

Status of Women from Disadvantaged Sections of the Rural Areas in Haryana: Challenges and Aspirations

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Abstract

Women, constituting nearly half of the population in India, play a vital role in the socio-economic development of the country. Despite significant progress in many areas, the reality for Women from disadvantaged sections remains far from equitable. This paper explores the status of rural poor women in Haryana, examining the persistent issues, challenges, and inequalities they face. In the 21st century, the empowerment of women, particularly those from economically disadvantaged rural backgrounds, continues to be more aspiration than actual. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, relying on data derived from various primary and secondary sources, including government reports, research papers, and field-based case studies. Both qualitative and quantitative dimensions are considered to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived realities of rural poor women in Haryana. Major findings revealed that the majority of rural Women from disadvantaged sections continue to shoulder gender-based responsibilities, such as childcare, food preparation, and household maintenance, which limit their ability to engage in broader economic and social activities. Although there has been some progress in increasing educational and socio-cultural opportunities, substantial disparities still exist. Many rural women are engaged in agricultural labor and small economic activities, yet their roles remain informal and underappreciated. Caste based atrocities and discriminations are seen against them. Author recommended that sustainable empowerment of Women from disadvantaged sections in Haryana requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses both economic barriers and cultural mindsets through Government, family, Civil Societies and Society as a whole. It is concluded that true empowerment can only be achieved through structural changes in education, employment opportunities, and societal attitudes toward gender roles. Moreover, the social work profession can play a pivotal role in facilitating awareness, access to resources, and advocacy for these rural women's rights.

Keywords- Rural Women, Gender, Women Empowerment, Women Participation, Governance, Self Reliance of Women, Patriarchy, Social Norms, Women Entrepreneurships, Disadvantaged Sections, Rural Areas.

Introduction

The socio-economic condition of women, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, has placed them in some of the most deprived and marginalized positions globally. Women from disadvantaged Sections in Haryana, particularly in rural areas, suffer from limited access to education, healthcare, and employment

opportunities, a situation that is particularly dire in northern India. The reality of women's socio-economic status is stark, as their contributions to families and communities often go unrecognized. In a patriarchal society, women are frequently seen as economic burdens rather than valuable contributors. Additionally, there is a pronounced son preference in India, where sons are expected to care for aging parents, while daughters often bear the financial weight of dowry demands, resulting in discrimination and mistreatment. This gender bias is particularly severe for Women from disadvantaged Sections who experience the compounded effects of poverty and gender inequality. In Haryana, this issue is more pronounced, where women from disadvantaged sections face extreme difficulties. Furthermore, Indian women, including those in Haryana, generally have low levels of education and limited participation in the formal labor force, which restricts their autonomy. Their lives are largely governed by male authority figures, from fathers to husbands, and later sons, further diminishing their independence and decision-making power. In India, and specifically in the state of Haryana, women's roles are rigidly defined by traditional customs, including pervasive practices like the *purdah* system, and widespread illiteracy. These factors have contributed to the social and economic degradation of women from the lower socio-economic strata. In Haryana, a region deeply influenced by patriarchy, caste hierarchies, and ethnic divisions, these entrenched gender relations exacerbate the inequalities women face, compounding the challenges they encounter in their daily lives. These structural and social constraints significantly impact the health and well-being of women from disadvantaged Sections. Poor health, resulting from inadequate nutrition, limited access to healthcare, and lack of autonomy, not only affects the women themselves but also their families. Women in poor health are more likely to give birth to low-weight infants and struggle to provide adequate care for their children. This, in turn, affects the economic productivity of the household, as women in ill health are less able to contribute to the labor force, further entrenching cycles of poverty.

In Haryana, the gender disparities in work and wages are glaring. Historically, women have played a vital role in agricultural labor, performing tasks such as threshing and fodder cutting. However, with the advent of mechanization, many of these jobs have been replaced by male labor. Skilled tasks related to machinery, which once involved female workers, are now predominantly male-dominated. Furthermore, women's participation in the workforce has declined significantly in Haryana, largely due to displacement by male workers. Studies have shown that gender disparity in wages contributes significantly to the low female workforce participation rate in the state. Women from disadvantaged Sections often receive lower wages than their male counterparts for similar work. Other contributing factors include household income disparities, caste-based discrimination, lack of employment opportunities, and cultural barriers that restrict women's access to work. These issues warrant a more in-depth exploration to better understand the obstacles faced by Women from disadvantaged Sections in rural Haryana.

In the light of the above facts, this study would explore the multifaceted challenges faced by Women from disadvantaged Sections in rural Haryana, specifically focusing on the disparities they face in employment, health, education, and socio-economic mobility. It will also examine the aspirations of these women, shedding light on their hopes for empowerment and the necessary steps to address the deep-rooted inequalities they endure. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to highlight not only the challenges but also the potential pathways to social change and economic empowerment for women from disadvantaged Sections in Haryana's rural areas. It would also explore the scope of social work in working with these women to help them in mitigating their challenges and issues.

Review of Relevant Literature

Bhambu, S. (2023). explored the status of women in rural Haryana reflects a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors rooted in deeply patriarchal structures. Several studies underscore that

rural women in Haryana continue to face multifaceted disadvantages, most notably limited access to education, economic opportunities, and political empowerment. Author highlighted that while constitutional and legal provisions such as the 73rd Constitutional Amendment have aimed to empower women through political participation and reservation in *Panchayati Raj Institutions*, their practical impact remains contested. Study highlighted the importance of contextualizing women's empowerment within the broader framework of cultural reform, institutional accountability, and sustained grassroots activism in rural Haryana.

Himanshi, & Rajeshwari. (2021). Argued that the participation of women in economic activities is a critical component of a nation's overall development. As women constitute nearly half of India's total population, their involvement in the workforce has far-reaching implications not only for the economy but also for gender equality and social empowerment. The research also identified spatial and social group-based variations. This finding suggests that socio-economic necessity, rather than empowerment, often drives female labor among marginalized groups. Moreover, while women's education correlates positively with participation at the state level, intra-group disparities remain prominent. Study underscores the complexity of women's labor participation in Haryana and the need for caste-sensitive and education-based interventions to address both structural and cultural constraints.

Kumar, S. (2023). Examined the status of rural women in the Rohtak district of Haryana, recognizing their role as crucial contributors to family welfare and socio-economic development. In the 21st century, the issue of rural women's empowerment has gained significant attention; however, in practical terms, it often remains an illusion rather than a reality. The major findings indicate that rural women remain relatively disempowered and continue to hold a lower social status compared to men. One of the most significant findings is the internalization of unequal gender norms among women themselves, which further reinforces gender-based disparities. The study concluded that access to education, employment, and a transformation in the social structure are essential preconditions for achieving genuine empowerment.

Sweetty (2021), explored that MGNREGA has contributed to expanding employment opportunities for women in Haryana. Study explored the spatial distribution of MGNREGA worksites, demonstrating that geographical factors; such as distance, terrain, and local infrastructure; directly impact women's ability to participate in the program. Further study found that socio-cultural constraints and intra-household dynamics, frequently limit women's mobility and autonomy in decision-making. The study advocates for region-specific policy adjustments to improve the inclusivity and effectiveness of the program for rural women in Haryana.

Need and Relevance of the Study

Present research holds a great significance in understanding the complex socio-economic realities faced by women from disadvantaged Sections in Haryana. This research is particularly valuable for the social work profession, as it identifies areas where intervention is most needed. Social workers can play a vital role in advocating for policy reforms, promoting women's rights, and facilitating access to resources such as education, vocational training, and microfinance. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader goal of social justice, equality, and inclusive rural development in Haryana and in India as a whole. Study would be helpful for future research assignments in the related and allied areas.

Objectives of the Study

- To Examine the Current Socio-Economic Status of the women from disadvantaged Sections in Rural Areas of Haryana.
- To Analyze the Significant Factors and Challenges women from disadvantaged Sections in Rural Areas of Haryana.

- To Propose Solutions and Strategies aimed at Achieving Sustainable Empowerment for these Women in the Region.

Research Methodology and Design

The present study adopts a descriptive-cum-diagnostic research design, utilizing a mixed-methods approach to explore the socio-economic conditions of women from disadvantaged Sections in Rural Areas in Haryana. The study is based on various research work and case studies, which are basically based on primary and other sources of secondary sources are also applied; including government reports, and field-based case studies of the civil societies.

Analysis and Major Findings

It is found that while the status of women in rural areas of Haryana, particularly those from disadvantaged sections, has seen some improvement in recent years. The progress made in areas like female literacy, workforce participation, self-employment opportunities, and local governance is commendable, yet persistent challenges in the realms of violence, political representation, sex ratio imbalances, and deep-seated caste-based discrimination continue to hinder the full empowerment of women, especially in rural areas. Despite these setbacks, Haryana has made notable strides in addressing some of the barriers women face, suggesting that with targeted efforts, further advancements can be made. It is explored that significant disparities persist across various socio-economic indicators. One area where there has been clear progress is literacy. Gender gaps in education have been narrowing, with more girls enrolling from disadvantaged sections in schools in Haryana and completing their education, though disparities remain, particularly in rural regions. Female literacy rates have risen, offering hope for future generations of women who may have greater opportunities for economic and social mobility. Alongside improvements in education, women's workforce participation has also increased. Although still lower than male participation, studies indicate that more women are entering the workforce, particularly in rural areas, where they are taking on roles traditionally dominated by men. This increase, however, is often marred by the ongoing wage disparity and the prevalence of informal and low-paid employment options for women.

Local governance is another area where progress has been visible. Women's representation in political spheres, particularly at the grassroots level, has improved. More women are being elected as sarpanches (village heads), which has led to a greater voice in local decision-making processes. This growing political participation provides women with the platform to address local issues, including education, healthcare, and the welfare of disadvantaged communities. Despite these advances, significant challenges remain. In addition, caste-based discrimination and societal norms that continue to restrict women's autonomy are barriers that require concerted efforts to dismantle. These challenges are compounded by structural inequalities in health and hygiene, further exacerbating the difficulties faced by these socio-economically disadvantaged women in rural areas of the state. In response to these challenges, the state government of Haryana Government has implemented a range of welfare measures aimed at improving the status of women. These initiatives include financial assistance, skill development programmes, and support for female entrepreneurship. However, while these welfare programmes have provided some relief, they are not a panacea for the systemic issues at play. Achieving true gender equality in Haryana will require a multi-faceted approach that not only addresses the immediate needs of these women but also works towards long-term cultural and social change.

Further, it is explored that the political participation among women from disadvantaged Sections in Rural Areas of Haryana has improved, especially after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. However, many women remain unaware of their rights and reservations. Even elected women often lack autonomy, with male relatives; often influenced by dominant caste groups; making decisions on their behalf. Some of the other major findings are

underlined as given below-

- Rural women from poor and marginalized backgrounds in rural areas of the state continue to face educational disadvantages due to patriarchal attitudes, resulting in lower literacy rates compared to men.
- Decline in Employment, but Positive Impact of MGNREGA- MGNREGA has opened avenues for paid work, enhancing these women's role in financial decision-making and increasing their participation in self-help groups.
- Entrenched Patriarchal Norms and Early Marriage- Girls in Haryana are often married at a young age, leading to early transfer into their husbands' households where they face layered dominance; from husbands, in-laws, and societal restrictions.
- Severe Health Inequities Tied to Gender and Class- Many women face nutritional deprivation, poor reproductive health services, and exclusion from health research, making them vulnerable to chronic illness and maternal health issues.
- Invisible Labor and Informal Sector Dependence- Around 80–87.00 percent of rural working women are engaged in low-paying, unorganized sectors such as agriculture, household industries, and construction, with minimal protections or benefits.
- Cultural and Social Factors Deeply Impact Aspirations- These include restrictions on mobility, lack of awareness of rights, socialized gender roles, and unequal treatment within the home and community.

As explored above, women from disadvantaged Sections in Rural Areas participation in political processes has improved, yet remains symbolic in many cases due to the influence of male family members and dominant caste pressures. Education remains uneven, and economic independence is hindered by both cultural attitudes and lack of asset ownership. Health disparities are glaring, with women's health needs poorly addressed due to both systemic neglect and societal discrimination. Despite these challenges, rural women are showing resilience and a growing desire for autonomy and empowerment. Many are stepping into leadership roles, engaging in financial decision-making, and joining self-help groups. Their aspirations reflect a yearning for transformation, even as structural barriers persist.

On the basis of various studies, a critical insight into the living conditions, health awareness, and socio-cultural practices affecting rural women from disadvantaged sections in rural areas of Haryana are found. Some of them are highlighted as, such as; approximately 18.00 percent have a hand pump facility. Only 24.00 percent of households have a flush toilet, while 80.00 percent have a bathroom facility. Only 36.00 percent of households have four or more rooms, indicating relatively spacious living arrangements. Incidents of early marriages of girls are still seen in the disadvantaged sections in rural areas. Around 16.00 percent became mothers before the age of 20. After pregnancy, a number of rural women from disadvantaged sections in rural Haryana are still not consulting Doctors. Approximately 41.00 percent suffer from blood deficiency anemia. Many women are not able to complete their School and higher education. Women are not allowed to join the occupation, as per their choices. After being elected as Panch or Sarpanch, maximum decisions taken are nil from their sides. They are not even taking voting decisions by their own. Many of these women responded that they often face caste based ferocities, discriminations, stigma and violence in their day to day life from their own village members from socio-economically rich castes. These findings reveal a mix of progress and persisting challenges; while basic infrastructure like drinking water and living space has improved, awareness of reproductive health, access to medical care, and early marriage practices continue to reflect significant areas of concern.

Recommendations and Role of Social Work

The Government of India and the State government are working continuously to improve the status of poor,

socio-economically disadvantaged women in rural Haryana. However, there is much more to do and the government must prioritize policies that ensure access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. The police and judiciary together should enforce laws against caste-based violence and discrimination while providing a safe environment for these women to report abuse. Civil society organizations should focus on raising awareness, providing legal aid, and offering support services such as counseling and skill development programmes. Society must work towards challenging deep-rooted patriarchal norms and caste-based discrimination, fostering an inclusive culture that empowers women to participate fully in social, economic, and political life without fear of violence. Major role of social worker in supporting socio-economically disadvantaged in rural Haryana are given as follows-

- Resource Mobilization- Social workers connect disadvantaged women with essential resources such as government welfare schemes, microfinance programmes, and community-based organizations.
- Self-Help Group (SHG) Promotion-These groups would foster self-reliance, enhance economic independence, and strengthen women's social networks, providing them with the confidence and support to make decisions in both their households and communities.
- Advocacy and Policy Change- Through policy advocacy, social workers work towards creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment at local, state, and national levels.
- Community Development- Through community organizing and mobilization, social workers empower rural residents to identify their needs, develop sustainable solutions, and advocate for their interests.
- Empowerment and Skill Development- Social workers provide counseling, support services, and educational programmes aimed at empowering women. They focus on skill development, offering training that enhances women from disadvantaged Sections capabilities and confidence.
- Bridging the Gap between Rural Communities and Services- Social workers connect women from disadvantaged Sections with government welfare programmes, healthcare services, legal aid, and other resources, ensuring that women from disadvantaged sections are not excluded from the benefits they are entitled to.
- Focus on Microfinance- Social workers can empower these women to engage in entrepreneurial activities, start small businesses, and improve their economic standing, by facilitating access to microcredit and microfinance.

Conclusion

It is concluded that in the status of poor women from disadvantaged Sections in Rural Areas of the Haryana, the progress in areas such as literacy and political participation, substantial barriers persist, particularly in health, employment, and decision-making. However, it remains deeply affected by socio-economic challenges, limited access to resources, caste issues, crime and violence against them and entrenched gender inequalities. It is suggested that Social work can play a pivotal role in improving their condition by facilitating resource access, promoting self-help groups, advocating for policy change, helping them in caste issues, crime and violence against them and empowering women through skill development. Author recommended that with the Government actions and collaboration of society and welfare organizations, there is need for comprehensive programmes and effective strategies for further improving the socio-economic status of women from disadvantaged Sections in Rural Areas and promoting gender equality in the state.

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