



Leadership Roles for Women in Rural India: Challenges, Progress, and Prospects by 2047

Richa Yadav (Junior Research Fellow)
Department of Public Administration
University of Lucknow, Lucknow, UP

Abstract

Rural women are pivotal drivers of development, fostering transformative economic, environmental, and social changes crucial for sustainable progress. However, they face numerous challenges, including limited access to credit, healthcare, and education, compounded by global crises and climate change. Empowering rural women is vital, not only for individual and community well-being but also for enhancing overall economic productivity, given their significant presence in the agricultural workforce worldwide. UN Women actively supports the leadership and engagement of rural women in shaping laws, policies, and programs that impact their lives. This includes efforts to enhance food and nutrition security, as well as to improve rural livelihoods. Through training initiatives, women are equipped with skills to pursue alternative livelihoods and effectively utilize technology tailored to their needs. Keeping in mind the emerging scenario of women taking lead roles in various arenas of development be it space, defence or any other sector signifying development, it becomes pertinent to draw the sketch for providing women the leadership roles for the developed India we want to achieve in 2047. This research aims to explore the leadership roles that rural women could occupy by 2047, with an emphasis on political, agricultural, social, environmental, entrepreneurial, and digital domains. It identifies key trends and challenges while providing recommendations for policy and action to realize this vision.

Keywords: Women leadership, Empowerment, Healthcare, education, Rural women, Panchayati Raj.

Introduction

“The hands that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.” India's aspiration to become a developed nation by 2047 hinges on maximizing the potential of its women, especially those in rural areas. Women's empowerment, in particular, fosters an environment that enables women to access resources and power in all spheres of life, enhancing their participation in transformative actions. While there has been notable progress in gender equality in recent years, rural women continue to face significant socio-economic barriers that restrict their leadership opportunities. Traditionally, rural women have been confined to domestic roles, but shifting economic dynamics, technological progress, and supportive government policies are gradually expanding their presence and recognition in leadership across various sectors.

Women's leadership is widely recognized as a key driver of sustainable development and inclusive governance worldwide (United Nations, 2015). In the Indian context, where more than 65% of the population continues to live in rural areas (Census of India, 2011), strengthening the leadership capacities of rural women is not just an issue of social justice but a strategic imperative for national progress. Traditionally restricted to domestic responsibilities, rural women have gradually begun participating in public decision-making, particularly following policy reforms like the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. Yet, their leadership opportunities remain constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, unequal access to education, financial limitations, and restrictive social customs (Sen, 2021).

As India works toward its vision of attaining developed-nation status by 2047, harnessing the leadership potential of rural women across diverse sectors—including politics, economy, agriculture, education, healthcare, environment, and technology—will be essential. This study critically explores the trajectory of rural women's leadership in India, highlights enduring challenges, and offers policy-oriented recommendations to build a more gender-inclusive leadership framework for the future.

Historical Context and Policy Framework

The long-standing marginalization of women in India — particularly in rural settings — is well documented. Historically, rigid social hierarchies relegated women to subordinate positions, denying them equitable access to property, education, and political authority (Agarwal, 2018). The emergence of the women's movement in post-independence India, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, brought rural women's rights and leadership to the forefront of public and policy debates. This advocacy laid the groundwork for significant institutional reforms, including:

- The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992), which introduced a mandatory 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies, enabling their entry into grassroots governance.
- The launch of the National Rural Health Mission (2005), which formalized women's participation in rural healthcare delivery through frontline roles like Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs).

- The establishment of the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), aimed at enhancing women's leadership in agriculture and promoting their role in farm-based livelihoods.

While these interventions have significantly improved women's visibility and involvement in public decision-making, their impact remains uneven. Persistent patriarchal norms, socio-economic barriers, and structural inequalities continue to restrict the full realization of rural women's leadership potential.

Sectoral Leadership Roles

Political Leadership

Political participation serves both as a reflection of and a catalyst for women's empowerment. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has enabled over 1.4 million women to occupy positions within local governance structures (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021). Research by *Chaudhary (2021)* and *Jha & Jhingran (2020)* indicates that female leaders have brought notable improvements in community decision-making, particularly in essential areas such as drinking water supply, maternal health services, and local education.

However, the widespread issue of proxy leadership—where male family members exercise authority on behalf of elected women—continues to restrict authentic female leadership (*Sujaya, 2017*). Looking ahead to 2047, increasing women's reservation in local governance bodies to 50% and enhancing capacity-building initiatives could help elevate rural women from village sarpanches to influential positions in state and national legislatures, directly shaping rural policy agendas (*Sen, 2021*).

Economic and Entrepreneurial Leadership

Rural women have increasingly asserted leadership within the economic sector, particularly through the proliferation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which now exceed 7 million nationwide (National Rural Livelihood Mission, 2022). These collectives have expanded women's access to microfinance, promoted entrepreneurship, and fostered community leadership. *Kabeer (2020)* highlights how SHGs have empowered women economically while nurturing social networks and solidarity. Yet, limitations such as restricted market access, insufficient capital, and mobility challenges hinder the growth of women-led enterprises (*Nanda, 2018*). Innovative models, including women-led agricultural cooperatives and digital marketplaces, are emerging as scalable solutions for rural women entrepreneurs. Initiatives like Mahila e-Haat and government-backed digital literacy programs are also expected to bridge digital and market access disparities by 2047 (*Kumar & Singh, 2021*).

Agricultural Leadership

Although rural women make up 42% of India's agricultural workforce, they own less than 13% of agricultural landholdings (FAO, 2019). While their role in food production is critical, their leadership in agricultural decision-making, enterprise management, and climate-resilient practices remains limited. *Nandi (2021)* emphasizes rural women's growing involvement in sustainable agriculture and biodiversity conservation. With the increasing availability of emerging technologies such as AI-based soil sensors, drones, and climate-resilient crop varieties, rural women have the potential to become frontrunners in tech-driven agriculture by 2047 (*Singh et al., 2020*). However, securing land rights and strengthening agricultural training and leadership opportunities will be vital to unlocking this potential.

Healthcare Leadership

Women have long played indispensable roles in India's rural health infrastructure, notably as Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Anganwadi workers, and traditional birth attendants. *Das (2019)* acknowledges their pivotal contributions to maternal and child health, immunization programs, and family welfare services.

Despite their crucial roles, *Singh (2021)* notes that these women remain undervalued and often overburdened, with limited leadership development opportunities. By 2047, with the support of structured training programs, rural women could advance to lead community health committees, oversee local health centers, and advocate for equitable healthcare access and policy reforms at higher levels.

Educational Leadership

Educational disparities persist in rural India, where the female literacy rate stands at 59.3%, considerably lower than the 78.8% literacy rate for rural men (Census of India, 2011). *Mitra (2020)* argues that empowering women as teachers, school administrators, and community educators can play a transformative role in improving literacy rates and reducing school dropouts among rural girls. The growth of digital education platforms and learning apps—particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic—has created new leadership avenues for women. Initiatives aimed at increasing women's participation in STEM education and digital literacy programs are poised to be key accelerators of gender-inclusive educational leadership by 2047 (*UNESCO, 2022; Sundararaman, 2021*).

Environmental and Climate Leadership

Rural women's leadership in environmental conservation has deep historical roots, epitomized by landmark movements like Chipko (1973). *Agarwal (2018)* and *Bose (2020)* document women's ongoing contributions to water harvesting, afforestation efforts, and

sustainable farming practices in rural areas. By 2047, there is strong potential for institutionalizing women's leadership in climate-resilient agriculture, solar energy entrepreneurship, waste management initiatives, and eco-tourism cooperatives. With supportive policy frameworks and leadership training, rural women can play a pivotal role in addressing India's environmental and climate challenges (Sen, 2021).

Barriers to Women's Leadership in Rural India

Despite the vast potential for women's leadership in rural India by 2047, several challenges persist:

1. **Patriarchal Norms:** One of the most entrenched challenges is the persistence of patriarchal norms and gendered social expectations that confine women to domestic roles and limit their visibility in public life. In many rural communities, leadership and decision-making authority are traditionally viewed as male domains, with women often discouraged or actively prevented from participating in governance, economic management, or community leadership (Sen, 2021). Even when women are elected to positions like sarpanches, they frequently face resistance from community elders, male relatives, and local power groups.
2. **Limited Access to Education:** Low levels of female literacy and educational attainment in rural areas continue to be a significant barrier to women's leadership. According to the Census of India (2011), the rural female literacy rate is 59.3%, compared to 78.8% for rural males. Early marriage, domestic responsibilities, gender-biased curricula, and inadequate schooling facilities contribute to high dropout rates among rural girls. Without foundational education and leadership training, rural women struggle to participate meaningfully in public affairs or economic ventures (Mitra, 2020).
3. **Economic Dependency:** Financial insecurity and economic dependency on male family members inhibit women's leadership potential. Most rural women lack independent income sources and control over household finances. Moreover, land and property ownership remains extremely skewed—women own only about 13% of agricultural land in India (FAO, 2019). Without ownership of productive assets like land, livestock, or enterprise capital, women are excluded from critical decision-making in both family and community economic matters (Nanda, 2018).
4. **Lack of training and development:** Even when women are appointed or elected to leadership positions, they often lack access to structured leadership training, mentorship, and skill development opportunities. Many government schemes focus on basic literacy or livelihood skills, without equipping women with negotiation skills, legal literacy, digital literacy, or public speaking abilities necessary for governance and enterprise leadership (Jha & Jhingran, 2020). This skills gap results in underperformance and low confidence among rural women leaders.
5. **Lack of Mentorship:** Due to overburden of family responsibilities women's take break from their careers. They lack proper guidance and are not able to boost their inner qualities.
6. **Lack of Informal networks:** Lack of communication leads to a lack of coordination in the workplace.
7. **Limited physical mobility and concerns about safety** pose significant obstacles for rural women who aspire to leadership roles. Social norms often restrict women's travel beyond their villages, making it difficult to attend meetings, trainings, or markets. Fear of harassment, violence, and social backlash further deters women from participating in public activities (Sen, 2021). This restriction limits networking opportunities and leadership exposure, which are essential for effective community engagement.

Way Forward

As India charts its course toward developed-nation status by 2047, unlocking the leadership potential of rural women will be essential for fostering inclusive, equitable, and sustainable national progress. Overcoming the complex and interconnected challenges confronting rural women demands a concerted approach—combining policy reforms, institutional restructuring, targeted capacity-building programs, and transformative shifts in social attitudes at both grassroots and systemic levels. The following strategic directions propose a holistic roadmap to enhance rural women's leadership in the years ahead-

➤ Legal and Policy Interventions

- **Increase Political Reservations:** Raise the reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies from 33% to 50%, ensuring not only greater representation but also paving the way for their leadership at state and national political platforms.
- **Secure Land and Property Rights:** Enforce gender-just land reforms to guarantee women's legal ownership and inheritance rights over land, property, and productive assets, strengthening their economic and decision-making authority.
- **Adopt Gender-Responsive Budgeting:** Mandate dedicated budgetary provisions for leadership development initiatives targeting rural women in governance, agriculture, healthcare, and the digital economy.

➤ Education and Skill Development

- **Strengthen Rural Girls' Education:** Substantially invest in education infrastructure for girls, particularly at secondary and higher levels, promoting retention through scholarships, residential facilities, and access to digital learning.
- **Set Up Rural Women's Leadership Academies:** Establish leadership training centers at district and state levels, offering courses in public administration, legal literacy, digital tools, financial management, and advocacy skills for elected women representatives, SHG members, and grassroots activists.
- **Integrate Leadership Training into Existing Programs:** Incorporate leadership, governance, and civic education modules within the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and other women's development schemes to build leadership readiness from the grassroots.

➤ Economic and Entrepreneurial Empowerment

- **Expand Women-Led SHGs and Cooperatives:** Scale up financial, technical, and marketing support for women's self-help groups and cooperatives in sectors like agriculture, food processing, handicrafts, eco-tourism, and services.
- **Improve Access to Finance and Markets:** Broaden rural women's access to institutional credit, microfinance, government subsidies, and exclusive women-focused rural marketplaces and digital commerce platforms.
- **Promote Digital and Home-Based Entrepreneurship:** Encourage women's active participation in online enterprises, e-commerce, digital payments, and virtual education services through targeted digital literacy programs and affordable smartphone access.

➤ Health, Safety, and Well-Being

- **Strengthen Rural Healthcare Systems:** Enhance healthcare infrastructure, focusing on maternal and child health services, nutrition programs, insurance coverage, and leadership roles for ASHAs and frontline health workers.
- **Ensure Safe Mobility and Public Spaces:** Develop gender-sensitive transport services, mobile health units, and multipurpose community centers to improve women's mobility and participation in leadership activities.
- **Implement Work-Life Balance Measures:** Design flexible work hours, on-site childcare, maternity benefits, and social security schemes for rural women leaders and entrepreneurs to support their professional and personal responsibilities.

➤ Technological and Digital Inclusion

- **Close the Digital Gender Gap:** Guarantee affordable internet services, mobile devices, and digital skills training to rural women, ensuring their meaningful participation in digital governance, enterprise, and learning.
- **Strengthen E-Governance Literacy:** Train women leaders to actively use e-governance platforms, grievance redressal mechanisms, and digital financial tools, empowering them to be proactive agents in local administration.
- **Promote Women-Driven Agri-Tech Innovations:** Encourage women's leadership in technology-enabled agriculture through AI, climate-resilient farming, mobile advisory services, and digital market access.

➤ Institutional Reforms and Gender-Inclusive Governance

- **Eliminate Proxy Leadership:** Establish accountability protocols within Panchayats and PRIs to dismantle proxy leadership practices and uphold the independent authority of elected women leaders.
- **Institutionalize Gender-Inclusive Decision-Making:** Mandate the inclusion of women leaders in local planning bodies, cooperative boards, and farmer producer organizations to ensure diverse and representative governance.
- **Regularly Monitor Participation and Impact:** Conduct periodic gender audits and leadership assessments at local, district, and state levels to track women's representation, leadership performance, and capacity gaps.

➤ Social and Cultural Transformation

- **Lead Gender Sensitization Campaigns:** Organize community-driven awareness programs involving men, elders, religious leaders, and youth to challenge patriarchal norms and normalize women's leadership roles.
- **Highlight Rural Women Role Models:** Widely share success stories of women sarpanches, social entrepreneurs, educators, and health advocates through local media, state platforms, and community events to inspire collective change.
- **Promote Intergenerational Mentorship:** Create mentorship networks connecting experienced women leaders with young aspiring girls, nurturing future generations of confident and capable rural women leaders.

➤ Vision for 2047

By the year 2047, with sustained policy commitment and grassroots mobilization, India can realize a future where:

- Rural women hold influential leadership positions across politics, economic enterprises, healthcare, education, environmental sustainability, and digital innovation.
- Proxy leadership is abolished, replaced by independent and effective female authority in governance and public life.
- Digital platforms empower rural women as entrepreneurs, public service providers, educators, and agri-tech innovators.
- Legal and policy frameworks uphold women's equal rights to land, credit, education, and public resources.
- Rural governance systems reflect gender-balanced, participatory, accountable leadership that advances inclusive development.

This transformation transcends the goal of gender equity alone; it is a national imperative crucial for building a resilient, prosperous, and socially inclusive India capable of meeting the complex challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusion

The leadership landscape for rural women in India has undergone considerable transformation over recent decades, yet it continues to be shaped by deep-seated socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. This paper has explored the diverse dimensions of rural women's leadership across key sectors such as politics, economy, agriculture, healthcare, education, environment, and digital innovation. It has also brought to light both the opportunities for progress and the persistent structural challenges that influence women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles at various levels.

Historically marginalized by patriarchal customs, unequal property rights, and limited access to education and healthcare services, rural women's leadership capacities remained stifled for generations. However, pivotal reforms like the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments** and initiatives such as the **National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)** and **National Health Mission (NHM)** have gradually expanded opportunities for rural women to engage in governance, community development, and local economies. The emergence of **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**, women-led cooperatives, and digital platforms has further amplified their presence in public and economic spheres.

Yet, significant systemic constraints endure. Challenges such as **proxy leadership, low literacy rates, financial dependency, restricted mobility, digital exclusion**, and entrenched gender biases within institutions continue to curtail women's leadership potential. Additionally, inadequate leadership training, health inequalities, and a lack of access to capital restrict rural women from ascending to influential roles in politics, enterprise, and public administration.

As India sets its sights on achieving **developed nation status by 2047**, it is crucial that rural women's leadership advances from nominal representation to active, substantive participation. Their leadership is not solely a gender rights issue but a strategic prerequisite for achieving inclusive, sustainable, and equitable development outcomes. Considering that a substantial proportion of India's population resides in rural areas, empowering women to lead transformative initiatives in agriculture, health, education, environmental conservation, and digital governance is indispensable.

To this end, the paper proposes a **comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategy** aimed at bolstering rural women's leadership capacities by 2047. Recommended measures include expanding political reservations to 50%, securing land and property rights for women, enhancing girls' education infrastructure, promoting women-led cooperatives, bridging the digital divide, and embedding gender-responsive reforms in governance structures. Equally essential are social and cultural interventions such as **gender sensitization campaigns, leadership mentorship networks**, and the public recognition of rural women's achievements to challenge patriarchal norms and foster new generations of women leaders.

The envisioned future for 2047 is one where **rural governance structures are gender-balanced, participatory, and accountable**, with women not only active in Panchayats and cooperatives but also occupying leadership positions in state assemblies, Parliament, and national policy-making forums. It imagines rural women leading innovations in **agri-tech, healthcare delivery, climate resilience, digital enterprise, and local governance**, thereby contributing decisively to India's inclusive growth trajectory.

Realizing this vision will require **coordinated, collaborative efforts** from government institutions, civil society, academia, private sector stakeholders, and rural communities themselves. Persistent policy commitment, sustained financial investments, capacity-building initiatives, and transformative shifts in societal attitudes will be critical in dismantling the barriers that hinder women's leadership in rural India.

In conclusion, empowering rural women and elevating them to leadership roles by 2047 is not only a matter of social justice but also a national development imperative. Only by fully unleashing the leadership potential of its rural women can India genuinely aspire to become a **developed, inclusive, and socially progressive nation**, prepared to meet the complex demands of the mid-21st century.

References

1. Agarwal, B. (2018). Gender Challenges: Property, Family, and the State. Oxford University Press.
2. Baviskar, A. (2019). Chipko Movement and the Environmental History of India. South Asia Press.
3. Bose, P. (2020). "Women and Sustainable Agriculture: The Role of Rural Women in Climate Change Adaptation." Journal of Agricultural Development, 45(2), 67-84.
4. Chaudhary, M. (2021). "Women's Political Participation and Panchayati Raj in India: Current Challenges and Future Prospects." Journal of Rural Studies, 82, 35-42.
5. Das, M. B. (2019). The Rising Importance of Women in India's Rural Healthcare System. World Bank.
6. FAO. (2019). The Role of Women in Agriculture. FAO Report.

7. Jha, P., & Jhingran, D. (2020). Political Empowerment of Women in Rural India. *South Asian Journal of Gender Studies*.
8. Kabeer, N. (2020). *Gender, Livelihoods, and Inequalities: Women Workers in India's Informal Economy*. Zed Books.
9. Kumar, R., & Singh, V. (2021). "Women's Agricultural Cooperatives in India: Drivers of Rural Development." *Indian Journal of Agrarian Studies*, 27(1), 12-29.
10. Mehrotra, A. (2020). "Digital Inclusion and the Future of Women in Rural India." *International Journal of Rural Development*, 5(3), 112-130.
11. Mitra, S. (2020). "Education and Empowerment of Rural Women in India: A Policy Perspective." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(4), 520-535.
12. Nanda, P. (2018). *Women's Economic Empowerment in India's Rural Economy: Policies and Challenges*. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).
13. Sen, A. (2021). "Patriarchy, Gender, and Rural Women's Leadership in India: Obstacles and Pathways." *Development in Practice*, 31(8), 1012-1028.
14. Sharma, S. (2020). "Agricultural Empowerment: The Role of Women Farmers in Rural India." *Journal of Agriculture and Development*, 45(2), 56-72.
15. Singh, K., & Patel, N. (2022). "Digital Transformation and Women's Leadership in Rural India." *Journal of Technological Studies*, 18(3), 67-79.
16. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2001092>
17. <https://www.india.gov.in/website-viksiti-bharat-sankalp>
18. <https://innovateindia.mygov.in/viksiti-bharat2047>
19. Chaudhary, M. (2021). "Women's Political Participation and Panchayati Raj in India: Current Challenges and Future Prospects." *Journal of Rural Studies*, 82, 35-42.
20. Das, M. B. (2019). *The Rising Importance of Women in India's Rural Healthcare System*. World Bank.
21. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2019). *The Role of Women in Agriculture*. FAO Report.
22. Kabeer, N. (2020). *Gender, Livelihoods, and Inequalities: Women Workers in India's Informal Economy*. Zed Books.
23. Mehrotra, A. (2020). "Digital Inclusion and the Future of Women in Rural India." *International Journal of Rural Development*, 5(3), 112-130.
24. Mitra, S. (2020). "Education and Empowerment of Rural Women in India: A Policy Perspective." *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(4), 520-535.
25. Nanda, P. (2018). *Women's Economic Empowerment in India's Rural Economy: Policies and Challenges*. International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).
26. Nandi, R. (2021). "Women's Leadership in Sustainable Agriculture: Evidence from India." *Sustainable Agriculture Reviews*, 47, 201-217.
27. 10. Sen, A. (2021). "Patriarchy, Gender, and Rural Women's Leadership in India: Obstacles and Pathways." *Development in Practice*, 31(8), 1012-1028.
28. 11. Sharma, S. (2020). "Agricultural Empowerment: The Role of Women Farmers in Rural India." *Journal of Agriculture and Development*, 45(2), 56-72. Sujaya, C. P. (2017). *Women and Panchayati Raj in India: Empowerment, Participation and Leadership*. South Asia Books.
29. UN Women. (2021). *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. UN Women Report.
30. 15. Yadav, S. K. (2022). "Women's Cooperatives and Agricultural Leadership in India: A Comparative Study." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(1), 76-89.

