

From Margins to Mainstream: Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Rural Transformation in Telangana

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Abstract:

Telangana's rural development trajectory since statehood in 2014 has been shaped substantially by the mobilisation of women through self-help groups, Panchayati Raj institutions, and flagship welfare schemes. This paper examines the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable rural transformation in the state, situating the discussion within the broader debate on gender and development in post-bifurcation Telangana. Drawing on secondary data from the Census of India, the National Family Health Survey, and state government reports, the paper documents shifts in women's literacy, workforce participation, asset ownership, and political representation, and examines how these shifts intersect with rural livelihoods, natural resource management, and household well-being. The analysis shows that while institutional channels such as Stree Nidhi and the 33 per cent reservation for women in local bodies have expanded women's visibility in public life, empowerment remains uneven across caste, class, and regional lines, and has not automatically translated into ecological or economic sustainability at the village level. The paper argues that sustainable rural transformation in Telangana requires empowerment strategies that move beyond participation and credit access toward substantive control over productive resources, land, and decision-making. It concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening the empowerment-sustainability linkage in the state's rural development framework.

Keywords: women's empowerment; sustainable rural transformation; Telangana; self-help groups; Panchayati Raj institutions; gender and development

1. Introduction

The formation of Telangana as India's twenty-ninth state on 2 June 2014 opened a distinct chapter in the region's development history, one in which rural women were positioned, both rhetorically and institutionally, as central agents of change. The new state inherited a rural economy scarred by decades of drought, farmer distress, and comparative neglect under the composite Andhra Pradesh administration, and its early policy architecture explicitly linked rural revival to the strengthening of women's collectives, land and water access, and local self-governance (Government of Telangana, 2016). The Telangana movement itself had drawn substantial energy from women's participation at the grassroots, and this history has continued to inform the symbolic weight attached to women's mobilisation in the state's post-bifurcation development narrative. Flagship interventions such as Mission Kakatiya for tank rehabilitation, Mission Bhagiratha for piped drinking water, and the Rythu Bandhu investment support

scheme for farmers were accompanied by a parallel, less publicised expansion of the state's self-help group (SHG) network and its associated credit institution, Stree Nidhi Credit Cooperative Federation, which by 2018 had extended cumulative credit exceeding ₹9,000 crore to rural women's collectives (Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty [SERP], 2018).

This paper asks a question that sits at the intersection of gender studies and rural development scholarship: to what extent has women's empowerment in Telangana translated into sustainable rural transformation, understood as development that improves livelihoods and well-being without depleting the natural resource base or reproducing structural inequality? The question is timely for two reasons. First, Telangana's rural development model, built substantially around women's SHGs and community institutions, has attracted attention as a possible template for other states, and an evaluation of its empowerment outcomes carries implications beyond the state's borders. Second, five years after bifurcation is long enough to move past inaugural claims and examine what the data actually show about literacy, workforce participation, land ownership, and political representation among rural women.

The empowerment of women is frequently treated in policy discourse as a self-evidently positive and largely economic project, measured through indicators such as SHG membership, credit disbursement, or attendance at gram sabha meetings (World Bank, 2017). This paper takes a broader view, following feminist development scholarship that distinguishes between women's visible participation in development programmes and their substantive control over resources, labour, and decision-making (Kabeer, 1999; Batliwala, 1994). Participation without control, this literature argues, risks becoming what Cornwall (2003) termed an "invited space" that absorbs women's labour and time without redistributing power. Applying this distinction to Telangana is instructive: the state has achieved a striking scale of women's institutional participation through its 4.86 lakh SHGs covering an estimated 59 lakh rural women (SERP, 2018), yet questions remain about whether this participation has altered underlying patterns of land ownership, agricultural decision-making, and access to irrigation that determine the sustainability of rural livelihoods.

The paper is organised as follows. Section two develops the conceptual framework linking women's empowerment to sustainable rural transformation. Section three outlines the objectives and methodology. Section four presents the socio-economic status of rural women in Telangana using Census and NFHS-4 data. Section five examines the institutional architecture of SHGs and Panchayati Raj institutions (PRIs) as empowerment channels. Section six analyses the empowerment-sustainability linkage directly, drawing on indicators of natural resource management and household welfare. Section seven discusses persistent constraints, and section eight offers policy recommendations before the paper concludes.

2. Conceptual Framework

Women's empowerment is conceptualised here, following Kabeer (1999), as a process of change in which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire that ability. Kabeer identifies three interrelated dimensions: resources (access to and future claims on material, human, and social resources), agency (the capacity to define one's goals and act upon them), and achievements (the outcomes of exercised agency). This tripartite framework is useful for the Telangana case because it separates the resource inputs that state programmes provide, such as credit and group membership, from the agency and achievement outcomes that are harder to engineer through policy alone.

Sustainable rural transformation, meanwhile, draws on the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainability as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future

generations to meet their own (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), applied specifically to the rural context. In agrarian states such as Telangana, sustainable rural transformation requires simultaneous progress on three fronts: livelihood diversification and income security; natural resource conservation, particularly of groundwater and soil, given the state's history of over-extraction for paddy and cash-crop cultivation; and equitable institutional governance at the village level (Reddy & Reddy, 2007).

The empowerment-sustainability linkage is not automatic. A substantial body of research on women and natural resource management argues that women, as primary managers of household water, fuel, and fodder in most Indian villages, possess situated knowledge that can improve resource stewardship when they hold decision-making authority (Agarwal, 2010). At the same time, empowerment interventions that increase women's labour burden without increasing their control over assets, such as land titled in a husband's name despite a wife's SHG-financed investment in it, can undermine rather than support sustainable outcomes (Agarwal, 1994; Rao, 2017). This paper therefore treats the empowerment-sustainability relationship as an empirical question rather than an assumption, examining Telangana's data for evidence of where the two reinforce one another and where they diverge.

A further conceptual distinction, drawn from Cornwall and Rivas (2015), separates "empowerment as instrument" from "empowerment as transformation." The instrumental view treats women's mobilisation primarily as a means to programme efficiency, such as improved loan repayment rates or better targeting of welfare transfers, while the transformative view treats empowerment as an end in itself, requiring change in gender relations, social norms, and institutional structures. Telangana's rural development model, this paper argues, has so far leaned toward the instrumental register, and assessing the balance between the two views forms a recurring theme in the analysis that follows.

3. Objectives and Methodology

This paper has three specific objectives: first, to document the current socio-economic status of rural women in Telangana across literacy, workforce participation, asset ownership, and political representation; second, to examine the institutional architecture, primarily self-help groups and Panchayati Raj institutions, through which women's empowerment is pursued in the state; and third, to assess the extent to which these empowerment channels have contributed to sustainable rural transformation, understood in terms of livelihood security, natural resource management, and equitable local governance. The paper adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology based entirely on secondary data. Quantitative indicators are drawn from the Census of India (2011), the fourth round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4, 2015-16) for Telangana, annual reports of the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), the Telangana State Panchayat Raj and Rural Development Department, and the Ministry of Rural Development's MGNREGA management information system. These are supplemented by peer-reviewed literature on gender, development, and natural resource management in South Asia. Data are triangulated across sources where possible and presented in three summary tables covering demographic and workforce indicators, SHG and credit outreach, and political representation in local bodies. The analysis is confined to Telangana's rural areas and does not extend to urban women's empowerment, which raises a distinct set of questions beyond this paper's scope.

4. Women's Socio-Economic Status in Telangana

Telangana's rural female population, as recorded in the 2011 Census, stood at approximately 1.63 crore, comprising just under half of the state's total rural population (Census of India, 2011). Table 1 summarises key demographic and workforce indicators for rural women in the state, drawing on Census 2011 and NFHS-4 (2015-16) data.

Table 1. Selected Socio-Economic Indicators for Rural Women in Telangana

Indicator	Value	Source
Rural female population (2011)	~1.63 crore	Census of India, 2011
Rural female literacy rate	49.4%	Census of India, 2011
Rural male literacy rate	71.2%	Census of India, 2011
Rural female work participation rate	47.4%	Census of India, 2011
All-India rural female work participation rate	30.0%	Census of India, 2011
Women with sole/joint ownership of agricultural land	21.3%	NFHS-4, 2015-16
Rural women (15-49) classified as anaemic	54.3%	NFHS-4, 2015-16
Rural total fertility rate	1.9	NFHS-4, 2015-16

Sources: Census of India (2011); International Institute for Population Sciences & ICF (2017).

The female literacy rate in rural Telangana was recorded at 49.4 per cent in the 2011 Census, against a rural male literacy rate of 71.2 per cent, a gap of nearly 22 percentage points that reflects the historically low priority given to girls' education in the erstwhile Telangana region under composite Andhra Pradesh (Census of India, 2011). Subsequent state interventions, including the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya residential schools for girls from marginalised communities and the expansion of Telangana Residential Educational Institutions, have narrowed this gap for younger cohorts, though Census and NFHS data available at the time of writing do not yet capture the full effect of these measures on adult literacy (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2017).

Female work participation in rural Telangana was recorded at 47.4 per cent in the 2011 Census, higher than the all-India rural female work participation rate of 30.0 per cent, a pattern consistent with the historically higher visibility of women's agricultural labour in the Telangana region compared to many other parts of the country (Census of India, 2011). However, the quality of this participation deserves scrutiny: an overwhelming majority of working rural women in Telangana are classified as agricultural labourers or marginal workers rather than cultivators in their own right, meaning that high work participation coexists with limited ownership of the land being worked (Reddy & Reddy, 2007; Kalyani, 2017). NFHS-4 data show that only 21.3 per cent of women in Telangana who had ever owned agricultural land held that land solely or jointly in their own name, and even where joint ownership was recorded,

decision-making authority over cropping and sale of produce was reported by women in only a minority of cases (IIPS & ICF, 2017).

Health and nutrition indicators reveal further gaps that bear on the sustainability of rural livelihoods. NFHS-4 recorded that 54.3 per cent of rural women aged 15-49 in Telangana were anaemic, and the state's rural total fertility rate stood at 1.9, below replacement level, reflecting a demographic transition that has occurred alongside, rather than clearly because of, improvements in women's autonomy (IIPS & ICF, 2017). Anaemia among agricultural women workers, in particular, has direct implications for productivity and for the physical burden of unpaid resource-collection labour that rural sustainability strategies often assume women will continue to perform (Agarwal, 2010).

Taken together, these indicators depict a rural female population in Telangana that is highly visible in the workforce but constrained in ownership, education, and health, a combination that the following sections argue shapes the character of the state's empowerment interventions and their relationship to sustainable transformation.

5. Institutional Mechanisms: Self-Help Groups and Panchayati Raj Institutions

Two institutional channels dominate the architecture of women's empowerment in rural Telangana: the self-help group movement, inherited and substantially expanded from the undivided Andhra Pradesh-era Indira Kranthi Patham programme, and the reserved seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions strengthened under the Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018.

The Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), Telangana's nodal agency for rural livelihoods, reported that by March 2018 the state had 4.86 lakh SHGs organised under village organisations and mandal samakhya, covering approximately 59 lakh rural women (SERP, 2018). Table 2 presents key indicators of this institutional outreach alongside women's representation in local governance.

Table 2. Self-Help Group Outreach and Women's Political Representation in Telangana

Indicator	Value	Source
Number of SHGs (as of March 2018)	4.86 lakh	SERP, 2018
Rural women covered under SHGs	~59 lakh	SERP, 2018
Cumulative Stree Nidhi credit disbursed (by 2018)	₹9,000+ crore	SERP, 2018
SHG loan repayment rate	>95%	SERP, 2018
Statutory reservation for women in PRIs	33%	Telangana Panchayat Raj Act, 2018
Actual women's representation in gram panchayats (2019)	~47%	Telangana State Election Commission, 2019
SHG members reporting increased public-speaking confidence	68%	Reddy & Reddy, 2007

Indicator	Value	Source
SHG members reporting control over loan-fund decisions	34%	Reddy & Reddy, 2007

Sources: Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (2018); Telangana State Election Commission (2019); Reddy & Reddy (2007).

The scale of this mobilisation is, by most comparative standards, considerable. Stree Nidhi, the state-promoted cooperative credit institution for SHG women launched in 2011 and substantially scaled up after 2014, had disbursed cumulative loans exceeding ₹9,000 crore by 2018, with repayment rates consistently above 95 per cent, a figure frequently cited by the state government as evidence of women's creditworthiness and financial discipline (SERP, 2018). SHG credit has financed a mix of consumption smoothing, small livestock and dairy investment, and, to a lesser extent, agricultural inputs and land leasing.

Alongside SHGs, the Telangana Panchayat Raj Act of 2018 retained the constitutionally mandated 33 per cent reservation for women in gram panchayats, mandal parishads, and zilla parishads, and in practice, actual female representation in Telangana's local bodies following the 2019 panchayat elections exceeded the statutory minimum, reaching approximately 47 per cent of elected gram panchayat seats when unreserved seats won by women are included (Telangana State Election Commission, 2019). This places Telangana among the states with the highest female representation in local government in India.

Yet the relationship between formal representation and substantive authority remains contested in the literature on women's political participation in PRIs. Studies of women sarpanches in Telangana and neighbouring states document a persistent pattern in which male relatives, often informally referred to through the phrase "sarpanch pati," continue to exercise de facto authority over decisions nominally made by elected women, particularly in matters involving land, contracts, and budget allocation (Ban & Rao, 2008; Kalyani, 2017). Training programmes conducted for newly elected women sarpanches by the state's rural development institutes have sought to address this gap, but coverage and follow-up support remain uneven across districts (Telangana Panchayat Raj and Rural Development Department, 2019).

Similarly, while SHG membership has expanded women's mobility, financial literacy, and collective bargaining power in interactions with banks and local officials, evaluations caution against equating high membership figures with empowerment in Kabeer's fuller sense of agency and achievement. A study of SHG federations in Telangana found that while 68 per cent of members reported increased confidence in public speaking, only 34 per cent reported having sole or shared authority over decisions regarding the use of SHG loan funds within the household (Reddy & Reddy, 2007). This gap between participation and control is central to the argument developed in the next section: institutional outreach at scale does not, by itself, guarantee the redistribution of decision-making power that sustainable rural transformation requires.

6. Empowerment and Sustainable Rural Transformation: The Linkage

The preceding sections establish that Telangana has achieved considerable scale in women's institutional participation. This section turns to the paper's central question: does this participation translate into sustainable rural transformation, measured through indicators of livelihood security, natural resource management, and equitable governance?

Evidence of positive linkage is clearest in the domain of household welfare and livelihood diversification. Villages with mature SHG federations in Telangana report higher uptake of kitchen gardens, small ruminant rearing, and non-farm income activities among member households compared to non-member households, contributing to income diversification that reduces vulnerability to monsoon-dependent paddy cultivation (SERP, 2018; Kalyani, 2017). SHG-linked convergence with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has also been notable: women constituted 59.8 per cent of person-days generated under MGNREGS in Telangana in 2018-19, among the highest shares recorded nationally, and SHG members have been disproportionately represented among works related to water-harvesting structures and horticulture plantations under the scheme (Ministry of Rural Development, 2019).

Table 3 summarises indicators relevant to the empowerment-sustainability linkage, drawing on MGNREGS, SERP, and groundwater monitoring data.

Table 3. Indicators of the Empowerment-Sustainability Linkage

Indicator	Value	Source
Women's share of MGNREGS person-days (2018-19)	59.8%	Ministry of Rural Development, 2019
Mandals classified over-exploited/critical for groundwater	47	Central Ground Water Board, 2017
Non-farm income diversification among SHG households	Higher than non-member households	SERP, 2018; Kalyani, 2017
Women with formal role in groundwater/irrigation bodies	Minimal / largely absent	TSPRRD Dept., 2019
Village Water & Sanitation Committee focus	Predominantly drinking water supply	TSPRRD Dept., 2019

Sources: Ministry of Rural Development (2019); Central Ground Water Board (2017); SERP (2018); Kalyani (2017); Telangana Panchayat Raj and Rural Development (TSPRRD) Department (2019).

The picture is less encouraging with respect to natural resource management, particularly groundwater, which is central to Telangana's rural sustainability given the state's near-total dependence on borewell irrigation in several districts. Telangana had 47 mandals classified as "over-exploited" or "critical" for groundwater extraction as of the 2017 Central Ground Water Board assessment (Central Ground Water Board, 2017), and women's SHG-financed livelihood diversification into dairy and horticulture, while beneficial for income, has in several documented cases increased water demand for fodder and orchard irrigation without a corresponding institutional mechanism for women to participate in aquifer-level water governance (Rao, 2017). Village Water and Sanitation Committees, which formally include women members, have in practice been reported to function primarily around drinking water supply under Mission Bhagiratha rather than around groundwater regulation for irrigation, an arena where decision-making

remains concentrated among male landholders (Telangana Panchayat Raj and Rural Development Department, 2019).

This divergence illustrates the distinction, introduced in section two, between empowerment as instrument and empowerment as transformation. Where women's collectives have been mobilised instrumentally, for loan repayment discipline, MGNREGS worksite attendance, or welfare scheme delivery, outreach has been extensive and outcomes measurable. Where empowerment would require a transformation of underlying resource governance, particularly land titling and groundwater regulation, the state's institutional architecture has been comparatively thin, and women's SHGs, however well-organised for credit and livelihood purposes, have not generally been extended authority over these domains (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Agarwal, 2010). Sustainable rural transformation, on the definition adopted in this paper, cannot be considered secure while the resource base underpinning rural livelihoods remains governed largely outside the institutions in which women's participation has been concentrated.

It is also worth noting that the direction of causality between empowerment and sustainability indicators is not always straightforward. Higher MGNREGS participation among women, for instance, may reflect distress-driven labour supply during agricultural lean seasons as much as it reflects empowered choice, a caution raised more broadly in the literature on women's work in rural India (Reddy & Reddy, 2007). Interpreting scale indicators such as those in Tables 2 and 3 therefore requires attention to the underlying conditions generating them, not simply their magnitude.

7. Challenges and Constraints

Several structural constraints limit the extent to which Telangana's empowerment architecture can deliver sustainable rural transformation. First, land ownership patterns remain a fundamental bottleneck. Despite decades of SHG mobilisation, the proportion of agricultural land solely or jointly owned by women in Telangana remains below one-quarter (IIPS & ICF, 2017), and inheritance practices, even where legally gender-neutral under the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, continue to favour sons in practice across most rural communities in the state (Agarwal, 1994; Rao, 2017). Without land in their own names, women's ability to access formal agricultural credit, negotiate irrigation entitlements, or participate as equals in decisions over cropping patterns remains constrained regardless of their SHG membership status. Second, caste and regional disparities cut across the aggregate figures presented in this paper. Women from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households in districts such as Kumuram Bheem Asifabad and Adilabad report lower SHG penetration, lower literacy, and more limited access to Stree Nidhi credit compared to women in the relatively better-resourced districts of the erstwhile Nalgonda and Karimnagar regions (SERP, 2018; Kalyani, 2017). Aggregate state-level indicators, of the kind presented in Tables 1 through 3, therefore risk masking considerable intra-state inequality in the actual reach and quality of empowerment interventions.

Third, the "sarpanch pati" phenomenon and its variants in cooperative and SHG federation leadership indicate that formal representation thresholds, even when exceeded, do not straightforwardly convert into substantive authority. Training interventions have shown some success in building women leaders' confidence and administrative literacy, but sustained mentorship and accountability mechanisms to prevent proxy control by male relatives remain underdeveloped and unevenly funded across districts (Ban & Rao, 2008; Telangana Panchayat Raj and Rural Development Department, 2019).

Fourth, the institutional separation between livelihood-focused bodies, such as SHGs and their federations, and resource-governance bodies, such as Village Water and Sanitation Committees or informal irrigation

management groups, means that even highly organised women's collectives generally lack a formal seat at the table where decisions about groundwater extraction, tank command area management, or forest resource access are made (Central Ground Water Board, 2017; Rao, 2017). This institutional gap, rather than a lack of organisational capacity among rural women, appears to be the more binding constraint on the empowerment-sustainability linkage in Telangana.

Finally, unpaid care and domestic labour continue to fall disproportionately on rural women, including SHG leaders and elected panchayat representatives, constraining the time available for the kind of sustained engagement that substantive participation in natural resource governance would require (Agarwal, 2010; Kabeer, 1999). Time-use constraints of this kind are rarely captured in programme monitoring data, yet they recur throughout the qualitative literature on women's leadership in rural Telangana as a limiting factor on the depth, rather than the breadth, of empowerment achieved.

8. Policy Recommendations

Based on the preceding analysis, this paper offers four policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the linkage between women's empowerment and sustainable rural transformation in Telangana.

First, land titling reform should be pursued explicitly as a rural sustainability measure rather than only a gender-equity measure. Joint titling as the default for land distributed, regularised, or mortgaged under state schemes, alongside targeted support for women to register existing but unrecorded claims, would strengthen women's standing in both credit markets and resource-governance forums (Agarwal, 1994; Rao, 2017).

Second, the state should formally extend SHG federations' institutional mandate, or create linked sub-committees, to include representation in groundwater and irrigation management bodies at the mandal and command-area level, rather than confining women's collectives to livelihood and credit functions alone. Given that SHG federations already possess organisational infrastructure and trained leadership, this would be a comparatively low-cost way to close the institutional gap identified in section six (Central Ground Water Board, 2017).

Third, mentorship and post-election support for women panchayat representatives should be extended beyond initial orientation training to include ongoing accountability mechanisms, such as peer-support networks among elected women and periodic social audits of decisions taken in panchayat meetings, to reduce the scope for informal proxy control by male relatives (Ban & Rao, 2008).

Fourth, district-level monitoring of empowerment indicators should be disaggregated by caste and sub-region, not only reported at the state level, so that resource allocation for SHG expansion, Stree Nidhi credit, and panchayat capacity-building can be targeted toward districts and communities with the lowest current outreach, including Adilabad, Kumuram Bheem Asifabad, and other tribal-majority districts (SERP, 2018).

Taken together, these recommendations shift the emphasis of Telangana's empowerment strategy from expanding the scale of women's participation, an objective the state has already achieved to a considerable degree, toward deepening the substantive control that participation confers over land, water, and governance decisions that determine whether rural transformation will be sustainable in the long run.

9. Conclusion

Telangana's rural development model since statehood has placed women's collectives and political representation at its institutional core, achieving a scale of participation, through SHGs, Stree Nidhi credit,

and PRI representation, that few Indian states can match. This paper has argued, however, that participation at scale is not synonymous with the substantive empowerment that sustainable rural transformation requires. Rural women in Telangana remain visible in the workforce yet constrained in land ownership; well-organised in SHG federations yet largely absent from groundwater and irrigation governance; formally over-represented in panchayats yet, in a documented share of cases, subject to informal proxy control. The empowerment-sustainability linkage in Telangana is therefore real but partial: strongest where empowerment operates instrumentally to support programme delivery, weakest where it would require redistributing authority over land and natural resources.

Moving from margins to mainstream, to borrow the paper's title, cannot be measured solely by the number of women enrolled in SHGs or elected to panchayat seats. It requires that the resource base on which rural livelihoods depend, land, groundwater, and common property resources, comes under women's shared authority alongside men's, and that the considerable organisational capacity Telangana has built among rural women is extended formal jurisdiction over the decisions that will determine whether the state's rural transformation is, in fact, sustainable. Future research, ideally drawing on district- and village-level primary data, would usefully test whether the institutional reforms proposed here measurably alter this balance over time.

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