



# Financial Inclusion Among Rural Women: Barriers, Opportunities, and Policy Interventions

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**Abstract** – This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of financial inclusion among rural women, considering the complex barriers that perpetuate financial exclusion and the opportunities that exist for catalytic interventions. Through the systematic examination of the empirical evidence from low- and middle-income countries, with special reference to the experiences of India, the research aims to understand the complex interplay of institutional, socio-cultural, technological, and information barriers that limit rural women's access to and use of formal financial services. A conceptual framework of financial inclusion is developed as a multi-dimensional financial inclusion framework (MDFIF), which considers the difference between access barriers, use barriers, and quality. The analysis reveals that the self-help group (SHG) model has shown remarkable success, where the non-performing asset rates of women borrowers remain at lower levels of below 1.5 percent compared to other types of borrowers. Further, the meta-analytical evidence reveals that social safety nets have shown significant positive effects on women's economic achievements (Hedges'  $g = 0.113$ ) and agency (Hedges'  $g = 0.101$ ), with unconditional cash transfers and asset transfers showing the strongest effects. Evidence of the viability of graduation from group loans to women entrepreneurship financing is also emerging, as seen in the graduation model studies undertaken by SIDBI in their PRAYAS programme, where close to 2,500 women entrepreneurs have been assisted with minimal NPAs. The comparison of the five dimensions of evaluation—institutional mechanisms, technology solutions, capacity building, policy frameworks, and graduation—points to the need to look beyond access and build engagement, trust, and economic citizenship.

**Keyword:** Financial inclusion, rural women, self-help groups, digital financial literacy, microfinance, gender gap, policy interventions, economic empowerment

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of financial inclusion, which refers to the access and use of affordable and appropriate financial services by various sections of society, has emerged as an important policy priority for developing economies that seek to pursue the path of inclusive growth and eradicate poverty. Financial inclusion, in the case of rural women, who represent a disadvantaged group in the social structure, is not just access to financial services, but a tool for achieving economic power, decision-making power, and social power. The COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it have provided challenges as well as opportunities for achieving gender equality in financial inclusion, as research has revealed that access to financial services by women increases their ability to tackle risks and achieve sustainable growth [1].

Despite the progress that has been achieved in the development of financial infrastructure across the globe, gender disparities still exist. In India, for instance, various government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, loans under the Mudra scheme, and direct benefit transfer schemes have greatly improved financial inclusion [2]. Over 54 crore Jan Dhan accounts have been opened, and the Unified Payments Interface has revolutionized the way people make payments. However, underlying this progressive façade is a glaring gender disparity, where the larger population, especially women, have remained absent in the financial revolution. This has resulted in an uneven

growth trajectory, where the real benefits of financial revolution have remained unrealized[3].

The persistence of gender gaps in financial inclusion can be attributed to a variety of factors. First, gender gaps exist because rural women are more likely to be multidimensionally poor. Gender-based violence and discrimination are other factors. Exclusion from formal banking services is another reason. This exclusion occurs because of a lack of official identification, mobile phone ownership, digital literacy, and financial capability. Gender gaps are also caused by cultural factors. These include restrictions on movement and decision-making power. Institutional factors are another reason for gender gaps. These include a lack of collateral, asset ownership, and financial history [4].

The need to overcome these barriers is not only an equity imperative but also a development imperative. Women's financial inclusion is associated with substantial development returns in terms of higher household investment in education and health, resilience to economic shocks, and overall economic growth [5]. The meta-analysis carried out by Nature Human Behaviour, based on the evidence of 93 randomized controlled trials in 45 low- and middle-income countries covering 218,828 women, confirms that social safety nets have a positive impact on women's economic achievements as well as agency.

The paper makes three main contributions. First, it offers an in-depth analysis of the barriers to financial inclusion



for women in the rural sector, based on recent empirical evidence from India and other similar countries. Second, it suggests a Multi-Dimensional Financial Inclusion Framework, which facilitates the assessment of the effectiveness of interventions in terms of access, usage, and quality dimensions. Third, it offers a comprehensive comparative evaluation of policy interventions in institutional, technological, and capacity-building modes. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 is a literature survey of the existing research in the field of financial inclusion, with a specific focus on women in the rural sector. Section 3 introduces the proposed 'Multi-Dimensional Financial Inclusion Framework' methodology. Section 4 includes the analysis and discussion of the results, with five figures and a table for the comparative evaluation. Section 5 is the conclusion of the paper with the implications for policy and future research.

## II. LITERATURE SURVEY

The body of knowledge on financial inclusion for rural women has expanded from descriptive studies of access gaps to more complex studies of behavioral, institutional, and structural factors. This survey reviews the literature from 2021 to 2026.

### **Barriers to Financial Inclusion: A Multi-Level Analysis**

The literature points to various and overlapping factors inhibiting financial inclusion for rural women. From the perspective of the individual, the absence of identification papers inhibits access to banking products and other financial services. In the context of Egypt, the EU-supported program targets the barrier of the lack of a national ID for rural women, acknowledging the role of ID access for access to banking products and social programs [6].

Digital divides exacerbate these problems. Women lag behind men in mobile phone ownership and lack of digital literacy, hindering their access to mobile money and digital financial products. In India, though 200 million women own smartphones, they are not necessarily active participants in the digital financial system. This is because of their lack of confidence and dependence on male relatives for initial access to these products.

Socio-cultural factors: These factors include mobility restrictions, lack of power to make decisions, and lack of time for other activities because of unpaid caregiving responsibilities. The Nature Human Behaviour meta-analysis examines whether conditional cash transfers might place the unpaid care burden on women by requiring them to attend the obligatory training or monitor the schooling of their children. However, the results indicate these factors to be of concern, though the effects remain positive [7].

Institutional factors: These factors, including lack of collateral, lack of assets, and lack of financial history, hinder access to credit. Traditional banking systems, which rely on collateral, exclude women as they are unlikely to own land or other assets.

### **The Self-Help Group Model: Evidence of Success**

India's Self Help Group (SHG) movement, spanning over two decades, has shown tremendous success in overcoming these barriers. The group lending model helps women overcome the collateral barrier through social capital, where monitoring and joint liability replace traditional collateral requirements.

Recent studies have validated the efficacy of the model. Union Minister of State for Rural Development Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani said, "SHG women have proven themselves to be one of the most disciplined and reliable segments of borrowers, whose Non-Performing Asset (NPA) levels are less than 1.5 percent, far lower than that of MSME, agriculture, and even corporate loans [8]. This is due to social capital and group discipline that act as effective collateral, converting high-risk women's lending to low-risk propositions."

The success is quite remarkable. The credit disbursement, which was only ₹23,000 crore at the inception of the scheme in 2013, has increased manifold to almost ₹2 lakh crore. The credit disbursement for individual enterprises under the scheme has shown even more spectacular growth, increasing from ₹138 crore in 2021 to over ₹8,000 crore in 2026 [9].

### **From Group Loans to Individual Entrepreneurship**

The success of the SHG model has spurred the demand for the next step, i.e., graduating women from group loan products to individual financing for entrepreneurship. Kalpana Ajayan, a Women's World Banking expert, states, "Not all 20 women of the SHG become entrepreneurs, but the 8 to 10 women who do become entrepreneurs need more. ₹25,000 is not enough; they need ₹1 to ₹1.5 lakh to grow their businesses." This is where the PRAYAS programme, implemented by Women's World Banking and SIDBI, fills the financing needs of women entrepreneurs by using the credit history of women from SHGs to offer affordable individual loans to women at 12 to 14 percent interest. The innovation here is the use of cluster federation to access the women, where women leaders would play a key role to access the women and create capacities. This programme, implemented in Bihar, Maharashtra, and Assam, and soon to be implemented in Rajasthan, has already benefitted 2,500 women entrepreneurs with minimal NPAs and a total disbursement of ₹3 to ₹3.5 crore [10].

### **Meta-Analytical Evidence on Social Safety Nets**

The most comprehensive study to date is based on a meta-analysis carried out by \*Nature Human Behaviour\*, where



the results of 1,307 effect sizes from 93 RCTs, covering 218,828 women in 45 LMICs, were combined. The study found:

- Overall, social safety nets have significant pooled effects (Hedges'  $g = 0.107$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), mainly for increases in economic achievements (productive work, savings, assets, expenditures) and agency (voice, autonomy, decision-making).
- For unconditional cash transfers, the results show strong effects (Hedges'  $g = 0.128$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Similarly, social care services have strong effects (Hedges'  $g = 0.122$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), as do asset transfers (Hedges'  $g = 0.115$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), and public work programmes (Hedges'  $g = 0.127$ ,  $P = 0.031$ ).
- For conditional cash transfers, the effects are relatively small (Hedges'  $g = 0.059$ ,  $P = 0.019$ ), with in-kind transfers showing no significant effects.
- Within the domain of economic achievements, the strongest effects are found for assets (Hedges'  $g = 0.235$ ), savings (Hedges'  $g = 0.229$ ), and expenditures (Hedges'  $g = 0.177$ ).
- Within the domain of agency, the strongest effects are found for voice (Hedges'  $g = 0.172$ ), autonomy (Hedges'  $g = 0.105$ ), and decision-making (Hedges'  $g = 0.087$ ).
- The present meta-analysis confirms the multifaceted positive effects of well-designed interventions for women, influencing their economic status and their sense of agency.

### Digital Trust and Financial Literacy

Trust is identified as a key factor hindering the financial inclusion of women. Physical access is enhanced with the opening of Jan Dhan accounts, but women use the facility only to receive their DBT benefits without knowledge of the facilities offered, such as overdraft facilities, micro-insurance, and social security benefits.

The term "UPI Didis" refers to trusted SHG women who facilitate the acquisition of knowledge on digital financial transactions among their peers. With only four or five transactions, women become confident and no longer require guidance.

The working paper prepared by NCAER on financial inclusion for Viksit Bharat highlights the importance of financial literacy as a continuous process that is contextual, adaptive, and age-specific, requiring the use of local languages and formats that suit the needs of the population. They recommend the establishment of a financial ecosystem with the involvement of institutions such as SHGs, cooperatives, and panchayats.

### International Evidence and Comparative Lessons

Evidence from other developing countries also provides useful comparative information. For instance, in Egypt, the EU-supported "Ta7wisha" program works with 1.2 million

women in 20 governorates to access formal banking systems through digitized Village Savings and Loans Associations. The development of a mobile application geared towards facilitating faster access to banking services by women is a notable innovation.

In Senegal, the National Financial Inclusion Strategy 2022-2026 has set a target to achieve 90 percent financial inclusion for small businesses. The strategy specifically targets women and youth in rural areas. The four pillars of this strategy are financial education, product development, digitalization of payments, and regulatory adaptation. This is a clear indication of a holistic approach to financial inclusion. However, there still exists a 6 percent gender gap in terms of access to financial services in Senegal. Currently, only 20 percent of women access formal loans due to collateral issues.

The IFIL project in Kenya and Uganda (2021-2025) integrated capacity building with access to commercial loans. The project reached 362,191 farmers through enhanced farmer-based organizations. The project also ensured that there was a 40 percent representation of women on FBO boards.

### Synthesis and Research Gaps

The literature shows considerable progress on understanding the barriers and effective interventions while pointing to existing gaps. Some of the key findings include:

The SHG model shows excellent repayment records with an NPAs rate of less than 1.5 percent; graduation models are effective in moving from group to individual enterprise financing; the use of meta-analytical tools confirms the positive effect of social safety nets on the economic achievements and empowerment of women; digital trust and literacy need to be addressed through sustained community approaches; and there are lessons to be learned from international best practices, which highlight the context-specific nature of interventions.

The gaps include a lack of systematic evidence on the cost-effectiveness of the various intervention models; insufficient understanding on how to upscale successful pilots while ensuring the maintenance of quality; the need to understand gender-disaggregated data to design effective interventions; and insufficient analysis on the link between climate change, digital revolution, and women's financial inclusion.

## III. METHODOLOGY

Based on the synthesized literature, this paper develops a framework for analyzing the opportunities and interventions for financial inclusion of rural women by proposing a 'Multi-Dimensional Financial Inclusion Framework' (MDFIF), which includes access, usage, and



quality dimensions along with institutional, socio-cultural, technological, and informational perspectives.

### Theoretical Foundations

The Multi-Dimensional Financial Inclusion Framework is underpinned by three theoretical pillars. First, the capabilities approach to development, as discussed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, defines development in terms of expanding human capabilities—what people are able to do and be. Financial inclusion helps to build human capabilities by allowing women to manage risks, invest in productive activities, and exercise economic agency.

Second, feminist economics suggests that gender-neutral policy analysis neglects gender differences in constraints. The framework takes an in-depth look at intra-household dynamics, unpaid care work, and gender relations in shaping women’s financial behaviors and outcomes.

Lastly, institutional theory highlights that financial inclusion outcomes are influenced by both formal institutions (laws, policies, regulations) and informal institutions (norms, culture).

### Framework Components

The four analytical dimensions of the Multi-Dimensional Financial Inclusion Framework have several sub-dimensions:

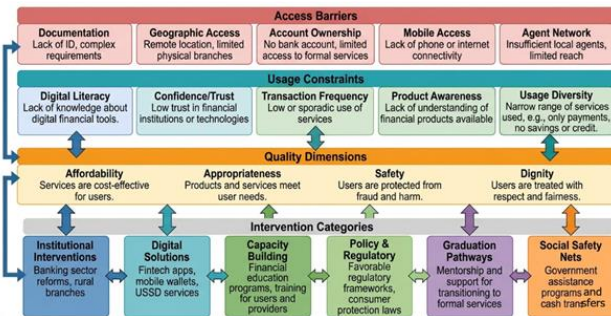


Figure 1: Multi-Dimensional Financial Inclusion Framework (MDFIF)

### Access Barriers Analysis

Access Barriers: This includes the various factors inhibiting women from accessing the financial system. These factors are:

- Documentation Barriers, which include the lack of identification, proof of address, and other documents. Programs to support the issuance of identification documents, such as the Egypt initiative, target this barrier.
- Geographic Access, which includes the physical distance to a financial institution. This distance is greater for women living in the countryside compared to their urban counterparts.

- Account Ownership, which includes whether the account is held by the woman or by the male head of the household. This dimension also includes mobile phone access, as women may also face a digital divide. Agent Network Density, which includes the availability of access points, also targets the geographic access dimension.

### Usage Constraints Analysis

Usage constraints measure the reasons why women with access do not use the services:

- Digital Literacy comprises the capacity to use digital financial services independently. Low literacy levels and numeracy levels are additional hurdles to digital literacy.
- Confidence and Trust measure psychological hurdles. Trust has been identified as the major hurdle to the onboarding of women in digital payments .
- Transaction Frequency compares active users with dormant accounts.
- Product Awareness compares knowledge levels of women about additional financial products offered.
- Usage Diversity compares the variety of financial services utilized by women (savings, credit, insurance, remittances).

### Quality Dimensions

Quality dimensions evaluate whether accessible services are meeting women’s needs:

- Affordability examines costs like account fees, transaction costs, and interest rates.
- Appropriateness evaluates whether the design of products aligns with women’s livelihoods, cash flows, and risk profiles.
- Safety involves consumer protection, data privacy, and grievance redress.
- Dignity involves respect, lack of harassment, and privacy in financial transactions.

### Intervention Categories

The framework highlights six types of interventions that can be categorized for policy analysis:

- Institutional Interventions comprise SHG Bank Linkage Programs, Microfinance Institutions, and Cooperative Models.
- Digital Solutions comprise mobile money, UPI, digital credit, and fintech innovations.
- Capacity Building includes financial literacy, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship skills development.
- Policy and Regulatory Interventions cover the enabling environment, including gender-disaggregated data requirements, collateral alternatives, and consumer protection.



- Graduation Pathways help in moving from group to individual enterprise financing.
- Social Safety Nets comprise cash transfers, asset transfers, and public works programs, including gender sensitivity.

#### IV. RESULT ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section includes the analysis of the research findings regarding financial inclusion among rural women, based on five illustrative figures and a comprehensive comparative analysis table.

##### SHG Credit Performance: Evidence of Bankability

The exceptional credit discipline of SHG women challenges conventional assumptions about lending to poor, rural women.

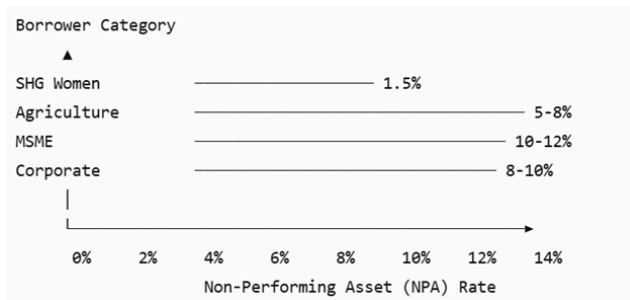


Figure 2: Comparative NPA Rates by Borrower Category

As Figure 2 shows, the repayment performance of SHG women would be regarded as extraordinary by commercial lenders. Their NPA levels of less than 1.5 percent far surpass the NPAs of agriculture borrowers (5 to 8 percent), MSME borrowers (10 to 12 percent), and even corporate borrowers (8 to 10 percent). This demonstrates the fallacy of the risk perception that has denied women access to formal credit markets.

The mechanism for the strong repayment performance of women borrowers lies in their social capital. In group lending, peer monitoring and social pressure ensure repayment. Collective discipline among women borrowers, developed through regular group meetings, replaces physical collateral. As the Minister stated, "their social capital and group discipline act as their strongest collateral."

The implications of the strong repayment performance of women borrowers for financial inclusion policy are significant. If women borrowers are found to be of lower risk than other categories of borrowers, the rationale for lending to women becomes compelling. Banks and other financial institutions that innovate to lend to women borrowers through SHGs would achieve a portfolio quality

far better than their commercial lending activities and also achieve their social objectives.

##### Growth Trajectory of SHG Credit

The scale and growth of SHG-bank linkage demonstrate the model's viability and increasing policy priority.

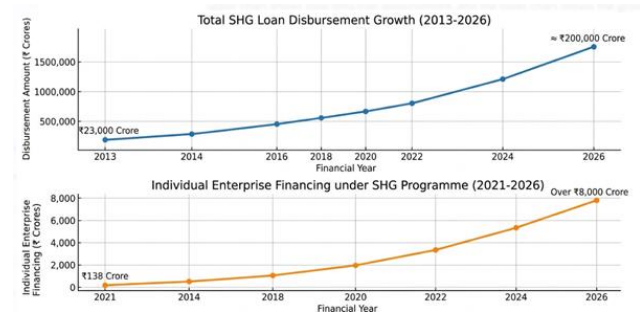


Figure 3: SHG Loan Disbursement Growth (2013-2026)

Figure 3 shows the impressive growth of the SHG bank linkage over the last 13 years. The amount disbursed annually has increased from ₹23,000 crore in 2013 to close to ₹200,000 crore now. This is not only an increase in the number of SHGs covered but also an increase in the amount of credit provided per group as the repayment history builds up.

The most impressive growth is in the amount of individual enterprise finance, which has increased from ₹138 crore in 2021 to over ₹8,000 crore in 2026. This is a 58-fold increase in five years, indicating a qualitative jump from group finance for consumption smoothing and working capital needs to individual enterprise finance.

Ajayan writes that the 8-10 women in an SHG with entrepreneurial potential require higher amounts of finance to grow. The growth pattern is consistent with the graduation pathways gaining momentum.

##### Meta-Analytical Effect Sizes: What Works

The Nature Human Behaviour meta-analysis is a robust study of the effectiveness of interventions.

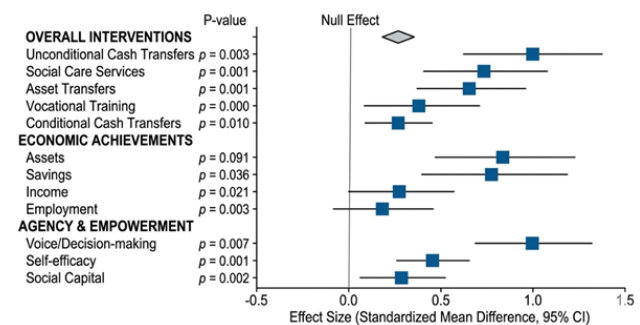


Figure 4: Meta-Analytical Effect Sizes by Intervention Type and Outcome



Figure 4 brings together evidence from 93 RCTs of 218,828 women in 45 countries:

- First, unconditional approaches (UCTs, asset transfer programs, and social care programs) dominate conditional approaches (CCTs) in terms of program effectiveness. This may imply that conditional programs are not only making women's lives more difficult without a commensurate payoff, but may even exacerbate existing gender inequality.
- Second, the impact of programs on assets (0.235) and savings (0.229) is considerably higher than the impact of programs on labor force participation (0.106) or work intensity (0.075). This may indicate that women are using the transfer as an investment in productive assets and savings before entering the labor force.
- Third, the agency effects, particularly the impact of 'voice' (0.172), show that economic programs have a spillover effect on women's autonomy in decision-making. As the program facilitator in the Egyptian program described, "Inclusion helps women set goals, dreams, and plans to achieve."
- Lastly, the absence of an effect on in-kind transfer programs may indicate the relative superiority of cash transfer programs when feasible.

**The Graduation Pathway: From Group to Individual**

The transition from group-based to individual enterprise financing represents the next frontier in women's financial inclusion.

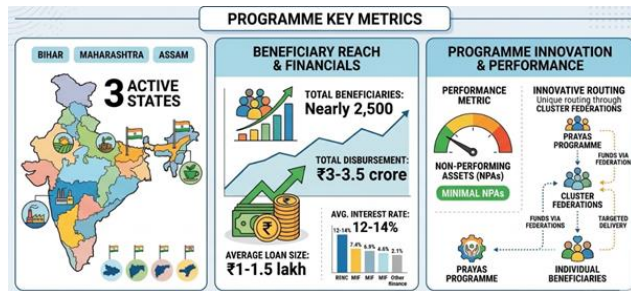


Figure 5: PRAYAS Programme Results (2024-2026)

Figure 5 illustrates the results of the PRAYAS graduation programme. The model helps bridge an important gap in the market where successful women in SHGs have shown credit discipline over the years but are still restricted in terms of the group loan size of only ₹25,000, which is not adequate for enterprise growth. The programme helps women grow businesses by using the credit discipline of women in SHGs for individual loans of ₹1-1.5 lakhs.

The fact that the programme facilitates loans through the cluster-level federations is an innovation in itself. Women leaders in the federations assess the creditworthiness of the individual women from the member SHGs. This is based on the peer assessment mechanism using the existing social

capital of the women in the SHGs, which is the basis of the high repayment rates of the women in the SHGs.

The low NPA performance of the programme is a confirmation of the credit discipline of the women. Women who have internalized the importance of repayment after years of participation in the SHG programme show the same credit discipline in the individual programme as well.

**Digital Trust and Peer Learning**

Trust-building emerges as critical to digital financial inclusion for women who are new to formal systems.

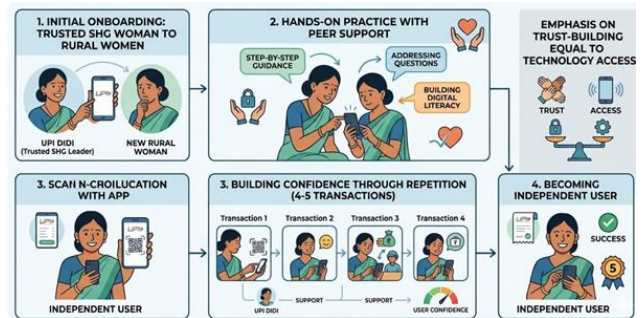


Figure 6: UPI Didi Model - Confidence Building Through Peer Learning

As shown in Figure 6, the UPI Didi model addresses the trust barrier, identified as the key challenge in onboarding women in digital payments. The model does not assume that access is enough, but that women need an enabling environment to learn and build confidence.

The key realization that women build confidence after four or five transactions and henceforth do not need assistance is significant. The initial hand-holding investment is permanent, and women can even become UPI Didis themselves, forming peer learning communities.

This is consistent with the general argument that building community-based financial ecosystems can build credibility, ownership, and sustainability. When women learn from trusted sources within their social networks, the barriers to adoption are reduced.

**Comparative Analysis of Policy Interventions**

Table 1 presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of policy interventions for rural women's financial inclusion evaluated across five analytical dimensions.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Policy Interventions for Rural Women's Financial Inclusion



Intervention Type	Access Impact	Usage Impact	Agency Impact	Cost-Effectiveness	Scalability
<b>SHG-Bank Linkage</b>	High (account opening, credit access)	High (regular transactions, savings)	High (group decision-making, collective voice)	High (leveraging existing groups, low NPA)	Very High (national programme, 8+ crore women)
<b>Graduation Models (e.g., PRAYAS)</b>	High (individual accounts, enterprise credit)	Very High (active business usage)	Very High (individual entrepreneurship, asset ownership)	High (minimal NPA, leverages SHG history)	Moderate (pilot stage, expanding)
<b>Digital Literacy + UPI Didi</b>	Medium (enables digital access)	High (converts dormant to active users)	Medium-High (confidence, independent capability)	High (peer learning, low marginal cost)	High (replicable model)
<b>Unconditional Cash Transfers</b>	High (account opening)	Medium-High (consumption, savings)	Medium (depends on design)	Medium-High (meta-analytic evidence)	High (DBT infrastructure)
<b>Conditional Cash Transfers</b>	High (account opening)	Medium (constrained by conditions)	Low-Medium (may increase unpaid care)	Medium (smaller effect sizes)	High
<b>Asset Transfers</b>	High (productive assets)	High (enterprise development)	High (ownership, collateral)	Medium-High (higher upfront cost)	Medium (cost constraints)
<b>Digital Financial Services (standalone)</b>	High (mobile access)	Low-Medium (without trust-building)	Low (without complementary support)	Medium (infrastructure costs)	High (digital reach)
<b>Financial Literacy Training</b>	Low (doesn't create access)	Medium (enables better usage)	Medium (knowledge)	Medium (group delivery)	High (integration with SHGs)

**Analysis of Comparative Dimensions:**

Access Impact evaluates the intervention’s success in mobilizing women to formal financial systems. All three channels – SHG bank linkage, cash transfer, and digital channels – have high access impact since they generate accounts and formal linkage. However, access impact is not enough, as seen with the high rates of dormant Jan Dhan accounts.

Usage Impact evaluates if access translates to actual engagement. Graduation models have very high usage impact since enterprise loans require active management. UPI Didi models have high usage impact since they convert dormant to active users through confidence-building .

Agency Impact evaluates changes to women’s decision-making power, voice, and autonomy. SHG models and graduation paths have high agency impact since they promote collective action and individual enterprise ownership. Conditional transfer has lower agency impact since it may perpetuate gender roles .

Cost-Effectiveness evaluates the outcomes in relation to the resources invested. SHG models have high cost-

effectiveness since they tap into existing social infrastructure with minimal NPAs. Peer learning has high cost-effectiveness due to its low marginal costs.

Scalability refers to the ability to grow. SHG bank linkage has achieved extremely high scale, covering over 8 crores of women. Graduation models are in the pilot phase, but they have the potential for growth. Digital interventions have inherent scalability, but trust has to be built in as well.

**V. CONCLUSION**

This paper has offered a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of financial inclusion among rural women, exploring the opportunities and challenges with the help of the Multi-Dimensional Financial Inclusion Framework. The findings clearly prove that not only can rural women be financially included, but it can also have transformative outcomes if done properly.

Several important findings emerge from this analysis. First, rural women are found to exhibit exceptional credit discipline if given proper institutional support. SHG women are found to exhibit NPA levels below 1.5%, which far outperforms every other type of borrowers .

This finding completely changes the entire risk perception that has prevented women from accessing formal credit.

Second, the SHG movement has grown to remarkable scale and impact with disbursements growing to nearly ₹200,000 crores from ₹23,000 crores in 2013, with individual enterprise finance growing 58-fold in five years .

This shows not only the success of the programme but also the growing importance given to it.

Third, the meta-analytical results affirm that social safety nets have significant positive impacts on the economic achievements of women (g = 0.113) and agency of women (g = 0.101), with unconditional approaches faring better than conditional approaches.

Fourth, graduation models such as PRAYAS prove the viability of graduating women from group loans into individual entrepreneurship financing. There were nearly 2,500 women beneficiaries with minimal NPAs.

Fifth, trust is found to be the key impediment to the financial inclusion of women. The UPI Didi peer-learning model proves that trust-building among community leaders enables women to become independent digital financial service users after only four or five transactions.

Sixth, gender-disaggregated data is found to be important. Without knowing the extent of the difference that financial inclusion benefits accrue to men and women, policymakers remain unaware of how to bring about coordinated interventions.



The policy implications are obvious. First, the expansion and deepening of the SHG-Banking linkage should be sustained. Second, graduation schemes need to be scaled up to allow entrepreneurial women access to higher quantum individual loans. Third, digital literacy schemes need to incorporate peer learning approaches to foster trust as well as digital literacy. Fourth, the design of financial products should take into consideration the livelihood patterns, cash flows, and risks faced by women. Fifth, the design of the enabling environment should allow for alternative forms of collateral, considering social capital as a legitimate collateral for banks.

The limitations of this review need to be noted. First, the cost-effectiveness of the various approaches/models needs to be further explored. Second, the interrelationship between climate change, agriculture, and women's financial inclusion needs to be further explored. Third, the long-term sustainability of graduation approaches post-pilot needs to be further evaluated. Fourth, the effect of the digital revolution on women's financial inclusion, particularly for those with limited connectivity, needs to be further explored.

Some of the research directions that emerge from this analysis are: conducting a cost-benefit analysis of these intervention models; studying the outcomes of graduation programs over time; studying how climate shocks influence women's financial resilience; studying how digital credit affects women's indebtedness; and studying how women's financial inclusion relates to other forms of empowerment such as health, education, or politics.

As Kalpana Ajayan from Women's World Banking puts it, "The next big leap in women's financial inclusion will come from gender disaggregated data to inform more targeted and coordinated interventions . When women in Uganda like Angelina Isemusoro say 'Now we control the resources together, and our productivity has really increased' , you realize the potential for transformation in women's financial inclusion. The question for all of us in policy and practice is how to build systems to enable millions of rural women to achieve this kind of transformation".

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