

# Rural women cultivating good food for all

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## We need more than just acknowledgement and gratitude to build the Bharat of our dreams

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By NEELIMA PANDEYNANDINI PIRAMAL

Empowerment of women must be taken up as a top priority | Photo Credit: HANDOUT

Rural Women Cultivating Good Food for All – We need more than just acknowledgement and gratitude to build the Bharat of our dreams.

“I never paid attention to the fact that I am eating leftovers, as the last one to eat every day, while trying to serve the best food to my family. It was only when ‘Didi’ told us that we all need good hot food to feel happy and be healthy, that I noticed it. I am feeling very valued, and I realize that I need to take care of myself for my mental and physical health and happiness” - an overwhelmed young woman participant of a nutrition and mental health awareness session from a remote district in Rajasthan.

This statement is true for a large number of women in our country and holds significance on this International Day of Rural Women, with the focus on ‘Rural women cultivating good food for all’. It is painful to note that while rural women play essential roles in getting food to the table for their families, they may not be accessing the same food for their own health and wellbeing equally.

The current status of rural women’s health and nutrition corroborates this story. It is estimated that more than 80% of rural women are engaged in the agricultural sector as farm labour or as support to their farmer family. National Family Health Survey 4 data (2015) shows that a quarter of women of reproductive age are undernourished and almost half of them are anemic (with minor variations across districts) This coupled with early marriage of girls is leading to an intergenerational cycle of disempowerment for her.

Promising efforts

This issue is being addressed by the government, philanthropy and civil society, collectively working to improve rural women’s access to health and nutrition, livelihood and financial independence. Government’s Poshan 2.0 scheme, National Rural Livelihoods Mission,

Pradhan Mantri MUDRA Yojana (PMMY), Stand-Up India Scheme, Prime Minister's Employment Generation Program (PMEGP), NITI Ayog's Women Entrepreneurship Platform, all target to solve the challenges of rural women.

NGOs such as SEWA, Mann Deshi, Swayam Sikshan Prayog, Swaraj University have created successful role model rural women entrepreneurs. Philanthropies such as Bill & Milinda Gates Foundation, Tata Trust, NASSCOM Foundation, PIRAMAL Foundation, Edelgive Foundation, Ola Foundation and others are enabling rural women with financial digital literacy, vocational skilling and livelihood opportunities.

The root causes

Despite all these efforts, a large number of women still put themselves at the far end of the food table, hesitating to express their choices or facing the backlash of it. The reason behind this marginalized status of women is the deep-rooted system of patriarchy. There are very few organizations and fewer programs directly addressing the patriarchal mindset.

An international study pointed out that only 5% of the total philanthropic investment in women is for explicit work on gender (OECD- Insights on Philanthropy for Gender Equality 2019 pg.14) This is primarily because changing patriarchal mindset is complex, time taking and difficult to measure.

Gender sensitisation

In this context, a lot more can be done:-

Increasing investment in programs that directly address the system of patriarchy is critical. Men and boys from all sections of the community need to inculcate 'Positive Masculinity' to become empathetic, aware, and equipped to recognize inequality and address it.

A young man who was part of such a program, burst into tears during a reflection exercise, about the difference in a typical day in his life and his sister's life. He and others took an oath to ensure that their sisters get to play and go out like them. Collectively they were able to negotiate the same with their parents. Including gender equality and 'Positive Masculinity' in the school curriculum by starting early and integrating it in the government's large national schemes for youth, will help scale and institutionalize these interventions.

Training on these issues also needs to be a compulsory part of the professional development of last mile workers, middle and top systemic officials, and all elected representatives from Panchayat to parliament. Their ownership is key for a gender responsive system. To do these trainings at scale for changing mindsets, organisations need large and sustained investments. Grassroot organizations who directly work with rural women and their families, also need investment in institution building.

Finally, in support, endowing rural women with easy access to smart phones, laptops, internet, enabling her with digital skills, will tilt the power balance in her favor. A rural bride informing her husband about the correct price of crops from her laptop or a rural woman taking online tuition classes during COVID, have been seen to transform their family's outlook towards them forever. A young rural woman with visual impairment is preparing for civil services with her family and community's belief in her.

These are just examples of what is possible if we get together to create a more equal and inclusive Bharat!

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