

# An Invisible Force Deserving Attention and Support

A photo essay unveiling the lives of rural young women







## Introduction and Rationale

This photo essay presents representative voices of rural young women who are mostly farmers from two underdeveloped districts in Maharashtra, Beed and Nandurbar. It offers a glimpse into the lives and minds of rural young women by shedding light on how they live, what they do, the challenges they face, and their dreams.

These were gathered as part of a study, conducted by SOPPECOM with partners of MAKAAAM, to explore the situation and options available to young women in rural areas.

The study was motivated by the need to know who young women workers/farmers are, what work they do, what are their aspirations, experiences, and opportunities, and the challenges they face within broader socio-cultural and economic contexts. This, we believe, is important to ensure recognition and visibility to the young rural women workers/farmers as well as to develop supportive policies for them.

## Key Features of the Study

- **Age group covered:** 18-25 years
- **Districts covered:** Wadawani block in Beed district in Marathwada and Shahada block in Nandurbar district in Northern Maharashtra
- **Areas of enquiry:** Current livelihood activities they engage in, key concerns, skill sets available with them and opportunities for developing new ones, and their aspirations for a better life
- **Methods for gathering data:** Photo elicitation, Focus Group Discussions, observations, individual conversations, and following the women through a day. Secondary data was sourced from official statistics at the national and state level.

## The Neglected Young Women from Rural Areas

Young women, aged 15-29, are a significant segment of Indian society. Nationally and at the State level they constitute about 26% of the total female population (PLFS 2020-21).

Education is often considered a low priority for these young women. Approximately 50% of girls who enrol in primary school drop out before reaching secondary classes. Once they drop out, they are typically forced into early marriage or compelled to work in fields, and sometimes both.

Essentially, we are referring to a social group that is neglected, lacking a voice, and denied opportunities for education and skill development, yet it forms a significant portion of the unorganised labour force in rural areas.

However, this population is often overlooked when it comes to shaping their own futures. They are socialised to suppress their dreams and desires and are expected to conform to decisions made by their families regarding their lives.

Nevertheless, they still dream and aspire, even in seemingly adverse conditions where they are unsure if their dreams will be fulfilled. However, their dreams and aspirations can come true if we focus on their situation and do our part to recognise their existence and their rights to education, employment, and above all, the right to lead a life with dignity.

Aimed at bringing visibility to the work the rural young women do and their needs, this study calls the attention of everyone in society—government, policymakers, civil society, educationists, and the community at large—to the situation of rural young women.

The study findings are presented below into four interrelated thematic areas: Education, Housework, Livelihood, and Aspirations.

# Education Interrupted

Young women often face numerous competing priorities, with education being deemed secondary. Engrossed in household chores or agricultural wage work, they frequently miss school, making it difficult to keep up with the curriculum. Eventually, they drop out and succumb to the responsibilities imposed on them by their families.

*I go to school for a few days and then take long breaks to go for wage work. How will I be able to learn or retain anything in this situation?*

- A Bhil Adivasi girl  
from Mandana village in Shahada

Completing school education is already riddled with hurdles, and pursuing further education becomes even more challenging as local colleges or courses may be unavailable. Parents are reluctant to send their daughters to other towns for higher studies for reasons of safety and security.

*I want to become a doctor, but I am not sure my parents will allow me to study. My mother often says that this world is not good and girls should be married off soon. I will have to accept whatever they decide for me.*

- A young dalit girl  
from Pimperkhed village in Wadwani.

*Bus service is not regular. Sometimes I do not get bus for two hours. Therefore, parents do not send me out of village for studying. Not girls, but most of the boys in our village go to taluka place to study.*

- A Pawra Adivasi girl  
from Vadgoan village in Shahada







**Shilpa**, from Pimparkhed village in Beed, is pursuing her graduation in Computer Application, overcoming numerous obstacles along the way. As the first college graduate in her family, she serves as a role model for her three younger siblings. Despite her parents' status as landless agricultural labourers, who migrate every year for cane cutting, Shilpa assumes the responsibility of caring for their home and her siblings while also attending college.

Realising the lack of opportunities in her local area, Shilpa turned to YouTube in search of alternative options and discovered a BCA course offered at a college in Beed. However, this opportunity comes with its challenges, as it entails a daily one-hour bus journey each way, costing her Rs. 500-600 per month.

*If similar learning opportunities were available locally, I wouldn't have to bear the expenses of travel and could have saved valuable time spent commuting. This would have certainly alleviated the burden of education on my parents,* Shilpa feels.



In addition to social restrictions, systemic issues hinder girls from continuing their education. They are aware that their families cannot afford the cost of education, leading them to give up on their dreams and abandon their educational pursuits.

The quality of education also remains a significant concern. Many girls we spoke to were enrolled in colleges, but their attendance was irregular. When asked why they did not attend regularly, they expressed that colleges do not expect regular class attendance. Some mentioned that classes hardly take place even when they do attend. Colleges merely serve as examination centers, with minimal teaching. Parents also have low expectations from educational institutions, viewing a better degree as an additional qualification for marriage rather than a means to pursue a career.

Marriage often becomes a preferred option for girls once they complete their schooling. In some cases, even while studying, parents may plan their marriage and persuade them to marry if a suitable proposal arises. Girls shared instances of their friends whose parents assured them they could continue their education after marriage, only to find that it was not possible. Although the groom's family initially accepts these aspirations, they often fail to support them, leading to an abrupt end to education and a crushing halt to dreams.

However, there are exceptional girls like Aarti who assert their determination when the promises are not kept.



*Our family members will not allow us to continue education as long as we wish. They are in a hurry to marry us off and will not let us study for an extended period.*

- A girl from cane-cutters' family  
in Chinchala village in Beed

*You need to have money to continue Education. Even if you complete education and graduation, you cannot get a job until you pay a bribe of Rs. 1 to 2 lakh. Where will we get such money from? If we are not going to get a good job, what is the point in continuing education?*

- A Bhil Adivasi girl  
from Mandana village in Shahada







During our visit to Mandana, we had the opportunity to meet **Aarti**, who was preparing for her Class X exams. She said, she started accompanying her parents for wage work at a young age. Whenever local work was unavailable, her family would migrate to Chalisgoan in Jalgaon district for cotton picking. Due to these circumstances, Aarti faced challenges attending school regularly and struggled to keep up with her studies.

*"I could hardly understand what was happening in class when I would return to school after a gap of two to three months."*

Nonetheless, she has a deep love for learning and has aspirations to complete her Class X education. Following that, she hopes to pursue a nursing diploma.

She made a decision to marry a boy who promised that he would support her in her educational pursuits after their marriage. However, he did not fulfill his promise and, moreover, became an alcoholic who, along with his parents, harassed Aarti.

She explained,

*They imposed several restrictions on me. I was not allowed to go out or even raise my head to look at someone. I had no freedom to make choices, unlike in my parents' home.*

Consequently, she left her husband's home and returned to her parents.

Aarti had initially aspired to become a teacher, but due to the gap in her education, she believes that it is no longer possible. However, her new goal is to pursue a Nursing Diploma after completing her Class XII. She has sought information about the course from a relative.



# Housework, the Burden of Early Responsibilities

To foster open conversations with the girls, we initiated our meetings by screening a film titled 'Dismantling Patriarchy'. The film portrays the contrasting lives of a young girl and her brother within a patriarchal setting. While the girl carries out household chores, helps her mother, and even assists her brother to prepare for school, he doesn't contribute in any way. Despite the work burden, the girl harbours a deep yearning to study. When asked what she would like to do in the future she instantly expresses her dream nurtured amidst adversities of her life and says, 'I want to become a doctor'.

Participants of various ages found the film relatable and were encouraged to share their own experiences as a result. Through their responses, it became evident that housework is consistently deemed a woman's responsibility.

The girls are not only groomed to take on these duties from an early age but also taught to accept the unfair division of household work.

They start by assisting their mothers and gradually shoulder a major share of the work, all while attending school or being employed. Soon, they become immersed in the routine of household chores, as it is ingrained that housework is solely the responsibility of women.



*I get up, light up the chulha, cook, clean utensils, wash clothes, and then I go for work... these are all women's works, isn't it?*

- A Bhil Adivasi girl  
from Mandana village in Shahada

*I do all the housework since I was in Class IV, my brother doesn't share a single task.*

- A Bhil Adivasi girl  
from Mandana village in Shahada







## Limited Options for Livelihood

Often young rural women carry their house work into the farms, sometimes as waged work and most often as unwaged work. In rural communities, young women find themselves engaged in agricultural work from a tender age. First they accompany their parents and gradually become an integral part of the labor force. This early exposure moulds their skills through practical experience, but unfortunately, it often comes at the cost of diminishing educational interests and exploring alternative career paths.

Agricultural work like sowing and weeding, typically done by women, is available seasonally. Family members want the girls to skip the school to go for the wage work as it brings income home. Girls earn up to Rs. 150 as a daily wage for these agricultural activities. Landowners prefer this arrangement as it allows them to avail of cheap labour.

These young girls have exceptional skills in agricultural activities, but these are not recognised as skills and therefore there are few programmes/schemes of the government that would help them in strengthening their existing skills. Lack of education and the burden of household responsibilities constrain their opportunities for attaining diverse skill sets.

Employment Status (PLFS 2020-21) of Rural women at the national level shows a large percentage (64.8 %) of women as self-employed. However, in absence of skill training, a large part of the self-employed among women and girls is in the category of unpaid helpers.

These young women would probably benefit from the government run skill building programmes, provided they reach them. Out of the total beneficiaries of all Employment Schemes in Maharashtra in 2021-22, run through over 8371 centres across the state, almost 56% (438782 out of total 771646 beneficiaries) are women as per the data shared by government of Maharashtra on its website. If this is true, the questions to be asked is whether these women found employment and whether they remained in that employment for a longer time. The field evidence from Beed and Nandurbar shows a very contrasting picture to say the least.

For those who manage to pursue education, their stories take a slightly different turn, as they harbour aspirations of securing paid employment, such as in the field of nursing.

Additionally, these girls yearn for skill development opportunities, yet the local options are severely limited, with tailoring being the only viable choice.







*At least there should be career guidance courses  
in the village, we will get to know  
what options are available for us.*

- Class XII girl  
in Chinchala village in Beed





# Aspirations Amidst Adversities

In rural areas, the lives of young women revolve around work, leaving little room for play or leisure. The absence of schooling deprives them of the opportunity to engage in recreational activities. Instead, their lives become consumed by household chores and agricultural labour. However, beneath the monotony, there lie unfulfilled dreams yearning to break free.

Suman used to find joy in playing kabaddi while attending school. However, in the village, girls rarely engage in such sports due to an unsupportive environment.

People pass judgement when girls participate in sports or wear sports attire, reinforcing the belief that there is no value in playing when household responsibilities await.

Even among school-going girls, the freedom to play is often snatched away. Parents, influenced by societal norms, instruct their daughters to put an end to their playful activities, declaring that they have reached an age where play is no longer acceptable. The stark contrast between boys and girls becomes apparent as girls are burdened with household chores upon returning from school, while their brothers are granted the privilege to venture outside and engage in play. Even the simple act of riding a bicycle, seen as a normal childhood activity for boys, is denied to girls, further reinforcing these gendered restrictions.









## Let us Listen to these Voices

The unending duties at home and on the farm pose a number of challenges for the young women, affecting their opportunities to live a full and healthy life. Health has emerged as one of the main concerns for these young women who are exposed to hard work from an early age and lack of nourishment. It was apparent during our encounters with them that a majority of them suffered from anaemia and were underweight. Due to the physical labour they engage in, and the inadequate nourishment, their concerns regarding overall health and more specifically reproductive health remain unexpressed.

Opportunities to go to school are also severely constrained due to the work burden imposed on them by patriarchy, caste and other forms of discrimination. This also restricts their opportunities to learn new skills that would open up opportunities for paid employment.

Violence against women is a pervasive issue, and some girls hinted at it by sharing personal experiences of domestic violence and abuse. Since the study did not primarily focus on this topic, we did not extensively delve into the issue. However, it was evident from the interactions that they encountered violence both directly and indirectly, within and outside their homes. This violence also severely restricted their mobility, work productivity and limited their choices of employment.

Overall the study highlights the numerous structural constraints that restrict the opportunities of young rural women and compel them to lead lives of monotony. Their capacities to challenge the power relations remain limited but some cases point to ways in which they have exhibited rebellion at times and gone against the flow.

While a number of things need to change for young women in rural areas to blossom and lead full lives, the voices specifically focused on the need for an education system that is flexible-which allows them to enter and exit as per their life cycle needs. They need a second chance at learning. Secondly, while the government's emphasis on skill building is commendable, there is ample room for improving the type of skills and the nature of training provided in the centers. Moreover, it is crucial to recognise the skills that young women already possess and assist them in further developing those skills. Additionally, offering a variety of skill-building options is essential.







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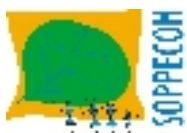
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*\* All the names of young women in the report have been changed to protect their identities.*



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