

# perspectives

A Quarterly Viewletter

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Focus: Role of Rural Women in 'Viksit Bharat'

## Time for a Rural Awakening

GUEST VIEW

In a letter to freedom fighter and India's first health minister Rajkumari Amrit Kaur from Wardha on October 21, 1936, Mahatma Gandhi wrote: "If you women would only realize your dignity and privilege, and make full use of it for mankind, you will make it much better than it is. But man has delighted in enslaving you and you have proved willing slaves till the slaves and the slave-holders have become one in the crime of degrading humanity."

Though written almost nine decades ago, the words still ring true. The women of rural India bear the invisible burden of work and family, keeping the fields ploughed and the hearths going. They are a majority of farm labourers in the country but have limited access to land, credit and other resources. That's not all. A little over 41 per cent of rural Indian women are in the formal workforce, yet largely unrecognised, compared to the participation rate of urban women of 35.31 per cent, according to data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2017).

But times are changing, even if slowly. From being slaves of men, they are becoming their own masters leveraging various government schemes and the quotas in Panchayati Raj institutions under the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Constitution.

Some changes are evident. According to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, one crore lakhpati didis are running their own businesses by becoming entrepreneurs in every

village. Then there is the Namo Drone Didi programme which aims to provide drones to 15,000 women Self Help Groups (SHGs) during the period 2024–25 to 2025–2026 for rental services to farmers.

This is in addition to existing government schemes for welfare of women/girls in which community participation plays an important role. Under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), nearly 9 crore women are connected with around 83.5 lakh women's SHG's that are transforming the rural socio-economic landscape. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA) mandates that at least one third of the jobs generated under the scheme (MGNREGS) should be given to women. The Panchayati Raj amendment has resulted in over 1.4 million women in leadership positions.

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence of change too. Take the winners of the CII Foundation Woman



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Exemplar Award, for instance, who work at the grassroots level in the fields of education, health, and micro enterprises. Since 2005, the programme has recognised 120 women across geographies, impacting 3 million lives. The winners have shown how government schemes, corporate support, and upgraded skills can transform their lives, their families, and the lives of other women.

Take Saraswathi Malluvalasa from Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh who won the Award in 2024.

Under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), nearly 9 crore women are connected with around 83.5 lakh women's self-help groups that are transforming the rural socio-economic landscape.

Drawing from her own experience with domestic violence and gender discrimination, Saraswathi recognized the correlation between food insecurity, economic dependence, and violence against women. In response, she established the Millet Sisters, a network of small-scale women farmers working together to ensure food security through livelihood enhancement, improving the income of over 20,000 women.

Or Kamal Kumbhar, who received the CII Foundation Woman Exemplar Award in 2017 in the micro-enterprise category. She was awarded for building the rural entrepreneurship ecosystem for women in the drought-hit region of Osmanabad in Maharashtra. Kamal founded Kamal Poultry and Ekta Sakhi Producer Company after escaping poverty and a failed marriage. Previously working as a daily wage labourer, she created six enterprises and has now become a renowned business coach for over 5,000

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rural women entrepreneurs, and helped 3,000 women establish thriving poultry farms, doubling their household incomes. Harnessing the power of the information provided to her through the CII Foundation training and mentoring activities, Kamal has strengthened her work further.

Women like Malan Raut, who was the micro-enterprise finalist for the CII

Foundation Woman Exemplar Award 2021, have made a difference to entire regions. Malan has trained 3,000 women in organic farming to generate sustainable lives and transform farming in drought-prone Latur in Maharashtra. Across the country, interventions through CSR schemes have made changes in farming, in micro-finance, and in livelihoods related to renewable energy, among other things. Women are learning from other women.

Seventy-five years ago, the great poet Kaifi Azmi said: *Uth meri jaan mere sath chalna hai tujhe, qalb-e-mahoul mein larzaan sharar-e-jang hain aaj* (Arise, my love, for now you must march with me/Flames of war are ablaze in our world today). This was written during the freedom movement. Today, he would urge women to walk ahead of the men, to alleviate the pain of poverty and achieve true freedom.

*Views expressed are personal.*

## MY VIEW

# A Commitment For Change



**Seema Arora**

CEO, CII Foundation and  
Deputy Director General, CII

“Rural women hold tremendous potential to drive India’s progress, and we have witnessed that through the work of our CII Foundation Woman Exemplars who are grassroots women leaders driving change in their communities. Indian industry can play a pivotal role in unlocking the potential of rural women to empower them to contribute meaningfully to a 'Viksit Bharat,' driving inclusive growth and transformative change in their communities and the nation.”



## Sustainable Development Goal 5

### Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering All Women and Girls

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. There has been progress over the last decades, but the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030.

Women and girls make up half of the global population and potential, yet gender inequality persists, hindering progress. Women earn 23% less than men on average and perform three times more unpaid care work. Women also make up 70% of global health and social workers.

COVID-19 has worsened these inequalities, with increased reports of sexual violence and women taking on more care responsibilities.

Urgent political leadership, investment, and reforms are essential to dismantle barriers and achieve gender equality.

There are 9 targets under SDG 5 to monitor gender equality and ensure empowerment of women and girls.

## Goal 5 Targets

**Target 5.1:** End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

**Target 5.2:** Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

**Target 5.3:** Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

**Target 5.4:** Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social

protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

[Click here to read more](#)

# Stories from the Field

The CII Foundation Woman Exemplar Program recognizes and empowers grassroots women leaders working in the areas of health, education and micro-enterprise.

These grassroots women leaders are driving social transformation towards a 'Viksit Bharat' and today we have a powerful network of over 120 Woman Exemplars who are impacting 3 million lives annually.

We present the story of Saraswathi Malluvalasa, winner of the Woman Exemplar Award 2024 in the micro-enterprise category whose work exemplifies the "five E's" for women's empowerment: Education, Equality, Employment, Economic development, and Empowerment.

## Reviving Forgotten Grains: How Saraswathi Malluvalasa's Millet Movement is Empowering Rural Women and Securing India's Food Future

In the bustling old town of Visakhapatnam, where narrow lanes tell stories of hardship, Saraswathi Malluvalasa was born into a world defined by scarcity. The daughter of a labourer and a fish-selling homemaker, Saraswathi's early life was marred by poverty. Her father, battling chronic bronchitis, juggled jobs as a barber, fisherman, and station worker just to make ends meet. Despite these struggles, Saraswathi's ambition burned brightly, guiding her on a journey from childhood deprivation to becoming the founder of SABALA, an organization now at the forefront of ensuring food security for women through millet cultivation.

### The Seeds of Resilience

Born in 1975, Saraswathi faced the kind of adversity that can crush spirits, but she was determined to

improve her life. Walking 30 kilometres to school each day in a neighbourhood where educating girls was unheard of, she became the first girl from her slum to receive a formal education. Her academic prowess earned her a scholarship from Rotary SCF (Save the Children Fund), which enabled her to continue her education against all odds.

Saraswathi's early exposure to the challenges of financial insecurity, along with her experiences of workplace discrimination and harassment, planted the seeds for her future activism and commitment to gender equality, sustainable agriculture, and women's empowerment. She joined the Sarada Valley Development Samithi (SVDS), an organisation focused on rural development, in her early twenties. Here, she gained



valuable experience in gender equality, second-line leadership, and organizational development. It was in this role that Saraswathi first became acutely aware of the transformative power of empowering women and the importance of self-reliance in breaking cycles of poverty.

### Breaking Free from the Cycle of Violence

At the age of 26, Saraswathi entered an abusive marriage. Her husband's constant job changes, heavy drinking, and violent tendencies affected her immensely. But even as a young woman, Saraswathi's inner strength prevailed.



Pregnant with her first child, she made the difficult decision to leave her husband and return to her parents' home in 2006. This bold move not only freed her from the cycle of abuse but also became a turning point in her journey from victim to change-maker.

### Cultivating Change: Millets as the "Miracle Grains"

Saraswathi's growing awareness of the interconnectedness of poverty, gender inequality, and food insecurity led her to focus on millet cultivation as a path to empowerment. Millets, once a staple crop in India, had fallen out of favour with the rise of commercial cash crops. However, these small, resilient grains were perfectly suited to the changing climate and the nutritional needs of rural communities. Saraswathi saw them as a solution not only for securing food supplies but also for creating sustainable livelihoods for women in her community. In 2004, Saraswathi founded SABALA, an organization dedicated to promoting millet cultivation among women farmers. Starting with just 200 acres and 200 farmers in a few villages, Saraswathi's "Millet Brigade" began a slow but steady movement to revive traditional crops. She introduced women to millet seeds and invested in their farms, providing Rs. 5,300 per acre as an initial boost to cultivate millets.

### The Millet Sisters: A Network of Empowered Women

Over the years, Saraswathi's millet movement grew into something far greater than she had imagined. She formed a federation of women farmers, known as the "Millet Sisters," who were not only producing millets but also processing them into food products. This network now includes over 1,500 women across Andhra Pradesh, with indirect benefits reaching more than 2,000 women.

These women, many of whom were once confined to traditional household roles, are now leading

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efforts in natural farming, developing millet-based products, and contributing to household nutrition. With the support of organizations like the Deccan Development

Society (DDS) and in collaboration with Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and the Millet Research Station in Vizianagaram, Saraswathi has ensured that these women are equipped with the skills and resources they need to thrive.

The "Millet Sisters" movement has expanded beyond Andhra Pradesh, connecting with women farmers from 15 other states across India. Together, these women are preserving indigenous millet farming practices and advocating for the restoration of these "miracle grains" as a sustainable solution to both food security and environmental challenges.

### A Vision for the Future

Saraswathi's ultimate goal is to establish a millet-based, immunity-focused supply chain to enhance food security for both community members and urban consumers. Saraswathi's steadfast objective remains to "Build India by Rural Young India." To achieve this, she has united all Farmer Producer Organizations (FPO) she promoted under the umbrella of the North Coastal FPOs Collective, aiming to create an efficient supply chain.

Her work doesn't stop at agriculture. Saraswathi is also a passionate advocate for gender equality and has been instrumental in campaigns against domestic violence and HIV/AIDS.

She was a key figure in advocating for the Panchayati Raj 73rd Amendment, which enhanced women's

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involvement in local governance, and played a critical role in raising awareness for the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) in Andhra Pradesh.

### Lessons from the Millet Revolution

Saraswathi's journey from a poverty-stricken child in Visakhapatnam to the leader of a grassroots agricultural movement holds important lessons for India and the world.

Her work emphasises the importance of reviving traditional knowledge and practices in agriculture, especially in a country like India, where monocropping and commercial agriculture have contributed to environmental degradation and food insecurity. By focusing on millets—a crop that is both climate-resilient and nutritious—Saraswathi has shown that food security and economic empowerment can go hand in hand.

But perhaps the most profound lesson from Saraswathi's story is the power of resilience and community.



Saraswathi's story is not just one of personal resilience: it mirrors a larger transformation in India, where rural women are reviving forgotten grains like millet in the fight against food insecurity, climate change, and the marginalization of rural women. As India revisits its agricultural roots, Saraswathi is leading a movement that not only revives millet cultivation but also empowers women in the most vulnerable corners of society.

In an age where climate change threatens traditional agricultural systems, and rural women continue to face systemic barriers to economic independence, Saraswathi's millet revolution offers a roadmap for sustainable development. Through her tireless efforts, Saraswathi has not only transformed her own life but has also empowered thousands of women to take control of their future.

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*To know more about grassroots women leaders like Saraswathi and the CII Foundation Woman Exemplar program, [click here](#)*

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