

Intersections of Space and Gender: Re-Examining Women's Developmental Pathways in Rural India

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Abstract: *Development of women in rural India has emerged from a complex intersection of spatial, structural and socio-cultural, forces which has shaped their access to education, skill development, mobility and the economic opportunities. Whereas the national policies have significantly emphasized empowerment and the gender equality, their lived experiences in rural and marginalized regions have showed that continued inequalities are result of gendered spaces, patriarchal conditioning, and the uneven infrastructural development. Conceptualizing from feminist geography, the sociology of gender, and frameworks from various empowerment models such as Sen's Capability Approach, Kabeer's concept of agency, Nussbaum's human development model, and this study aims to re-examines the role of space and structure in shaping the women's developmental trajectories. This study critically reviews the existing pool of literature and tries to identifies major research gaps which includes very less attention to the spatial barriers and challenges in the rural regions, inadequate attention paid to the women's agency in the preview of cultural norms, and there is a lack of context-sensitive and participatory development models. It shows that rural women are not negotiators of space, power, and the opportunity rather they are active recipient of that. By amalgamating key insights from feminist geography and the sociological, and development studies, this research work suggests towards a multidimensional framework for understanding the way through which rural women navigate their everyday lives constraints which reshape the gendered spaces, and the way through which they exercise their agency in the pursuit of skill development and education. The review of literature underscores that there is need for the holistic, locally centered, and the participatory approaches which foreground women's needs and their voices along with their lived experiences in creating the inclusive and sustainable roadmap for the women empowerment in the rural regions in India.*

Keywords: Gendered spaces, Rural women, Empowerment frameworks, Participatory development

1. Introduction

Development of women in rural India is a result of complex interplay between spatial, structural and social dimensions that define their accessibility to resources and their opportunities, and their agency. In many of the marginalized regions everyday lives of the women are result of socio-cultural norms along with the organization of space with the lens of the gender which affects their mobility, engagement with educational and economic institutions and participation in the economic activity. Many national policies are continuously emphasizing on skill development, empowerment, gender equality, and the lived experiences of rural women has revealed that persistent inequalities are embedded within geographical conditions, cultural setup, and institutional frameworks. These inequalities result in a multi-dimensional development landscape which results in uneven development levels which can be seen through the access to education, public spaces, skill-building programs. From this context, analyzing women's developmental trajectory requires an interdisciplinary and holistic lens which keeps gender within the spatial, socio-cultural, and economic perspectives shaping women's negotiations of power and place in their everyday lives. This study tries to re-examines various dynamics by putting the space as an active element in shaping the gendered experiences and by examining the ways through which women negotiate, navigate, and reshape the developmental opportunities within the deeply rooted patriarchal rural contexts.

Various empowerment framework particularly like Sen's capability approach, and Kabeer's agency, Nussbaum's human development model has provided the conceptual framework for evaluating access to development facilities

along with the women's freedom of choices, and their agency in shaping their developmental trajectories. Followed by these perspectives, this study aims to analyses the spatial dynamics and gendered norms influencing women's access to skill development and education related opportunities; to examine the role of socio-cultural practices, negotiation and their agency of women in everyday lives in the rural patriarchal setup; to evaluate the effectiveness of the development initiatives through the capability and empowerment lens; and to provide the participatory and context-sensitive strategies which can foreground rural women's voices into reality.

Gendered Spaces and Feminist Geography

The concept of gendered spaces is a critical area of feminist geography, which emphasizes that space is not neutral but it is shaped by social relations amalgamating with including gender, class, race and ethnicity. Doreen Massey (1994) in her work on *Space, Place, and Gender* explores role of spatial arrangements which influence women's access to opportunities and resources. She put forward that gendered practices are validated through spaces, and Patriarchal norms constrained women's mobility which limit access to educational and economic opportunities. In the particular context of Bundelkhand, Massey's perspective is significantly relevant, as women of rural area face physical distances along with cultural and institutional barriers that hampers their engagement with common public spaces like schools and skill building centers. Developing on Massey's ideas, Linda McDowell and Catherine Nash (1999) critically argue that geographical spaces are commonly gendered through everyday practices, like women's roles in the household, which limit their mobility and accessibility along with their participation in educational or economic spaces. Rural areas of India is a space where traditional gender roles persist, it

restricts women's ability to access educational resources and employment majorly by physical distance and cultural norms which is often shaped by community expectations and their roles in the family and society. In *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (2004), Nirmal Puwar emphasize that women from downtrodden community's experience seclusion and resistance when they pave their way through entering the spaces that have been traditionally constructed and controlled by men. In rural areas, public spaces like schools and government offices are often reflect power imbalances where gendered hierarchies reflect women's presence. This concept is crucial for the study; it will help explaining the way through which rural women are navigating and negotiating the constructed spaces in their pursuit of empowerment and development.

Perspective of Sociology in Gender, Education, and Work:

The sociological perspective of gender and education offers analytical insights into deeply rooted social structures that shapes women's accessibility to education and skill development. In the seminal work of Leela Dube's (1990) her perspective on the sociology of gender in India shows women's roles in the family and society are framed within patriarchal ideologies that shapes their domestic roles and identity, which highly limits their mobility and access to the institutions of formal education and employment opportunities. Dube's work is very important for understanding the role of family and society's expectations in shaping women's aspirations in terms of education and skill development in rural region of India. Bina Agarwal (1994), in her important work on gender and development, analyses women's access to various resources such as land, property, income, and education is molded by their position in the household and largely at the societal structures. Agarwal's analysis contributes in valuable insights power relations and gender especially related to economic control within households' space; it restricts opportunities for education and skill development for women's rural areas. In the rural region of India, here land ownership is majorly male-dominated, Agarwal's work will be very important in understanding women's economic status influences and shapes their ability to engage and participate in educational institutions and programs and gain employability. The Jefferys (Patricia and Roger) research work on the barriers faced by rural women in attaining education in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh further entangles the picture by introducing the element of caste, class, and religion as additional factors that limits the access to education. Their studies highlight that even if education is available theoretically, social norms generally prevent women from accessing the opportunities. This comes in line with the rural region here caste-based inequalities may further widens gender disparities in access to education. The Indian education system and gendered outcomes are further seen in the works of Aloka Ghosh and Geeta Gandhi Kingdon (2006). They put forward that rural women's education is generally seen as secondary to men's education in the deeply patriarchal set up of the communities. This finding shows directly to rural region of India, here cultural values, multiplied by poverty and geographical isolation and this create significant barriers for women in attending complete formal education.

Capability Approach and Empowerment Frameworks:

The capability approach is taken from the work of Amartya Sen (1999) it is particularly relevant for this study, as it redefines development beyond mere income enhancement and economic growth. Instead, Sen argues that real development focus on expanding people's capabilities that is their ability to live a life they have reason to value. This framework highlights the importance of providing opportunities and eliminating barriers to choice and agency, which are critical to women's empowerment and their development. This research will utilize Sen's approach to assess the true impact of educational and skill development programs on rural women's freedom to make choices about their lives. Martha Nussbaum's (2000) that is extension of Sen's framework in *Women and Human Development* offers a valuable insight for understanding the role of education and skill development initiatives in enhancing women's capabilities. Nussbaum's argues that empowerment requires expanding women's ability to lead their lives with dignity and freedom, the study's focus on not just increasing accessibility to education but also ensuring that it leads to actual empowerment. In the addition, Kabeer's (2001) analysis of empowerment as "the expansion of agency" his work provides an important conceptual lens for understanding women's agency in rural region. Kabeer differentiate between agency, resource and achievements, and suggests that access to resources like education does not instantly translate into agency until and unless women have the freedom to make her choices and act upon them.

Postcolonial Feminism and Development Critiques:

Postcolonial feminist view point, particularly the works of Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, criticize the mainstream development narratives that often "speak for" downtrodden women without considering their voices and lived experiences. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak argues that in the global south voices of the rural women are silenced by west centric development framework. This critique is significant for the proposed study, as it focuses the need for participatory research methods that allow rural women to articulate their own needs and desires, not simply for the objective of development interventions but as an active agent in their empowerment. Mohanty's (2003) the concept of "feminism without borders" puts the importance for a feminist analysis that is local and shows specific struggles rather than imposed from outside. She argues that developmental frameworks commonly impose external models of education and empowerment that do not resembles with local realities. This aligns with the current study which focuses on sensitive strategies for uplifting and enhancing educational and skill development programs, along with the ethnographic methodologies that shows the local knowledge and practices. In the continuation, Lila Abu-Lughod's (2002) work criticize development as a "rescue mission" is also significant. Abu-Lughod warns against the tendency to show women in marginalized communities as passive victims instead the need of saving them. Rather, her work emphasizes the significance of listening to and amplifying the local voices. This postcolonial feminist critique paves the way for methodological approach for the study, particularly the use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is to ensure that women's voices frame the research agenda and development initiatives and programs.

The existing literature on women and their education, skill development, and empowerment in rural areas of India, particularly in marginalized rural regions of India, has provided significant understanding into the challenges that women face in accessing educational and economic opportunities. However, key research gaps explored, remain that necessitate further exploration. These gaps majorly relate to the intertwining of gender, geography, and infrastructure; the agency of women in rural area and the patriarchal social structures; the role of culturally specific norms and practices; and along with the lack of participatory and context-specific development models that certainly account for the voices of women in rural areas.

Limited Research work on the Intersection of Geography, Gendered Barriers in accessing infrastructure in Rural India

There is a significant gap in existing literature is the domain area of research that specifically analyses the intersection of geography, gendered access to education and skill development institutes in rural India. In feminist geography, space and place in urban area are thoroughly examined in a gendered urban setting, less focus has been given to rural geographical isolation impacts gendered social structures, especially in economically backward regions region. Existing literature on rural India largely put emphasis on the region's socio-economic challenges like low literacy rates, poverty, poor infrastructure, but they often overlook the role of these geographical factors in uniquely shaping women's ability to access educational, skill development and vocational opportunities. Many studies have reflected that rural women face many barriers leading due to physical distance from educational institutions and vocational training centers, poor transportation, and underdeveloped infrastructure. However, the spatial dimensions of women's accessibility and mobility is not totally associated with these barriers only but they are associated with physical but also deeply cultural factors such as societal norms about women's mobility, which has been not explored in depth. By emphasizing on factors like geography and infrastructural constraints in Bundelkhand, the proposed research work will fill this gap by providing an in-depth explanation of understanding of spatial inequalities and physical infrastructures both are shaping access to women's education and development.

Empowerment and Agency of Rural Women in Patriarchal Social Structures

Another gap found in the literature is the limited research on the agency of rural women in navigating patriarchal social structures whereas there is an abundance of work on gendered spaces and women's struggles for equity and equality in education, which fails to account for the active agency that women should have in navigating these barriers. Currently available studies often focus on the constraints and challenges that hinders women's access to education but do not deeply explore how women actively resist, negotiate, and sometimes subvert these constraints in their daily walk of lives. Identifying this gap is very important in the context of rural region of India, where patriarchal norms are deeply rooted, and women's roles are majorly confined to the domestic sphere. However, women's agency and bargaining power is often overlooked in development programs that are based on the top-down approach rather than on the lived realities and

the ways through which women employ to navigate their constraints. The proposed study will emphasize on women's agency and will show they negotiate gendered social structures and creating spaces for themselves within the social power dynamics. This will offer a stronger understanding of empowerment, reflecting both the agency women and the structural barriers women possess to overcome them.

Superficial Understanding of Gendered Practices and Cultural Norms in Rural Education

Available research is more focused on the formal education system and its shortcomings, without considering the role of cultural norms and practices that influence women's accessibility to participation in educational institution and opportunities. Major existing research on rural India is inefficiently accounting for how local customs, cultural practices, family structures, and influence educational attainment and skills development, vocational training especially in conservative rural regions whereas gender roles within the family and community often restrict women's accessibility and mobility, cultural norms often sideline education for women and expect them to prioritize family related responsibilities over their personal development. This gap in the literature can be identified and attributed to a lack of region-specific studies that dwells in exploring the role of cultural practices in rural region and its impact on women's education and skill development. The proposed research work will fill this gap by considering the role of not only the formal educational structures but also along with the cultural and social norms that are governing the everyday lives of women. It will analyze the role of these norms that shapes women's decisions particularly related to education and work, and how particular interventions can be designed to formulated within the challenge which cultural frameworks is associated that supports women's empowerment and agency.

Inadequate Participatory and Context Perceptive Development Models

There is a critical gap in current research showing the lack of participatory and context perceptive development models that significantly integrate women's needs and voices into the design and implementation of skill development and educational programs. Many developments related programs in rural areas of India are formulated by external actors who generally fail to take into account the specific desires, needs, and constraints of the local female population. While top-down approach of development has been widely criticized that there is a lack of research that examines participatory models especially those models that include rural women as an active agent in the formulation and implementation of policies and initiatives. Major part of the research on rural women's education in rural region focuses on the implementation of national or state level programs like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative and other skill development programs, these program fails to engage the lived experiences of women on the ground. These studies often fail to reflect the local realities that can be very crucial in making or breaking the success of such initiatives. The proposed research work aims to fill this gap by integrating participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods and ethnographic approaches with ensuring that the voices and needs of rural women are central to the study and the work is action oriented which can propose solutions.

Lack of Amalgamation Between Feminist Geography, Sociology, and the Development Studies in Rural Empowerment Research

Lastly there is a gap in the insufficient amalgamation between feminist geography, sociology, and the development studies in research on women's empowerment in rural settings. Majority studies particularly focus on one theoretical framework on geography or sociology or development studies without limited attention on drawing on the synergies between these disciplines. Feminist geography and sociology have been often applied in urban sphere, but rural India has a unique challenge that require a mixed approach in which integration of feminist geography should focus on gendered spaces, sociology's insights should try to unlearn power relations, and development studies should explore on empowerment, the proposed research work will create a inclusive framework for understanding rural women's experiences. This multidisciplinary approach will allow for making a more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities for women's education and skill development in the marginalized regions.

The existing literature shows that women's skill development, education and empowerment are significantly shaped by the intersection of sociocultural norms, gendered spaces, and structural inequalities. Feminist geography highlights that space is produced and reproduced, actively with the gendered power relation which impacts and limit women's access to public institutions and their mobility. Sociological point of view further amplifies that patriarchal mindset and ideologies are embedded within family and the community structures which determine women's access to various institutions providing education, economic resources, and the opportunities. Complementing these views from feminist geography and sociology perspective, empowerment frameworks majorly as of Sen's capability approach, Nussbaum's human development model, and Kabeer's agency-centric perspective has emphasized that the real empowerment happens not just because of accessibility to resources, but it comes from expanding and enlarging women's capabilities, choices, and their freedom. Postcolonial feminist has emphasized and critiqued regarding the development narratives which has overlook local regional voices, it suggests for relooking for the participatory and the context-sensitive approaches that can emphasize and foreground women's real lived experiences.

2. Conclusion

Despite of this significant work, there is a major research gap which persists, majorly regarding the integration of sociocultural, spatial, and developmental dimensions. The current studies often sideline these theoretical frameworks from the perspective of examining the intersection of geography, culture, and power in shaping shape women's education and skill development trajectories. Women's agency is majorly expressed through resistance and negotiation. There every day acts shape their empowerment level which is frequently overlooked because of narratives which are focused on barriers. Based on the literature it has been identified that there is a need of participatory development models which puts women's voices in the program design and their in-depth evaluation. By addressing

of these gaps requires a holistic, multidisciplinary lens that shows the real local realities and recognizes the women as active agents within the complex gendered landscapes. The findings of this review-based work underscore the need of an integrated approaches for advancing towards inclusive and meaningful pathways to women's development and their empowerment in India.

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