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# **Enabling Women's Agency and Leadership in Rural Development Initiatives: Pathways for Transformation**



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This paper posits that rural development initiatives must treat women's agency not as an instrumental input for programme efficiency, but as a political and institutional outcome in its own right, central to redistributing power, ethical restraint, and the refusal of domination within households, markets, and governance systems.

The paper is a framing note for the national roundtable on women's agency and leadership in rural development. It seeks to synthesise feminist theory, empirical evidence, and programmatic learning to inform future institutional design and policy pathways.

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# 1. Introduction

Women in rural India, particularly in the Central Indian Tribal Belt (CITB), confront entrenched structural barriers that limit their access to resources, decision-making arenas, and formal institutional mechanisms. Despite their substantial contributions to agricultural production, forest-based economies, livestock management, and unpaid care work, these efforts seldom yield proportional influence over policy, governance, or household decisions (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & ICF, 2021; National Sample Survey Office [NSSO], 2019). For instance, women constitute approximately 73% of the rural agricultural workforce in India, yet they own only about 14% of agricultural land (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2016; Vatta et al., 2019). Moreover, unpaid care work exacerbates these disparities, with women spending over eight times more time on such activities than men, leading to time poverty that curtails economic participation and personal well-being (NSSO, 2019; Chopra & Zambelli, 2024; Institute for Human Development [IHD] & Centre for Gender Studies [CGS], 2025).

This paper argues that rural development initiatives must treat women's agency not as an instrumental input for programme efficiency, but as a political and institutional outcome in its own right, central to redistributing power within households, markets, and governance systems. Building on foundational feminist scholarship, the paper frames agency as a dynamic interaction among power within (internal self-efficacy and critical consciousness), power to (capacity for action and decision-making),



power with (collective solidarity), and the reduction of power over (domination, coercion, and control). It contends that strengthening women's agency in one domain, such as employment through the *Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act (VB-G-RAM-G)* [1] or collective mobilisation through the *Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM)*, can generate spillover effects across household bargaining, local governance, market participation, and climate adaptation.

Crucially, these spillovers remain structurally constrained by the gendered organisation of unpaid care and community work. Unpaid work operates not merely as a time constraint, but as a system of power that disciplines women's labour, mobility, and political presence, reinforcing cycles of economic dependence and weakened bargaining power (Ferrant & Thim, 2019; Samantroy & Nandi, 2022).

[1] *The Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill, 2025 (introduced in Lok Sabha on December 16, 2025) was enacted and received Presidential assent on December 21, 2025, becoming the Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025. The Act provides for its commencement by central notification and, by clause 37, repeals the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005, while including explicit savings and transitional provisions to address ongoing works, liabilities and entitlements.*

## 2. Conceptual Foundations: An Enabling Power and Agency Framework

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### 2.1. Power as a Multidimensional Construct

Feminist scholarship understands power as multidimensional, operating simultaneously within individuals, between people, through institutions, and across social structures. Gender inequality is reproduced not only through material deprivation, but through norms, identities, and everyday practices that shape whose voices count and whose labour remains invisible (Lukes, 2005; Rowbotham, 1973; Connell, 1987). For instance, agency and communality emerge as core constructs, with agency encompassing assertiveness, independence, and leadership competence, often ascribed more to men, and communality involving concern for others and emotional sensitivity, disproportionately linked to women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Haines et al., 2016). This duality underscores how gender stereotypes reinforce power imbalances, limiting women's access to decision-making roles.

Contemporary literature further disaggregates power into power within (self-confidence and critical consciousness), power to (decision-making capacity), power with (collective action), and efforts to diminish power over (coercion and discrimination) (Batliwala, 1994; Allen, 1999; Kabeer, 2012). These dimensions interact dynamically; for example, structural power over, manifest in caste and class hierarchies, constrains individual power within, as evidenced in studies of gendered norm perceptions among adolescents, where rigid stereotypes correlate with reduced agency (Golden et al., 2021).

Power within is not merely the confidence to act, but the ethical clarity to reject domination, both external and internalised, and to realise oneself as deserving of dignity, care, and voice; Thus, confronting internalised patriarchy, casteism and capitalist worth through unlearning domination from within (hooks, 1994).

Intersectional approaches reveal how power manifests differently across identities, with marginalised women experiencing compounded vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1991; Springer et al., 2012). In contexts of entrenched caste, gender, and economic hierarchy, women's subordination is sustained not only through material deprivation but through internalised beliefs about worth, obedience, and sacrifice. Power within, therefore, cannot be reduced to self-confidence or aspiration alone; it entails an ethical and spiritual awakening in which women come to recognise themselves as subjects rather than instruments of development. Without this inner refusal of domination, external opportunities risk reproducing new forms of control rather than enabling freedom.

Social transformation divorced from inner transformation risks reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. Feminist engagements with spirituality similarly caution against romantic or depoliticised readings of faith. When spiritual traditions legitimise obedience or silence, they reinforce gendered domination.

However, when approached as ethical practices oriented towards dignity, restraint,

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and non-exploitation, they offer resources for resisting internalised oppression and sustaining long-term political struggle. This understanding of spirituality, as a discipline rather than a doctrine, resonates deeply with conceptions of power within and its interactions with power over.

In rural development contexts, this multidimensionality implies that empowerment initiatives must target not only access to resources and networks but also the transformation of subordination structures embedded in norms and institutions (Shah, 2024; Batliwala, 2007, 2015).

## **2.2. Empowerment as Structural Transformation Rather Than Instrumental Efficiency**

The feminist literature on empowerment critiques instrumentalist approaches that prioritise economic efficiency over systemic change, advocating instead for transformative processes that redistribute power and challenge hegemonic structures (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 2015). Early critiques of smart economics, which views women's empowerment as a tool for GDP growth, highlight its failure to address root causes like gendered labour divisions and biased public systems, often reducing women to market actors without tackling exploitation (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Roberts & Soederbäck, 2021). In contrast, structural transformation frames empowerment as a political endeavour, requiring shifts in norms, institutions, and relations to foster genuine equity (Batliwala, 2015; Eyre & Eyben, 2020). This distinction is evident in debates over power feminism, which celebrates individual agency but risks overlooking collective resistance to domination (Caputi, 2013; Hains, 2009).

Feminist economists argue that true empowerment demands systematic changes, such as reallocating unpaid care burdens, to enable women to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999; Gammage et al., 2020). In development practice, gender-transformative approaches exemplify this by reshaping resource distribution and expectations across genders, moving beyond efficiency metrics to prioritise rights and solidarity (Gupta et al., 2022). Thus, rural programs must eschew technocratic silos and embed empowerment in broader struggles against patriarchy and inequality.

## **2.3. Collective Action as the Foundation of Agency**

Feminist theory positions collective action as pivotal to women's agency, enabling marginalised voices to contest structural barriers and build solidarities (Kabeer, 2012; Cornwall, 2016).

Scholarship traces this back to early labour movements, where women's groups challenged exploitative norms, to contemporary analyses linking collectives to enhanced bargaining power and institutional influence (Brody et al., 2017; Evans & Nambiar, 2013). For instance, self-help groups (SHGs) foster power with by pooling resources and amplifying advocacy, transforming individual resilience into communal strength (UN Women, 2014; Kumar et al., 2021).

This foundation is reinforced in intersectional feminist work, which views collectives as sites for navigating overlapping oppressions, such as caste and gender, through shared narratives and action (Batliwala, 2015; Raghunathan et al., 2021). However, challenges persist; instrumental uses of collectives for efficiency gains, moralisation,

status quo religion, and depoliticised spirituality/ ethics can dilute the transformative potential of collectives, underscoring the need for feminist solidarity that prioritises rights over outputs with emphasis on restraint, dignity and inner-outer transformation through interdependence (Shah, 2024; Sweetman, 2016; Guterres, 2023). In essence, collective action sustains agency by embedding personal gains in relational networks that reshape power dynamics.

## 2.4. Intersectional Vulnerabilities of Tribal Women

Intersectionality, as theorised by Crenshaw (1991), illuminates how gender intersects with tribe, caste, class, location, and other axes to produce unique vulnerabilities, particularly for tribal women in India (Vatta et al., 2019; Desai & Andrist, 2010). Literature reveals compounded exclusions: tribal women face socio-economic marginality, geographic isolation, and climate-dependent livelihoods, amplified by state neglect and cultural erasure (MoEFCC & World Bank, 2025; Borooah & Iyer, 2005). For example, Dalit and Adivasi women endure heightened violence and discrimination, with caste-gender intersections limiting access to justice and resources (IIPS & ICF, 2021; Nanda et al., 2024).

Recent studies emphasise tailored strategies that valorise indigenous knowledge while dismantling systemic and cultural biases, such as land dispossession and unpaid work burdens tied to tribal norms (Chakravarti, 2023; Mi, 2024). Unpaid work, often invisible in tribal economies, further entrenches these vulnerabilities, as women juggle subsistence farming with domestic duties amid resource scarcity (Samantroy & Nandi, 2022). Thus, empowerment must adopt an intersectional lens to address these layered power imbalances.



### 3. Practice Context: Structural Gaps and Programmatic Opportunities

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India's rural development and livelihoods architecture today rests heavily on women's labour, time, and collective participation. From self-help groups under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) to public employment through the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission – Gramin (VB-G-RAM-G), women are the visible face of programme implementation. Yet a substantial body of evidence shows that this growing visibility has not translated into commensurate agency or leadership. **Women contribute an estimated 70–73% of agricultural labour in rural India, but own only about 14% of agricultural land, sharply limiting their control over productive assets, credit, and decision-making in agriculture** (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2016; Vatta et al., 2019). This structural disconnect between labour and ownership continues to reproduce economic dependence even as women's work intensifies.

Flagship programmes illustrate this paradox clearly. Administrative data show that **women accounted for nearly 59% of total person-days under MGNREGA (now VB-G-RAM-G) in 2023–24**, marking one of the highest levels of female participation in a public works programme globally (Ministry of Rural Development, 2024). Rigorous evaluations confirm that MGNREGA participation improved women's incomes, mobility, and familiarity with state institutions (Afridi et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2018). However, women remain under-represented in supervisory roles such as mates, measurement, and worksite planning, spaces where authority and procedural power are exercised (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010; Narayanan et al., 2024). Participation, in other words, has expanded faster than power.

Strategically, women's agency in rural development continues to be framed in largely instrumental terms, as a means to enhance household welfare, improve nutrition outcomes, or increase programme efficiency. Feminist scholarship has long cautioned that such smart economics approaches risk intensifying women's workloads without addressing the structures that limit their autonomy and voice (Chant & Sweetman, 2012; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). This instrumental framing is reinforced by the persistent neglect of unpaid care work, which functions as a critical but invisible subsidy to both households and public programmes.

Time-use data underscore the scale of this constraint. Indian women spend **over eight times more time than men on unpaid domestic and care work**, a burden that sharply limits their ability to engage in paid work, training, collective action, or governance (National Sample Survey Office, 2019; Chopra & Zambelli, 2024). Recent evidence links this time poverty not only to lower labour force participation but also to reduced well-being, political participation, and leadership sustainability, particularly in rural and tribal contexts (Ferrant & Thim, 2019; Abraham et al., 2024). Unpaid care work thus operates not merely as a personal constraint but as a structural system of power that disciplines women's time, mobility, and public presence.

Programmatically, India has achieved unprecedented scale in mobilising women. DAY-NRLM has organised more than 10 crore rural women into self-help groups, significantly expanding access to savings, credit, and collective platforms (Ministry of Rural Development, 2025; World Bank, 2022).

Evidence shows that SHG participation strengthens women's confidence, collective voice, and engagement with local institutions (Brody et al., 2017; Kumar et al., 2021). Yet leadership pathways from collectives to decision-making bodies, such as Panchayati Raj Institutions, producer organisations, or forest governance committees, remain weak and uneven. Where women enter governance, studies document persistent "symbolic representation," shaped by patriarchal norms, limited institutional support, and care responsibilities that restrict sustained engagement (Beaman et al., 2012; Mi, 2024).

The cumulative effect is a stark paradox: women are indispensable to the delivery of rural development and livelihoods programmes, yet remain peripheral to the decisions that shape rural economies, climate responses, and governance priorities. If rural development in India is to become genuinely transformative, it must move beyond mobilisation and participation to confront the structural roots of inequality, such as land ownership, unpaid work, and institutional exclusion. Designing explicitly for women's power, voice, and leadership is not an add-on to development effectiveness; it is central to reimagining a more just, resilient, and democratic rural future.

### 3.1. Persistent Gender Inequalities in Rural India

Enduring gender disparities across domains underscore the systemic character of inequality. Data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) reveal that only 51% of women aged 15–49 years exercise decision-making authority over their earnings, while 71% participate in household decisions (IIPS & ICF, 2021; Nanda et al., 2024). Labour force statistics indicate a female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) of 41.7% in 2023–

#### Key paradoxes in enabling women's agency through Rural Development Initiatives

- 1. Time vs Returns** – Women invest significant time, often unpaid or underpaid, with uncertain economic or political payoff.
- 2. Safe Spaces vs Systemic Influence** – Women-only platforms foster confidence and solidarity but often struggle to shift male-dominated institutions.
- 3. Personal Change vs Structural Constraints** – Confidence-building is necessary but insufficient without enabling services, policy shifts, and norm change.
- 4. Social Work vs Economic Power** – Community engagement is frequently substituted for dignified, paid employment and leadership roles.
- 5. Disrupting vs Reinforcing Stereotypes** – Poorly designed initiatives risk essentialising women as “naturally caring” or “less technical.”

2024, reflecting barriers to dignified employment and economic opportunities (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2024; World Bank, 2023). These patterns exemplify how power over persists through gender norms, unequal asset distribution, and labour market segmentation, compounded by unpaid care work that consumes women's time and energy (Chopra & Zambelli, 2024; IHD & CGS, 2025).

### 3.2. Rural Development Programs as Institutional Entry Points

Rural development initiatives have nonetheless amplified women's economic and governance participation. MGNREGA (now VB-G-RAM-G) has facilitated unprecedented public employment for women, with women comprising 58.88% of person-days nationally in 2023–2024, surpassing 65% in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu (Ministry of Rural Development [MoRD], 2024). Evaluations indicate that MGNREGA enhances women's income, bargaining power, mobility, and familiarity with state systems (Afridi et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2018; Narayanan et al., 2024).

However, participation in public employment does not automatically translate into agency. Where women remain excluded from worksite planning, measurement, supervision, and grievance redressal, VB-G-RAM-G risks reproducing gendered hierarchies within public employment itself. Without explicit attention to decision-making roles and care responsibilities, women's labour may be visible while their power remains constrained (Samantray & Nandi, 2022).

Likewise, DAY-NRLM has mobilised over 10.05 crore rural women into more than 90.90 lakh SHGs, fostering financial literacy, credit access, and entrepreneurial skills (MoRD, 2025; World Bank, 2022). Evidence demonstrates that NRLM bolsters women's collective voice and facilitates transitions to leadership roles (UN Women, 2014; Kumar et al., 2021). These programs offer **pivotal avenues for cultivating power within, power to, and power with**, though integrating unpaid work, such as creches, enhanced role of women as planners and supervisors within the job descriptions of Mates, could amplify their reach (IHD & CGS, 2025).

### 3.3. Climate Vulnerability and Institutional Exclusion in the Central Indian Tribal Belt (CITB)

A comprehensive climate vulnerability assessment across Indian districts highlights acute risks in tribal-majority regions, characterised by limited SHG penetration, inadequate insurance access, and sparse state services (MoEFCC & World Bank, 2025). These vulnerabilities intersect with gender, exacerbating women's exposure to climate stressors while constraining adaptive capacity due to restricted resource control and disproportionate unpaid care loads in disaster-prone areas (Vatta et al., 2019; Chopra & Zambelli, 2024).



## 4. Pathways of Agency Enhancement Across Domains

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### 4.1. Economic Agency and Improved Household Negotiation

Empirical studies affirm that women's independent income elevates their intrahousehold bargaining position, enhances decision-making involvement, and diminishes gender-based control (Duflo, 2012; Jayachandran, 2021; Heath & Tan, 2020). Income from MGNREGA (now VB-G-RAM-G), deposited into women's bank accounts, underpins financial autonomy. However, capabilities are not just material, but emotional, practical and moral, wherein autonomy requires freedom from shame, fear, and humiliation. This understanding of economic agency offers a crucial bridge between material empowerment and inner freedom. Batliwala's power within concept applies here, as economic engagement fosters confidence and reshapes self-perceptions of rights and capabilities (Afridi et al., 2020). Capabilities such as practical reason, emotional integrity, and affiliation underscore that agency is not only about income or participation, but about the ability to live without chronic fear, shame or self-erasure (Nussbaum, 2011, 2013).

However, unpaid care demands within the household and in the community often erode these gains, linking economic agency to broader care economy reforms (Ferrant & Thim, 2019; Samantroy & Nandi, 2022). For rural women navigating unpaid care burdens and institutional exclusion, the erosion of emotional and moral capacities can undermine leadership even when economic access improves. Strengthening power within, therefore, requires attending to women's inner lives, not as a retreat from politics, but as a condition for sustaining ethical agency and collective action.

### 4.2. Collective Organising as an Entry Point Into Public Institutions

Collective organising fortifies women's civic and political capacities. The psychological effects of oppression (fear, self-doubt, silence) are not individual pathologies but collective outcomes of structural violence. For Adivasi and marginalised rural women, repeated experiences of exclusion, environmental loss, and institutional neglect can erode power within, even when formal opportunities expand. Feminist approach to nurturing women's agency and leadership must therefore treat healing, reflection, and consciousness-raising as political practices embedded in collective spaces, rather than as individual coping strategies.

In rural development work, the relevance of ethical integrity lies in practices already present in collective work: reflection, dialogue, ethical restraint, mutual care, and the refusal of domination. When embedded within women's collectives, these practices strengthen power within by sustaining dignity, courage, and long-term political engagement.

Rigorous assessments show SHG membership boosts Gram Sabha participation, institutional literacy, and negotiation with Panchayats (Brody et al., 2017; UN Women, 2014; Raghunathan et al., 2021). This aligns with Batliwala's power with, wherein collective strength influences individual journeys and governance structures, though time poverty from unpaid work hinders sustained involvement (IHD & CGS, 2025).

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### 4.3. Public Works Participation as Procedural Empowerment

MGNREGA participants gain proficiency in public documentation, grievance mechanisms, job cards, and measurement, enhancing procedural literacy and confidence in state interaction (Pankaj & Tankha, 2010; Narayanan et al., 2024). Such transformations are essential for eroding institutionalised disempowerment, limiting women's public power access, with added benefits if programs accommodate care responsibilities through flexible scheduling (ILO, 2021).

### 4.4. Climate Resilience through Collective Agency

Women's groups in homestead cultivation, water management, and natural resource governance exhibit heightened adaptive capacity and livelihood resilience (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], 2020). Districts with robust SHG presence demonstrate superior climate adaptation planning and women's involvement in resilience initiatives (MoEFCC & World Bank, 2025; Vatta et al., 2019). Unpaid care work intensifies during climate shocks, underscoring the need for collectives to incorporate care-sharing mechanisms (Chopra & Zambelli, 2024).



## 5. Structural Barriers Constraining Women's Agency

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### 5.1

#### Land, Assets, and Institutional Exclusion

Women account for only 14% of landowners in India, despite their predominant role in cultivation (Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, 2016). Limited land titles impede access to credit, subsidy eligibility, and infrastructure utilisation, mirroring structural property regime inequalities and gendered resource constraints (Agarwal et al., 2021). This exclusion intersects with unpaid work, as landless women rely on informal labour amid domestic burdens (Samantroy & Nandi, 2022).

### 5.2

#### Time Poverty Arising From Unpaid Care Responsibilities

Indian women perform over eight times the unpaid care work of men, per the Time Use Survey (NSSO, 2019; MoSPI, 2024). Time poverty curtails engagement in skill-building, employment, public forums, or leadership (Ferrant & Thim, 2019; Chopra & Zambelli, 2024). Recent analyses quantify its well-being costs, including reduced life satisfaction and health, with rural women facing acute drudgery from combined paid and unpaid workloads (Abraham et al., 2024; IHD & CGS, 2025).

### 5.3

#### Governance Underrepresentation and Symbolic Participation

Despite Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) reservations, women representatives often experience curtailed agency due to patriarchal norms, inadequate training, and male dominance, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive representation (Beaman et al., 2012; Mi, 2024). Unpaid care further limits attendance at meetings, perpetuating exclusion (Chopra & Zambelli, 2024).

### 5.4

#### Fragmented Service Delivery Creating Administrative Burden

Fragmented eligibility, documentation, and frontline support across schemes reinforce institutional power over, hindering effective program navigation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). For women juggling unpaid work (both unpaid care and community work), this burden compounds navigation challenges (IHD & CGS, 2025).

## 6. Transformative Opportunities for the Next Decade

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### 6.1. Building a Multi-Level Ecosystem for Women's Leadership

Women's leadership can be advanced via cohesive pipelines spanning SHGs, federations, producer groups, Forest Rights Committees, and PRIs. Structured mentoring, recognition, and funding accelerate transitions from household to institutional leaders (World Bank, 2022; Kumar et al., 2021). Batliwala advocates grounding such pipelines in collective processes for transformative leadership, with care supports to mitigate time barriers (IHD & CGS, 2025).

### 6.2. Making VB-G-RAM-G an Institutional Platform for Empowerment

VB-G-RAM-G can amplify empowerment by recruiting women as mates, supervisors, and staff; ensuring safe work sites; incorporating gender-responsive assets; and implementing participatory planning led by women (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2021; Narayanan et al., 2024). Integrating creches addresses unpaid care, enhancing participation (Samantroy & Nandi, 2022).

### 6.3. Convergence as Institutional Power-Building

Convergence among NRLM, VB-G-RAM-G, PRIs, agriculture, and forestry redistributes power beyond service coordination. Participatory governance evidence indicates that integration enhances entitlements and accountability (Mansuri & Rao, 2013), particularly when unpaid work is redistributed.

### 6.4. Integrating Gender-Responsive Climate Risk Analysis Into Rural Development

The Gender Mainstreaming Climate Vulnerability Assessment offers a foundation for gender-disaggregated diagnostics in planning (MoEFCC & World Bank, 2025). Programs can position women's groups as adaptation frontrunners, with provisions for care during periods of vulnerability (Chopra & Zambelli, 2024).

### 6.5. Developing a Women's Agency Index for Rural Development

A composite Women's Agency Index can evaluate agency across economic, political, social, ethical and climate dimensions, aligning with emphasis on structural shift metrics. It should incorporate unpaid work (unpaid care and community social work) indicators for holistic assessment (IHD & CGS, 2025).



## 7. An Emerging Conceptual Framework: Phases of Women's Agency and Community Transformation

To operationalise agency-building, Table 1 outlines a phased journey of women's unfolding agency, drawing on feminist theory (Kabeer, 1999; Batliwala, 2015) and empirical phases of development (Evans & Nambiar, 2013; Gupta et al., 2022). This spectrum illustrates progression from internal awareness to ecosystem influence, with spillover effects on communities.

**Table 1: Phases of Women's Agency Journey and Community Transformation**

| Phase                                               | Description                                                                                                  | Key Dimensions of Agency                      | Programmatic Examples                                                              | Community Transformation Outcomes                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Critical Consciousness (Power Within)            | Internal reflection, ethical awakening and healing from internalised gendered and caste-based subordination; | Self-efficacy; norm critique.                 | Participatory-inclusive planning exercise in landscape-based interventions of BRLF | Reduced acceptance of gender violence; initial household norm shifts, recognition of dignity, entitlement and interdependence amid constraints such as unpaid care. |
| 2. Material and Institutional Access (Power To)     | Acquiring skills, income and institutional literacy for individual action.                                   | Decision-making capacity; economic access.    | VB-G-RAM-G training and wage deposits.                                             | Increased mobility, household bargaining, and easing care burdens.                                                                                                  |
| 3. Collective Engagement (Power With)               | Building solidarity through groups.                                                                          | Relational solidarity; advocacy.              | Forest rights committees; SHG federations.                                         | Enhanced local governance participation; collective care-sharing models.                                                                                            |
| 4. Negotiation and Resistance (Reducing Power Over) | Challenging institutions and norms.                                                                          | Institutional voice; intersectional advocacy. | PRI leadership pipelines with tribal focus.                                        | Policy reforms on land/care; reduced caste- and gender-based exclusions.                                                                                            |
| 5. Influence and Ecosystem Impact                   | Transformative leadership and system change                                                                  | Transformative leadership; sustainability.    | Converged climate adaptation groups.                                               | Resilient communities; scaled empowerment, including care economy valuation.                                                                                        |



Fortifying women's agency and leadership in rural development demands confronting the power structures that constrain choices and opportunities, including the systematic undervaluation of unpaid care work. Without power within, livelihoods programmes risk producing exhausted participants rather than transformative leaders. Inner transformation is not a substitute for structural reform, but a necessary companion to it. By integrating feminist theory, empirical evidence, and programmatic experience, this note affirms that agency-building is both feasible and essential across rural institutions.

The next decade offers an opportunity not merely to include women in rural development, but to redesign rural institutions around feminist principles of power, care, and collective leadership. Doing so requires moving beyond pilots and add-ons towards structural reform in how labour, resources, time, and authority are valued and governed—positioning rural women not as beneficiaries, but as leaders and architects of transformation.



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