

INNOVATIVE MARKETING APPROACHES FOR RURAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS: A REVIEW OF EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in fostering economic development, particularly in rural areas. However, rural women entrepreneurs face distinct challenges that limit their capacity to establish and grow businesses. These challenges include restricted access to markets, resources, and technology, compounded by societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Despite these obstacles, rural women across the globe have embraced entrepreneurship with resilience and ingenuity, often turning to innovative marketing strategies to overcome barriers and drive business success. This paper reviews the innovative marketing approaches that rural women entrepreneurs utilize to enhance their empowerment and entrepreneurial outcomes.

The discussion begins with an overview of rural women entrepreneurship, emphasizing the pivotal role of marketing as a tool to surmount empowerment barriers. Empowerment, conceptualized as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing economic, social, and psychological dimensions, is integral to this analysis. Marketing strategies significantly contribute to empowerment by expanding market access, increasing visibility, and fostering a sense of agency and self-worth among rural women entrepreneurs.

One of the most impactful strategies is digital and social media marketing. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have enabled rural women to engage with consumers, share stories, and promote products far beyond their localities. These tools help entrepreneurs overcome geographical constraints, increase market reach, and strengthen social capital. However, digital literacy and internet access remain significant barriers, particularly in remote regions. Nevertheless, successful case studies demonstrate how overcoming these challenges can enhance women's market presence, improve sales, and contribute to empowerment.

Community-based marketing is another essential approach that leverages the power of local networks and social relationships. Rural women entrepreneurs often rely on grassroots efforts, word-of-mouth promotion, and participation in community events to build brand awareness and loyalty. In regions where trust and social capital are critical, these strategies strengthen relationships and boost business growth. For example, participation in local markets and community gatherings provides rural women with opportunities to showcase their products, build trust, and foster a sense of community ownership.

Mobile-based marketing strategies have also gained prominence, particularly in areas where mobile phones are widespread, but internet access is limited. Through SMS marketing and mobile apps, rural women can efficiently connect with customers and manage business operations. These cost-effective solutions are especially beneficial for small-scale entrepreneurs, enabling them to engage directly with their audience while minimizing expenses.

The rise of e-commerce and online marketplaces has further transformed rural women's access to global markets. Platforms like Etsy, Amazon, and region-specific e-commerce websites allow women entrepreneurs to sell products far beyond their immediate communities. Despite challenges such as logistical limitations, payment system constraints, and inadequate digital infrastructure, e-commerce adoption has proven transformative for many women, increasing revenue streams and fostering economic independence. Successful examples highlight the potential of e-commerce to empower women by connecting them to a global customer base and expanding their economic opportunities.

Sustainability and ethical marketing also emerge as critical components of rural women's strategies. Many rural women engage in sustainable farming, handicrafts, and eco-friendly product development. Ethical marketing practices, such as fair trade certification and eco-labeling, not only enhance product value but also build consumer trust and loyalty. Promoting sustainable products provides women with a competitive advantage and instills a sense of pride and purpose. This psychological empowerment further bolsters their entrepreneurial efforts, reinforcing the positive impact of their businesses on society and the environment.

Collaborations and influencer marketing have become increasingly popular among rural women entrepreneurs. By partnering with local influencers, NGOs, or government organizations, women gain access to networks and resources that enhance market reach and credibility. These partnerships amplify women's voices and enable them to overcome systemic barriers, fostering both social and economic empowerment.

Experiential and event-based marketing also play an essential role in building customer relationships and brand recognition. Events such as product demonstrations, workshops, and community gatherings provide opportunities for direct engagement with customers, creating memorable experiences that drive loyalty. Additionally, the hybrid approach of combining traditional advertising methods, such as flyers and radio ads, with modern digital tools like QR codes and social media integration, maximizes reach and effectiveness, offering cost-efficient solutions for rural women entrepreneurs.

Despite the evident potential of these marketing strategies, challenges persist. Barriers such as limited technological access, cultural resistance to change, financial constraints, and logistical difficulties hinder the widespread adoption of innovative marketing approaches. To address these issues, targeted support is crucial. Governments, NGOs, and development agencies must provide training to enhance digital literacy, invest in infrastructure to improve connectivity, and offer financial resources to support entrepreneurial growth. Policy initiatives that promote inclusivity and gender equity within entrepreneurial ecosystems are essential to creating an enabling environment for rural women entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Innovative Marketing Strategies, Rural Women Empowerment Sustainable Business Models, Digital Transformation in Rural Markets.

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship plays a vital role in driving economic growth, especially in rural economies, where it serves as a key vehicle for social and economic transformation. Rural women, in particular, have emerged as active agents of change in many developing countries, where they are taking the lead in various entrepreneurial ventures. From agribusinesses to small-scale industries, rural women are not only contributing to the local economy but are also shaping the dynamics of their communities. However, the journey of rural women entrepreneurs is fraught with challenges, including limited access to resources, information, and markets. Despite these challenges, innovative marketing strategies have enabled many rural women to overcome barriers and thrive in competitive business environments. This review paper explores the role of innovative marketing approaches in empowering rural women entrepreneurs and examines the strategies they employ to enhance their business success.

The Importance of Rural Women Entrepreneurs

Rural women entrepreneurs are essential contributors to the economic, social, and cultural development of rural areas. According to the United Nations (UN), women in rural areas make up a significant portion of the labor force in agriculture, manufacturing, and services (UN Women, 2020). These women are not only involved in traditional agricultural activities but are also increasingly diversifying into non-agricultural sectors such as food processing, handicrafts, and retail businesses. Despite their contribution, rural women often face systemic inequalities and limited opportunities for advancement. These challenges include gender discrimination, lack of access to education, limited mobility, poor infrastructure, and financial exclusion (World Bank, 2012).

The importance of empowering rural women through entrepreneurship cannot be overstated. Empowerment in this context refers to enhancing the capacity of women to make decisions, access resources, and assert control over their lives (Kabeer, 1999). Economic empowerment through entrepreneurship provides women with a stable source of income, which improves their standard of living and that of their families. Social empowerment is also a significant outcome, as entrepreneurial success often leads to greater recognition and respect within the community, challenging traditional gender roles. Moreover, entrepreneurship can boost psychological empowerment by increasing self-confidence, independence, and agency among rural women (Duflo, 2012) Table 1.

Table 1 SECTOR-WISE RURAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP					
Sector	% of Women Entrepreneurs	Income Improvement (%)	Skill Enhancement	Job Creation Impact	References
Agriculture	40%	45%	Moderate	High	Kundu, S. (2020). <i>Journal of Rural Studies</i> .
Handicrafts/Textiles	25%	50%	High	Moderate	Mandal, S., & Ray, S. (2019).

					<i>Indian Journal of Gender Studies.</i>
Food Processing	15%	60%	High	Low	Pradhan, S. (2016). <i>Journal of Rural Development.</i>
Retail/Trading	10%	40%	Low	Moderate	Dwivedi, P., & Mishra, A. (2021). <i>IJITE Engineering.</i>
Services (e.g., tailoring, beauty parlors)	10%	35%	Low	Low	Joseph, J. T., & Mehta, P. S. (2020). <i>WSIF.</i>

Challenges Faced by Rural Women Entrepreneurs

Despite the potential benefits of entrepreneurship, rural women face several barriers that hinder their ability to start and grow businesses. One of the most significant obstacles is **access to resources**, particularly financial resources. Women in rural areas often have limited access to credit and funding, as traditional financial institutions typically require collateral that they cannot provide. The lack of financial independence restricts their ability to invest in or scale up businesses (Deininger, 2003). Moreover, rural women often lack access to modern technology, market information, and professional networks, which can limit their ability to expand their businesses and compete in wider markets (Singh & Sharma, 2016).

Another major challenge is **societal norms and gender discrimination**. In many rural areas, traditional gender roles place constraints on women's mobility, decision-making power, and access to leadership positions. These gender norms often lead to a lack of support from male counterparts, families, and communities, making it difficult for women to establish or run successful businesses (Duflo, 2012). Furthermore, cultural barriers and stereotypes about women's roles in entrepreneurship often result in the marginalization of female entrepreneurs and their ideas, which reduces their confidence and limits their opportunities (Raghuvanshi, 2020).

Additionally, **marketing and distribution** remain significant hurdles for rural women. Many women operate in local or regional markets with limited understanding of how to market their products effectively or how to access broader markets. In rural settings, where access to technology and transportation may be limited, reaching customers beyond the local area can be challenging (Sahoo & Mishra, 2014). The lack of effective marketing strategies exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for rural women to grow their businesses and increase their income.

Challenges Faced by the Rural Women Entrepreneurs: The Role of Marketing in Empowerment

Marketing plays a crucial role in overcoming the barriers that rural women entrepreneurs face. Through effective marketing, rural women can reach broader markets, increase brand visibility, and foster customer loyalty. Marketing also

provides a pathway for **economic empowerment**, enabling women to increase their sales and profits. As rural women entrepreneurs adopt modern marketing techniques, they are able to expand their customer base and compete in regional and international markets, which ultimately leads to higher incomes and improved standards of living (Kotler et al., 2015).

Marketing is also a tool for **social empowerment**. It enables women to share their stories, products, and services, allowing them to gain recognition in their communities and beyond. As they establish their presence in the market, they challenge traditional gender norms and expectations. Successful women entrepreneurs often become role models, inspiring other women in their communities to pursue entrepreneurship. Furthermore, by engaging in public relations, advertising, and branding, women entrepreneurs assert their identity, build confidence, and gain respect from their peers (McClelland & Moustafa, 2018).

In recent years, **innovative marketing strategies** have emerged as effective ways for rural women to overcome geographical and socio-economic limitations. Traditional marketing methods, such as word-of-mouth and community-based networks, have been supplemented with **digital marketing**, **mobile marketing**, **social media campaigns**, and **e-commerce** platforms. These innovative strategies provide rural women with access to new opportunities, better marketing tools, and global markets. As these women utilize digital tools, they are empowered to increase their income, build stronger brands, and access wider consumer bases, both locally and internationally.

Innovative Marketing Strategies: A Gateway to Empowerment

Digital Marketing and Social Media: Digital marketing has become a powerful tool for rural women entrepreneurs to engage with a global audience. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp enable women to reach customers beyond their local communities, promoting products and services to diverse consumer segments (Prasad & Mehta, 2020). These platforms also facilitate direct engagement with customers, allowing rural women to receive feedback, build relationships, and adapt their offerings to meet market demands.

For instance, rural women in India have leveraged social media platforms to sell handmade crafts, agricultural products, and even food items. By using targeted ads and content marketing, these women have expanded their businesses and created online communities that promote their products (Singh & Sharma, 2016). However, the digital divide remains a challenge, with limited access to the internet and technology in some rural areas. In this context, digital literacy programs and affordable internet access are essential for maximizing the benefits of digital marketing.

Mobile Marketing: In regions where internet access is limited, mobile phones present an alternative marketing tool. Mobile-based strategies, including SMS campaigns and mobile apps, have enabled rural women to communicate directly with customers, promote their businesses, and receive orders (Oluwaseun & Salawu, 2020). Rural women entrepreneurs in countries like Kenya and Uganda have used mobile phones to conduct business transactions, schedule meetings, and advertise products through SMS broadcasts and mobile apps.

Community-Based Marketing: One of the most effective marketing strategies in rural areas is community-based marketing, which relies on local networks, word-of-mouth, and face-to-face interactions. Women entrepreneurs often leverage their social

networks within the community to promote their businesses, gain trust, and build loyalty among customers. Rural women in Bangladesh, for example, have organized local events, cooperatives, and markets to showcase their products and foster relationships with consumers (Chakrabarty, 2019).

By participating in local fairs and events, rural women can gain visibility, increase sales, and establish a sense of community around their businesses. Community-based marketing is particularly effective in rural areas where relationships and trust are crucial for business success.

E-Commerce Platforms: E-commerce has revolutionized the marketing landscape for rural women entrepreneurs. Platforms such as Etsy, Amazon, and local e-commerce websites have allowed rural women to showcase their products to a global audience. E-commerce platforms have provided a solution to the problem of limited access to physical markets by enabling women to reach international customers with just an internet connection. While challenges such as shipping, logistics, and payment systems remain, the rise of e-commerce has opened up new avenues for rural women to grow their businesses (Kumar & Sharma, 2021).

The dataset comprises three tables focusing on various aspects of rural women entrepreneurship. The first table provides a sector-wise numerical breakdown, highlighting participation rates, income improvement percentages, skill enhancement levels, and job creation impacts. Key insights include agriculture dominating participation with 40%, food processing yielding the highest income improvement (60%), and handicrafts/textiles excelling in skill enhancement. The second table outlines major challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs, with 65% struggling with access to credit, followed by limited market access and social barriers affecting over 40%. The third table details innovative marketing strategies, such as digital marketing, community-based approaches, and influencer marketing, alongside their implementation examples, challenges, and empowerment outcomes. These strategies have empowered women by increasing market reach, improving entrepreneurial skills, and enhancing brand recognition, despite barriers like digital illiteracy and logistical constraints. This dataset offers critical insights into the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for fostering rural women's entrepreneurial success.

Sectoral Distribution of Women Entrepreneurs

This is an analysis of the sector-wise participation of women entrepreneurs. Using a bar chart, we visualize the percentage of women entrepreneurs across different sectors. This visual representation highlights the variation in the participation rates and helps identify which sectors have higher involvement from women. The chart provides insights into sectors where gender disparities may exist, allowing for targeted interventions or policy recommendations to foster greater participation.

- Agriculture: 40%
- Handicrafts/Textiles: 25%
- Food Processing: 15%
- Retail/Trading: 10%
- Services (e.g., tailoring, beauty parlors): 10%

The chart shows that the highest percentage of women entrepreneurs are in the agriculture sector, followed by handicrafts/textiles. The lowest percentage of women entrepreneurs are in the retail/trading and services sectors.

We can assume that women entrepreneurs are significantly active in the agricultural and handicrafts/textiles sectors. Food processing and retail/trading sectors also have a notable presence of women entrepreneurs. Services sector, while having a moderate participation, indicates potential for growth. This data suggests that women entrepreneurs play a crucial role in the rural economy, particularly in agriculture and handicrafts.

Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

In this section, we focus on the common challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas. A frequency count of the challenges reported by respondents is visualized in a bar chart. This gives us an overview of the most frequently encountered barriers, such as access to credit, market access, and cultural barriers. Understanding these challenges is critical for designing programs and policies that can better support women in entrepreneurship and help alleviate these obstacles.

- **Lack of Access to Credit:** 65% of rural women entrepreneurs face this challenge.
- **Limited Market Access:** 50% of rural women entrepreneurs face this challenge.
- **Social and Cultural Barriers:** 45% of rural women entrepreneurs face this challenge.

The data highlights the significant challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs. The most prevalent challenge is a lack of access to credit, affecting a substantial 65% of these entrepreneurs. This lack of access significantly hinders their ability to secure resources for business expansion and growth. Furthermore, the challenge of limited market access impacts a sizable 50% of rural women entrepreneurs, highlighting the need for strategies to improve market penetration and visibility for their products and services. Finally, the data reveals that social and cultural barriers remain a considerable obstacle for 45% of these entrepreneurs, indicating the need for initiatives that promote inclusivity and overcome gender-based constraints.

These findings emphasize the critical need to address the unique challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs. By providing access to financial resources, supporting market access, and fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, it is possible to empower these entrepreneurs to thrive and contribute significantly to their communities and the overall economy.

Income Improvement by Sector

Here, we examine the income improvement experienced by women entrepreneurs across various sectors. A line chart is used to visualize the percentage increase in income in relation to the sector of business. This analysis offers insights into the sectors that show the most significant improvements in income for women entrepreneurs. The trends can inform where to focus future efforts to promote economic growth and income enhancement.

Key Observations:

- **Highest Improvement:** The Food Processing sector shows the highest income improvement percentage, exceeding 60%.
- **Moderate Improvement:** Agriculture and Handicrafts/Textile sectors demonstrate a moderate income improvement, with values around 45% and 50%, respectively.
- **Lowest Improvement:** The Retail/Trade sector shows the lowest income improvement percentage, at around 40%. The "Services" sector (including tailoring, beauty parlors) has even lower improvement, below 35%.
- **Trend:** There is a general trend of decreasing income improvement from Agriculture, Handicrafts/Textile, to Food Processing, then Retail/Trade, and lastly "Services".

The food processing sector saw the highest income improvement at 60%. This suggests that this sector has experienced the most significant positive change in income levels. The sectors of Handicrafts/Textile and Retail follow closely, with income improvements around 50% and 40%, respectively. This suggests that these sectors are also experiencing significant improvements in income levels. Agriculture, on the other hand, exhibits the lowest income improvement at around 45%. This indicates that this sector is experiencing the least positive change in income levels. The data suggests that certain sectors, namely food processing, handicrafts/textile, and retail, are experiencing substantial income improvement. Conversely, the agriculture sector seems to have experienced relatively lower income improvement. These findings highlight the varying economic performances of different sectors and can be valuable for understanding income trends and for informing policy decisions.

Correlation between Empowerment Outcomes

This section presents a correlation matrix analysis of the empowerment outcomes associated with various strategies employed by women entrepreneurs. By visualizing the relationships between these outcomes through a heatmap, we can assess how different factors, such as income improvement and market access, are interrelated. The heatmap allows for a quick visual understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of various empowerment initiatives, helping policymakers and practitioners refine their strategies.

The correlation matrix suggests:

- **Moderate positive correlation** between Entrepreneurial skills and Brand Recognition (0.42). This suggests that improving entrepreneurial skills can potentially lead to an increase in brand recognition.
- **Weak positive correlation** between Market Reach and Brand Recognition (0.23), and Market Reach and Entrepreneurial skills (0.39). This suggests that a higher market reach may be associated with some level of brand recognition and development of entrepreneurial skills, but the relationship is not strong.

The correlation between Market Reach and Brand Recognition is relatively weak (0.23). This suggests that achieving a wider market reach does not necessarily translate into stronger brand recognition, and vice versa. There is a moderate positive correlation (0.42) between Brand Recognition and Entrepreneurial Skills. This indicates that businesses with higher levels of brand recognition tend to have better entrepreneurial skills. Likewise, the correlation between Market Reach and

Entrepreneurial Skills is also moderate (0.39), suggesting that businesses with a wider market reach tend to possess stronger entrepreneurial skills.

The heatmap suggests that while there is a correlation between empowerment outcomes, the relationships are not overwhelmingly strong. This highlights the importance of focusing on a multi-faceted approach to empowerment, rather than assuming that success in one area will automatically lead to success in others. While there is a correlation between brand recognition and entrepreneurial skills, and market reach and entrepreneurial skills, there is a weak correlation between market reach and brand recognition. Organizations should develop strategic initiatives to achieve success in all three empowerment outcomes, considering that each contributes to the overall success of the organization.

Distribution of Marketing Strategies

In this section, we explore the distribution of marketing strategies employed by women entrepreneurs. A pie chart is used to visualize the proportion of different strategies adopted, providing an at-a-glance view of the most common approaches. This analysis allows us to identify which strategies are most popular among women entrepreneurs and how these strategies may correlate with their business outcomes. The insights from this distribution can help shape future marketing initiatives and guide entrepreneurs toward the most effective methods for growing their businesses.

- Influencer Marketing (Local Ambassadors): 10%
- Mobile-Based Marketing: 10%
- Community-Based Marketing: 10%
- Digital Marketing & Social Media: 10%
- E-Commerce & Online Marketplaces: 10%
- Product Diversification & Branding: 10%
- Sustainable & Ethical Marketing: 10%
- Experiential & Event-Based Marketing: 10%
- Collaborations & Partnerships: 10%
- Traditional Advertising with a Modern Twist: 10%

Each marketing strategy appears to be allocated an equal share of 10%, indicating a balanced approach to reaching different target audiences. The wide array of strategies suggests a comprehensive marketing plan that encompasses various channels and tactics, potentially catering to a broad spectrum of customers. The inclusion of both digital marketing (social media and online marketplaces) and traditional advertising (with a modern twist) highlights a multi-channel approach. The presence of "Community-Based Marketing" and "Influencer Marketing" suggests an emphasis on leveraging existing networks and building relationships. The inclusion of "Experiential & Event-Based Marketing" and "Sustainable & Ethical Marketing" indicate a focus on engaging experiences and socially responsible practices.

The pie chart shows the distribution of marketing strategies, with each strategy representing 10% of the total. The strategies are: Influencer Marketing, Mobile-Based Marketing, E-Commerce & Online Marketplaces, Product Diversification & Branding, Sustainable & Ethical Marketing, Experiential & Event-Based Marketing, Collaborations & Partnerships, Traditional Advertising with a Modern Twist, Community-Based Marketing, and Digital Marketing & Social Media. This indicates that all of these strategies are equally important to the overall marketing effort.

Discussions

Rural women entrepreneurs in India face a unique set of challenges that hinder their full potential. The datasets indicate that **lack of access to credit** is the most prominent barrier, affecting 65% of women entrepreneurs. The absence of formal financial services and high dependency on informal credit channels results in higher interest rates, making it difficult for women to expand or sustain their businesses. Furthermore, **limited market access** remains a significant obstacle, with 50% of rural women entrepreneurs struggling to reach larger, profitable markets due to infrastructural constraints and low digital engagement. This issue is particularly acute in sectors like **agriculture**, where 40% of rural women are engaged but cannot move beyond local markets due to inadequate logistics and poor connectivity.

Social and cultural barriers also play a major role, with **gender norms** restricting women's mobility, autonomy, and decision-making power. These barriers contribute to the low participation of rural women in higher-value sectors like **food processing** and **technology-driven enterprises**. Additionally, **low digital literacy** (35%) and **financial illiteracy** (40%) exacerbate these issues, limiting the entrepreneurs' ability to use digital platforms for marketing and accessing government schemes aimed at promoting rural businesses.

Despite these challenges, there is significant potential in the growth of rural e-commerce and mobile usage. With **58% of the mobile subscriber base** residing in rural areas, there is a growing opportunity for rural women to leverage mobile technology and digital platforms. However, this opportunity remains untapped for many due to a lack of training and awareness about how to utilize these tools effectively. As seen from platforms like Flipkart Samarth and Amazon Saheli, which have helped onboard thousands of rural sellers, **e-commerce** is emerging as a major opportunity for rural women entrepreneurs. However, there is a need to enhance digital literacy, improve internet infrastructure, and create awareness about these platforms to ensure sustainable engagement.

Innovative marketing strategies will be key to unlocking these opportunities. Digital marketing campaigns that utilize **regional languages** and **mobile-friendly content** can help bridge the communication gap and make marketing more accessible. **Community-based marketing** and **word-of-mouth** remain strong tools in rural India, where local networks play a pivotal role in purchasing decisions. Additionally, **collaborative business models** with self-help groups (SHGs), NGOs, and corporate entities can provide much-needed support in terms of training, funding, and market access, which are critical to scaling up rural women-led businesses. By fostering an ecosystem that integrates financial support, digital empowerment, and market access, the constraints faced by rural women entrepreneurs can be alleviated, enabling them to participate more fully in the economy.

CONCLUSION

Rural women entrepreneurs play a critical role in India's economic and social development. However, their potential remains underutilized due to systemic challenges such as credit access, market limitations, and social barriers. Innovative marketing approaches can serve as powerful tools for empowerment, enabling rural women to overcome traditional constraints and compete in dynamic markets. By focusing on digital literacy, skill development, and targeted campaigns,

stakeholders—including government agencies, NGOs, and private organizations—can create an ecosystem that fosters sustainable growth for rural women entrepreneurs. The adoption of **sector-specific interventions**, such as value addition in agriculture and handicrafts, combined with access to digital platforms and financial resources, can significantly enhance the economic independence of rural women. With sustained efforts, rural women entrepreneurship can evolve into a key driver of inclusive growth, bridging the urban-rural divide and contributing to national development goals.

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