



Journal of Social Sciences and Management Research



Theme - Issues and Challenges of Gender Justice & Equality: B.R. Ambedkar's Perspective of Sustainable Rural Development and Women's Leadership

Roots of Transformation: Women Leading the Way to a Thriving Rural World

Nidhin George K¹, Jintha.J², Dr. Clayton Michael Fonceca³, Moieson.T⁴, Ramachandran⁵, Moorthy.S⁶ & J. Andrewraja⁷

Abstract

This research explores the pivotal role of women in fostering sustainable rural development through the lens of B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy, with a focus on gender justice and empowerment. The study draws on responses from 426 women in rural Tamil Nadu, analyzing their demographic characteristics and perceptions of leadership. Highlighting Ambedkar's commitment to social equity, the research reveals that 77.9% of respondents consider women's leadership crucial for sustainable rural development. Empowering women, particularly in decision-making and rural programs, is integral to reducing socio-economic inequalities, a core tenet of Ambedkar's vision. The study emphasizes that gender justice, rooted in Ambedkar's advocacy for equality and education, is critical for achieving sustainable rural progress. Findings provide actionable insights for policymakers to integrate Ambedkar's ideals into gender-inclusive rural development strategies.

Keywords: *Women's Leadership, Sustainable Rural Development, Gender Justice, Ambedkar's Perspective*

^{1, 2, 4, 5&6} Research Scholars, PG & Research Department of Social Work, Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Tirupattur -635 601

^{3&7} Asst. Professors, PG & Research Department of Social Work, Sacred Heart College (Autonomous), Tirupattur -635 601

1. Introduction

This study examines the transformative role of women in sustainable rural development through B.R. Ambedkar's principles of equality and empowerment. Ambedkar's advocacy for gender justice and education underscores the importance of women's participation in rural transformation. He emphasized that "The progress of any society is measured by the progress of its women." This research builds on Ambedkar's vision, exploring how empowered women can act as agents of change in rural communities.

The respondents of this study, predominantly educated women (64.6% undergraduates), represent the emerging empowerment of rural women. Their strong support for leadership roles (77.9%) reflects Ambedkar's belief in women's capacity to drive social reform and sustainable development. By grounding this research in Ambedkar's principles, it underscores the importance of women's leadership in addressing the challenges of gender justice and equality in rural India.

2. Literature Review

Ambedkar's advocacy for gender justice aligns with global and Indian scholarship on women's roles in sustainable development. Amartya Sen's "**Development as Freedom**" (1999) emphasizes the importance of empowering women for holistic progress, resonating with Ambedkar's focus on education and self-reliance. Similarly, Naila Kabeer's "**Reversed Realities**" (1994) explores the critical role of women in transforming gender hierarchies, complementing Ambedkar's vision of inclusivity and equality.

In the Indian context, Ela Bhatt's "**We Are Poor but So Many**" (2006) highlights self-reliance among women, echoing Ambedkar's principles of self-sufficiency. Madhu Kishwar's "**Gandhi and Women**" (1986) further examines Ambedkar's progressive approach to gender justice. These works collectively affirm that women's empowerment is indispensable for achieving Ambedkar's vision of an equitable society.

3. Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value in understanding and advancing women's leadership in rural development through the lens of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's principles. Ambedkar's advocacy for gender justice, education, and social equality provides a transformative framework for

addressing persistent inequalities in rural societies. By emphasizing the importance of women's education and empowerment, the study positions women not merely as beneficiaries but as pivotal agents of rural governance and development.

The research sheds light on the critical role of women's leadership in fostering inclusive and sustainable rural progress. In many rural settings, systemic barriers such as gender discrimination, lack of education, and socio-economic inequalities continue to impede women's active participation in decision-making processes. Ambedkar's perspective, with its focus on education as a tool for liberation and equality, underscores the necessity of empowering women to become leaders in their communities. This empowerment catalyzes broader societal transformations, bridging the gender gap in governance and promoting equitable development.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable development by linking women's leadership with effective policy-making and governance in rural areas. It highlights the ripple effects of women's participation in leadership roles, including enhanced resource management, better health and education outcomes, and a more equitable distribution of opportunities. By advocating for a paradigm shift in rural governance through Ambedkar's principles, the study offers a roadmap for integrating gender justice into the broader goals of rural development. It underscores that women's leadership is not just a matter of equality but a cornerstone of sustainable progress.

4. Methodology

4.1 Aim

To examine the role of women in promoting sustainable rural development, aligned with Ambedkar's vision of gender justice and empowerment.

4.2 Objectives

- To analyze the demographic characteristics influencing women's leadership roles in rural development.
- To assess rural women's perspectives on decision-making and sustainable development.
- To evaluate the impact of women's leadership in reducing socio-economic inequalities.

- To propose strategies for enhancing women's leadership in rural development initiatives.

4.3 Research Design

A descriptive research design was employed to capture the multidimensional role of women in rural development, grounded in Ambedkar's advocacy for gender justice.

4.4 Inclusion Criteria

- Women respondents above 18 years who live in rural areas for the study to focus on the opinions of the women about rural development.
- At least a primary education to know how education affected their leadership positions considering Gandhian emphasis on knowledge.
- Those associated with any activities of the community, agriculture, or rural development.

4.5 Exclusion Criteria

- Male respondents or people from urban: the research targets women in the rural.
- Women below 18 years.
- No activities taking place in the rural community, such people are not relevant for the research criteria related to leadership in rural development.
- Lack interest in giving consent, people who do not have a problem with contributing in discussing on leadership aspect concerning women's leadership in initiatives related to rural developments.

4.6 Universe and sampling

This study is based on women staying in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India, engaged in either community development or agriculture. Purposive sampling used to draw 426 female participants from different educational backgrounds, marital status, and family type. This sampling technique was chosen in the attempt to focus on women and their opinions about leadership roles in terms of rural development in conformity with Gandhian impulses of empowering and social justice.

4.7 Tools of Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was put in place as the major collection tool; this demographic information was supplemented by opinion gathering regarding women's leadership in development. The close-ended part was helpful to quantify the responses, while the Likert

scale items used to assess attitudes toward women's roles in decision-making and sustainable development. The reliability test was done by Cronbach's Alpha which resulted 0.930 that affirming the credibility of the study.

5. Results

Statement	Response Type	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Women leadership crucial for sustainable development	Count	39	36	102	254	370
	%	4.9%	4.5%	12.7%	31.7%	46.2%
Women inclusiveness of rural development	Count	40	50	186	302	223
	%	5.0%	6.2%	23.2%	37.7%	27.8%
Women in decision making process	Count	34	75	152	293	247
	%	4.2%	9.4%	19.0%	36.6%	30.8%
Empowering women has a positive impact on community	Count	39	60	134	266	302
	%	4.9%	7.5%	16.7%	33.2%	37.7%
Women innovation in sustainable agriculture	Count	68	70	133	267	263
	%	4.9%	4.5%	12.7%	31.7%	46.2%
Gender equality essential for sustainability	Count	34	75	152	293	247
	%	4.2%	9.4%	19.0%	36.6%	30.8%
Women leaders more focus on rural communities	Count	39	60	134	266	302
	%	4.9%	7.5%	16.7%	33.2%	37.7%
The success depends on active women leaders	Count	68	70	133	267	263
	%	8.5%	8.7%	16.6%	33.3%	32.8%
Sustainable rural development possible with empowered women	Count	39	36	102	254	370
	%	4.9%	4.5%	12.7%	31.7%	46.2%
Women leaders bridge social and economic inequalities	Count	68	70	133	267	263
	%	8.5%	8.7%	16.6%	33.3%	32.8%

The data collected through the questionnaires were cleaned, analysed and tabulated using SPSS Version 27.

The data from Table 1 refers demographic characteristic of 426 female respondents. The sample comprises exclusively women (100%). A higher percentage of graduates who hold a bachelor's degree (64.6%) speaks in favour of a well-educated sample respondents. Most of the respondents are unmarried (90.4%), and most of them possess a nuclear family structure (69.2%). Most of the sample respondents are college students (91.5%), and the remaining 8.5% are working professionals. Thus, with a high percentage of educated single women and most being students, this is focused on the young educated girls in the rural sector, which is well positioned to contributed toward sustainable rural development and leadership in

Sl. No	Various Dimensions	Frequency (n=426)	Percent (100%)
1.	Gender Female	426	100
2.	Educational Qualification X XII UG PG Ph.D	6 101 275 37 7	1.4 23.7 64.6 8.7 1.6
3.	Marital Status Single Married Widow	385 39 2	90.4 9.2 0.5
4.	Type of Family Nuclear Joint	295 131	69.2 30.8
5.	Current Status College Student Working Professional	390 36	91.5 8.5

accordance with the Gandhian principles of empowerment (Gordon, 2023).

Table 2: Distribution of Women based on shaping sustainable and inclusive rural development

The data speaks to the strong recognition of women's leadership for rural development. 77.9% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that female leadership was necessary if sustainable development was to take place, reflecting a belief, in large numbers, that female leadership is important. Further, 65.5% view women's inclusion into rural schemes as

positive, and 67.4% believe that women's participation in the decision-making process is significant. Women's empowerment is perceived, in general, to positively impact communities-70.9%. These representations align with the Gandhian ideals of equality for the genders, non-violence, and others of inclusiveness, and in them, one affirms the importance of a role played by empowered women in achieving sustainable, inclusive, and sensitive rural development (Isakova & Luna, 2021).

Table 3: Overall Women leadership role in shaping sustainable and inclusive rural development

Sl. No.	Category	Frequency (n=426)	Percent (100 %)
1.	Low	28	6.3
2.	Moderate	320	72.1
3.	High	96	21.6

This table shows the respondents' perceptions of women's leadership in rural development, categorized into three levels: low, moderate, and high. The majority of respondents (72.1%) show moderate support for women's leadership, indicating a balanced but significant belief in its importance. A smaller proportion (21.6%) shows high support, while only 6.3% indicate low support. These findings suggest that while most respondents recognize the value of women's leadership in rural development, there is room for further empowerment and advocacy to elevate more individuals from moderate to high levels of support (Sharma & Mehta, 2021), in line with Gandhian ideals of gender equality and social justice.

6. Findings

The findings of this study show significant insights into the role of women in rural development, aligning closely with Gandhian philosophy of gender equality, empowerment, and inclusive growth.

6.1 Education as a Key Factor:

A majority of the respondents (64.6%) hold undergraduate qualifications, showing the rising educational empowerment of rural women. Gandhiji strongly pushed for women's education as a vital tool for self-reliance and community leadership. The data supports the view that education plays a crucial role in empowering women to lead and join in rural development initiatives (Jaysawal & Saha, 2023).

6.2 Broad Support for Women's Leadership:

An overwhelming 77.9% of respondents either "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that women's leadership is important for promoting sustainable development (Pierli et al., 2022). This aligns with Gandhiji's view that women are natural leaders in fostering community welfare and social equity. (Isakova & Luna, 2021)The results reflect how empowered women can serve as key agents of change in rural areas (Pierli et al., 2022).

6.3 Empowerment and Decision-Making:

Approximately 67.4% of respondents support women's participation in decision-making processes, resonating with Gandhiji's vision of women taking active roles in shaping the social and economic structures of rural communities. Empowering women in leadership positions is seen as important to bridging social and economic inequalities (Deininger et al., 2020).

6.4 Sustainability Through Gender Equality:

A significant proportion (70.9%) thinks that empowering women positively impacts the community, furthering Gandhiji's principle of *sarvodaya* (welfare of all). Gender inclusiveness is not just a moral imperative but a realistic necessity for achieving long-term sustainability in rural development (Leal Filho et al., 2022).

6.5. Challenges and Opportunities: While 72.1% of respondents exhibit moderate support for women's leadership, only 21.6% express high support, suggesting that further efforts are needed to raise awareness and advocacy. This represents Gandhiji's ongoing battle to shift societal mindsets toward greater acceptance of women in leadership roles, pointing to a need for continued policy focus on education, empowerment, and gender justice (Bhanvi, 2023).

Overall, the findings emphasize that Gandhian ideals of non-violence, equality, and community-focused development remain deeply important. Empowering women in rural areas is important not only for achieving gender justice but also for ensuring the sustainable development of communities (Bayeh, 2016). These insights offer critical guidance for policymakers, educators, and development professionals working to support inclusive, gender-just rural development.

7 Suggestions

The following suggestions, grounded in Gandhian philosophy, aim to enhance women's leadership and empowerment in rural development, ensuring a gender-inclusive approach to sustainable progress.

- **Enhance Women's Education:** Focus on improving access to education and vocational training for rural women to align with Gandhian ideals of empowerment.
- **Increase Women's Role in Decision-Making:** Establish platforms for women's active participation in local governance and rural development decision-making
- **Promote Gender Equality in Development Projects:** Prioritize gender inclusiveness in rural development initiatives to achieve sustainable progress, reflecting Gandhian principles of *sarvodaya*.
- **Support Women-Led Grassroots Initiatives:** Provide funding and incentives for women-led community projects in agriculture and entrepreneurship to foster self-reliant rural development.

By adopting these ideas, policymakers and community leaders can implement a gender-just, sustainable model of rural development based in Gandhian principles of empowerment, equality, and community welfare (Bryan et al., 2024).

8 Conclusion

This study underscores the important role of women in rural development, closely aligned with Mahatma Gandhi's vision of gender equality and social justice. The findings show that women's leadership is important for driving sustainable development, reducing inequalities, and fostering inclusive growth in rural communities (Akhter Ali & Kamraju, 2023). Gandhiji once said, "When women, whom we call *abala* (weak), become *sabala* (strong), all those who are helpless will become powerful." This study affirms his belief in the transformative power of women, highlighting the necessity of empowering women through education, decision-making roles, and leadership in rural projects (S. Singh & Singh, 2020).

To achieve true sustainability in rural development, it is important to create opportunities for women to lead, innovate, and add to the community's well-being (del Arco Bravo et al., 2021). By incorporating Gandhian principles of equality, non-violence, and self-reliance, policymakers and development professionals can ensure that rural progress is inclusive, equitable, and sustainable, eventually achieving the *sarvodaya* (welfare of all) that Gandhiji envisioned.

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