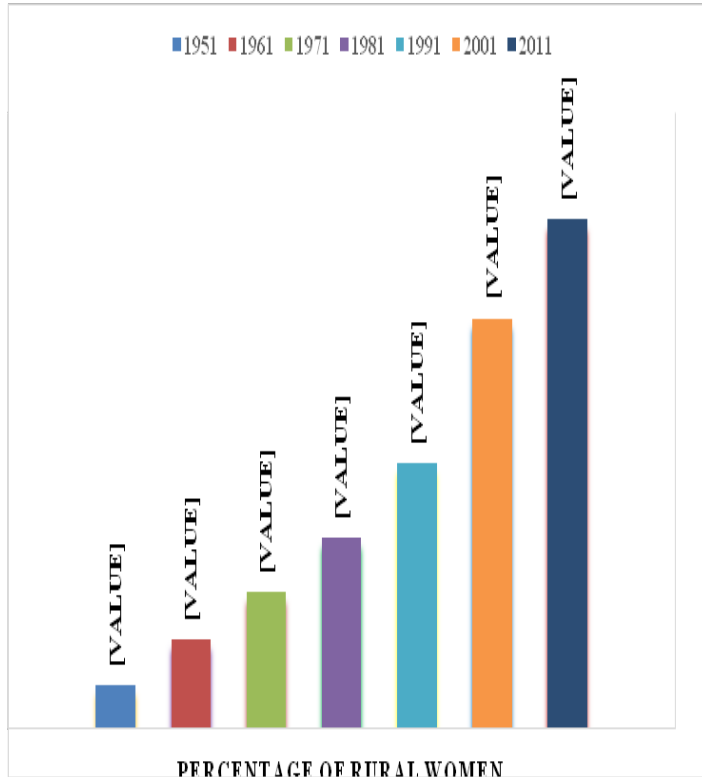


Fig. 2. Challenges of rural women

Literacy rate of rural women in post-independence India

The table highlights the steady growth in the literacy rate of rural women in India between 1951 and 2011. In 1951, only 4.87% of rural women were literate, a figure that points to the wide gender divide and very limited access to education in the years immediately after independence. By 1961, this figure had risen modestly to 10.1%, and then to 15.5% in 1971, indicating that early government initiatives

and rising public awareness were beginning to make an impact. While, following decades, with literacy reaching 21.7% in 1981 and 30.17% in 1991, reflecting the influence of literacy drives and the spread of rural education programs. The most remarkable improvement occurred after 2000, with 46.7% of rural women literate in 2001 and 57.93% in 2011, demonstrating the effectiveness of large-scale literacy campaigns, government schemes, NGO participation, and the growing emphasis on educating girls.



(Source: MoSPI, 2016)

Fig. 3: Literacy rate of rural women in post-independence India

Sukhet Model and Rural Women's Empowerment

The Sukhet Model, named after the village of Sukhet in Madhubani district, has been developed implemented by scientist of Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agriculture Pusa, Samastipur (Bihar), under this initiative, provide LPG cylinders to families every two months in exchange for their waste contributions. The project has created employment opportunities for around 14–15 local people, many of whom are rural women. This initiative like Bio-resource Centres (Singh & Lal, 2024), goes beyond just managing waste; it promotes cleanliness, organic farming, reducing pollution, and empowering women. Rural women, who typically manage household waste and livestock, play a

crucial role in making the project successful. the Sukhet Model demonstrates how rural women can be at the centre of sustainable village development. (Jain, 2021).

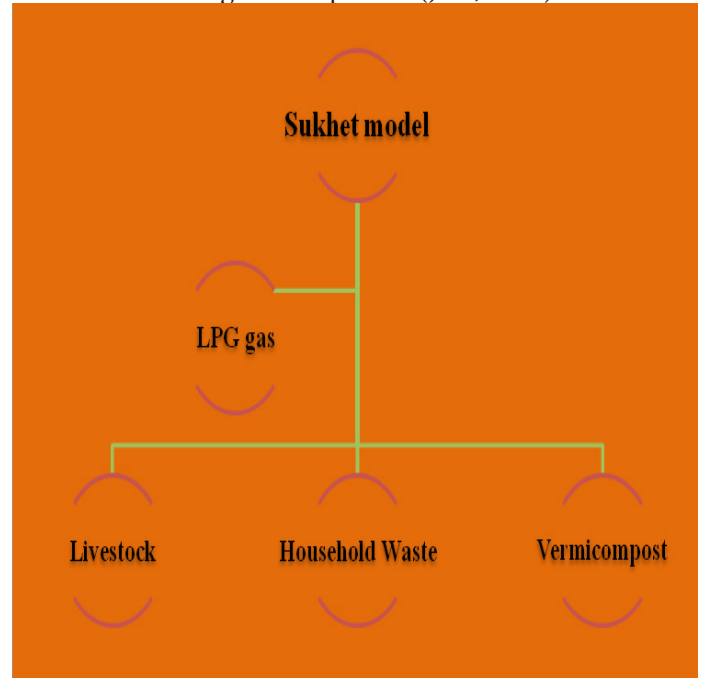


Fig. 4: Architecture of Sukhet Model

Bio-Resource Innovation for Rural Development

Rural women are key to the success of bio-resource centres because they actively manage household waste, livestock by-products, and agricultural leftovers. Their everyday tasks, such as farming, caring for animals, cooking, and gathering fuel, give them valuable experience in using natural resources wisely. In bio-resource centres, they play important roles in collecting biodegradable waste, making vermicompost, operating biogas systems, and producing organic fertilizers that support sustainable farming (Lal et al., 2024). Beyond waste management, rural women also act as custodians of biodiversity by saving seeds, maintaining home gardens, and protecting indigenous plant and animal species. Their participation ensures that bio-resource centres not only promote environmental cleanliness and reduce pollution but also create livelihood opportunities, especially through composting, organic farming, and eco-friendly energy generation (FAO, 2011; 2024).

Role of rural women in bio-diversity

Rural women play a vital role in protecting and managing biodiversity because they are responsible for both providing and producing food. Their daily work in farming, gathering,

and managing households connects them closely to preserving important plants and animals used for food. Over time, they have developed special knowledge about local plants, animals, and sustainable farming practices that help communities survive in tough environments. In many poor farming areas, especially where the land is difficult to farm, women often take care of seeds and plants, selecting, saving, and sharing up to 90% of the seeds in these communities. This helps protect different types of crops and ensures plants grow well in their local climate and soil. Since small farmers often cannot afford chemicals or special animal feed, rural women maintain a wide variety of crops, wild plants, and animal breeds. This diversity acts as a safeguard against crop failure, animal sickness, and hunger by keeping a steady and varied food supply. Women also look after different types of livestock and help preserve traditional animals, plants, and farming methods, even though many breeds worldwide are at risk of disappearing.

Lohiya Swachh Bihar Abhiyan (LSBA)

The Government of Bihar launched the Lohiya Swachh Bihar Abhiyan (LSBA) by integrating the Swachh Bharat Mission–Gramin (SBM-G) with the state’s Lohiya Swachhata Yojana (LSY), following the 2016 directives of the Rural Development Department. The first phase focused on training, community engagement, and awareness programs, mobilizing over 50,000 Swachhagrahis and 70,000 Raj Nidhis to promote toilet construction and encourage behaviour change. By October 2, 2019, all Gram Panchayats in Bihar were declared Open Defecation Free (ODF), and Community Sanitation Complexes (CSCs) were constructed to serve landless families, migrants, and other vulnerable populations. The second phase (2021–2025) aims to sustain ODF status and upgrade villages to ODF-Plus under the state’s 7 Nischay-2 initiative, focusing on solid and liquid waste management and long-term sanitation sustainability. The program ensures toilet access for newly eligible or previously excluded households, builds community and cluster toilets for landless and marginalized groups, and promotes a community-led, decentralized approach under Panchayati Raj Institutions. Continuous awareness campaigns encourage complete sanitation, personal hygiene, and positive behavioural changes in both communities and institutions, supporting the vision of clean, healthy, and prosperous rural villages (LSBA, 2021).

Rural Women: Building Sustainable Futures

Rural women are central to both preserving traditional

farming practices and introducing innovative approaches to agriculture, biodiversity, and climate change adaptation. They manage land and natural resources, pass on ancestral knowledge, and lead community efforts that strengthen climate resilience. Women farmers often respond to the challenges of climate change by practicing sustainable agriculture—using drought-resistant seeds, applying organic soil management, and leading reforestation and land restoration projects. Ensuring women’s equal access to education, financial resources, and land ownership not only improves agricultural productivity but also reduces poverty and fosters long-term sustainable development for future generations.

Agricultural and rural development policies are increasingly focused on supporting climate-neutral and environmentally sustainable farming, with an emphasis on human capital, innovation, and knowledge transfer. Gender equality plays a vital role in this shift, particularly through participation in Agri-environment-climate schemes (AECS). Evidence from Slovenia shows that although men still hold advantages in agricultural resources, women farmers actively adopt AECS practices and benefit from subsidies. This highlights the need to promote women’s empowerment and involvement in green technologies and eco-entrepreneurship as a pathway to sustainable agricultural development (Fertó & Bojnec, 2024).

Conclusion

Rural women are the backbone of farming, biodiversity protection, and sustainable growth, but they still face many social and economic difficulties. Over time, their situation has improved through education, literacy programs, and empowerment efforts, proving that supporting women benefits families, communities, and the nation as a whole. Initiatives like Bio-resource Centres, the Sukhet Model, and Bihar’s Lohiya Swachh Bihar Abhiyan show how women can turn waste into useful resources, improve sanitation, and create new jobs. Giving women equal rights to land, resources, and decision-making, along with their involvement in climate-friendly farming and rural development, unlocks their potential as leaders of change. Empowering rural women is not only about fairness but also about ensuring food security, reducing poverty, and building strong, sustainable communities for the future.

FUTURE SCOPE

The future of rural women’s empowerment in the coming years depends on reinforcing their role as key contributors to sustainable development through improved education, skill training, and access to essential resources. Enhancing

literacy and vocational opportunities will raise their social and economic status while supporting agricultural efficiency and resilience to climate change. Increased support for bio-resource centres, eco-friendly innovations, and green enterprises can create sustainable livelihoods while safeguarding the environment. Future policies should prioritize women's equal access to land, healthcare, financial services, and leadership roles to minimize gender inequality. Encouraging their involvement in climate-smart agriculture, Agri-environment schemes, and digital tools will further strengthen their contribution to national progress. Expanding community-led efforts such as the Sukhet Model and Lohia Swachh Bihar Abhiyan (LSBA) will promote inclusive sanitation, effective waste management, and sustainable rural advancement. Ultimately, empowering rural women will remain central to achieving gender justice, food security, poverty alleviation, and resilient, sustainable communities worldwide.

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Conflict of Interest. None.

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