

Empowering Koya (PVTG) Women in Telangana: Challenges and Opportunities

By

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Abstract:

This paper explores the challenges and opportunities for empowering Koya women, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Telangana, India. Despite their essential roles in community cohesion and cultural preservation, Koya women face significant socio-economic barriers, including limited access to education, healthcare disparities, and economic disenfranchisement. The study analyzes key challenges such as low enrollment and high dropout rates among Koya girls, alarming maternal and infant mortality rates, and restricted economic participation due to prevailing patriarchal norms. However, it also highlights promising opportunities for empowerment through targeted government initiatives, including skill development programs and health services, as well as the vital role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in facilitating self-help groups (SHGs) and promoting awareness of women's rights. The research includes case studies showcasing successful initiatives that have improved educational outcomes and economic independence among Koya women. The findings emphasize the interconnected nature of these challenges and identify the need for collaborative approaches that integrate cultural sensitivity in policy-making. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a comprehensive strategy that addresses the specific needs of Koya women, fostering their agency and contributing to sustainable development within their communities. By investing in the empowerment of Koya women, society can cultivate a more equitable environment, harnessing the potential of this marginalized yet resilient group.

Keywords: *Koya Women, Empowerment, Telangana, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG), Socio-economic challenges, Sustainable development, Gender equality*

1. Introduction

The Koya tribe, a classified Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), resides primarily in the forested regions of Telangana, India. This indigenous group, characterized by its rich cultural heritage and traditional knowledge systems, has historically faced numerous socio-economic challenges that hinder its overall development. According to the 2011 Census of India, the Koya population recorded in Telangana is approximately 292,000, predominantly residing in the districts of Khammam, Warangal, and Adilabad (Government of India, 2011). As a PVTG, Koya people experience heightened vulnerability due to their limited access to resources, political representation, and social services.

Among the Koya, women are the backbone of their communities, playing critical roles in familial, agricultural, and cultural practices. However, they often encounter systemic barriers that restrict their autonomy and opportunities for advancement. Gender inequality remains pervasive, where traditional norms dictate their roles predominantly within domestic spheres, and their contributions to the economy are frequently undervalued (Rao, 2018). Research indicates that tribal women in India, including Koya women, face significantly lower levels of education, restricted access to healthcare, and minimal engagement in formal employment compared to their male counterparts and women from non-tribal communities (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020).

The empowerment of Koya women is thus not only vital for the community's socio-economic development but is also essential for preserving their cultural identity and promoting gender equality. Women in tribal communities are increasingly being recognized as agents of change, capable of driving developmental initiatives that benefit their families and communities. However, achieving such empowerment necessitates comprehensive strategies that address the unique challenges they face, including limited educational opportunities, poor health outcomes, and economic disenfranchisement (Sharma & Singh, 2021).

The objective of this study is to explore both the challenges and opportunities affecting the empowerment of Koya women in Telangana. Through a qualitative and quantitative analysis, this paper will investigate the socio-economic context of Koya women, identify barriers to their empowerment, and evaluate existing initiatives aimed at improving their conditions. Specifically, the study will focus on the impact of government policies, non-governmental

organization (NGO) efforts, and community-led initiatives that seek to enhance the educational, healthcare, and economic prospects of Koya women.

By shedding light on these dynamics, this paper aims to inform policymakers, stakeholders, and community leaders about the pressing need for gender-sensitive approaches that empower Koya women, ultimately contributing to the sustainable development of their communities. Empowered Koya women can play a crucial role in fostering resilience and driving initiatives that enhance the quality of life within their community, thus leading to a more equitable society that values and supports the contributions of all its members.

2. Socio-economic Context of Koya Women

The socio-economic landscape for Koya women in Telangana is marked by a combination of challenges rooted in historical marginalization, cultural practices, and prevailing socio-economic structures. Understanding this context is essential to identifying the barriers they face and the opportunities for their empowerment.

2.1 Demographic Characteristics

Koya women are predominantly found in rugged, forested areas where they engage in traditional agriculture and gather forest products. The age distribution within the Koya community is typically youthful, with about 50% of the population under the age of 25. This demographic trend highlights the critical need for educational initiatives tailored for young women. As illustrated in **Table 1**, the literacy rate among Koya women remains significantly lower than the national average, reflecting broader trends of educational disparity among tribal populations.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Koya Women in Telangana

Demographic Indicator	Koya Women	All India (2011 Census)
Total Population	292,000	1.2 billion
Age Distribution (≤ 25)	50%	40%
Literacy Rate	31%	74%
Employment Rate	23%	41%

Source: Census of India, 2011; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023

The data indicates that Koya women face unique demographic pressures, particularly regarding education and employment, which are critical factors in their overall empowerment.

2.2 Education

Education is a significant determinant of women's empowerment and socio-economic development. For Koya women, access to education is severely limited, both by geographical isolation and socio-cultural factors. Schools are often located far from their villages, and cultural norms can prioritize male education over female education (Rao, 2018). As seen in **Table 2**, school enrollment rates among Koya girls are alarmingly low, with many dropping out due to a lack of support and resources.

Table 2: Access to Education Among Koya Women (2015-2023)

Indicator	2015	2020	2023
Primary Enrollment Rate (%)	40%	45%	50%
Secondary Enrollment Rate (%)	20%	25%	30%
Dropout Rate at Primary (%)	35%	30%	25%
Adult Literacy Rate (%)	18%	24%	31%

Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs and State Education Department Reports

The data reveals a gradual increase in enrollment rates and a decline in dropout rates, indicating some progress but more extensive systemic support is needed. Adult literacy remains critically low, further necessitating focused educational initiatives.

2.3 Health

The health status of Koya women is likewise concerning. Access to healthcare services is limited, with many women relying on traditional practices due to the unavailability of health facilities in their regions. According to the National Health Mission (2022), maternal and infant mortality rates in tribal areas, including those inhabited by the Koya tribe, are notably higher than national averages. As shown in **Table 3**, health indicators reflecting maternal health and nutrition illustrate significant vulnerabilities faced by Koya women.

Table 3: Health Indicators for Koya Women (2020-2022)

Health Indicator	Koya Women	National Average
Maternal Mortality Rate (per 1000)	130	113
Infant Mortality Rate (per 1000)	70	37
Percentage of Malnourished Women (%)	45	23
Access to Health Facilities (%)	40%	95%

Source: National Health Mission, Telangana (2020-2022)

These health indicators highlight the urgent need for enhanced healthcare services, maternal health programs, and nutrition initiatives targeted specifically at tribal women.

2.4 Economic Participation

Economic participation among Koya women is predominantly confined to the informal sector, including subsistence agriculture and gathering. Involvement in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has been shown to provide some economic empowerment but often lacks sufficient governmental backing (Sharma & Singh, 2021). **Table 4** outlines the primary sources of income for Koya women and their participation rates in economic activities.

Table 4: Economic Participation of Koya Women (2020-2023)

Economic Activity	Percentage Involved (%)	Average Income (INR/month)
Agriculture	60%	3,000
SHG Participation	30%	2,500
Casual Labor	10%	2,000
Formal Employment	5%	6,000

Source: NGO Reports (e.g., ActionAid, Oxfam, 2023)

This data indicates that while agriculture remains the primary source of income, opportunities for diversification through SHGs are yet to be fully realized. The income disparities suggest a need for more structured support in formal employment initiatives.

In sum-up, the socio-economic context of Koya women in Telangana is characterized by significant educational disadvantages, health disparities, and limited economic opportunities. Each area is interlinked, creating a cycle of poverty and marginalization that future empowerment efforts must address holistically. By understanding these socio-economic conditions, stakeholders can better devise tailored interventions that support Koya women in overcoming barriers and seizing opportunities for advancement.

3. Challenges Faced by Koya Women

Koya women confront a myriad of challenges stemming from socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. These challenges impede their ability to achieve empowerment and improve their overall quality of life. Understanding these hurdles is crucial for developing effective strategies to support Koya women in their journey towards empowerment.

3.1 Limited Access to Education

Access to quality education is a fundamental right that remains elusive for many Koya women. Several factors contribute to this issue:

- **Low Enrollment and High Dropout Rates:** According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020), the enrollment rates for girls in primary education among Koya women are significantly lower than the state average. Cultural beliefs regarding the necessity of education for girls and the perceived value of early marriage contribute to high dropout rates. Reports indicate that only 25% of Koya girl children complete secondary education (Rao, 2021).
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** The remote locations of Koya settlements often result in a lack of nearby educational institutions. Many Koya families cannot afford the travel costs to send their daughters to schools far from home (Sharma & Singh, 2021). This geographical barrier limits educational opportunities and exacerbates the cycle of poverty and illiteracy.
- **Insufficient Educational Resources:** Schools in tribal areas often lack qualified teachers, teaching materials, and basic facilities (National Council of Educational

Research and Training [NCERT], 2019). This deficiency contributes to a poor learning environment, further discouraging families from sending girls to school.

3.2 Healthcare Access and Outcomes

Healthcare access is another critical challenge for Koya women, resulting in adverse health outcomes for them and their families:

- **High Maternal and Infant Mortality Rates:** Koya women face disproportionately high maternal and infant mortality rates due to inadequate access to prenatal and postnatal care. The National Health Mission (2020) reports that the maternal mortality rate among tribal populations in Telangana is significantly higher than the national average, with limited healthcare facilities available within Koya regions.
- **Limited Awareness and Health Education:** In many cases, Koya women lack awareness regarding available healthcare services, including reproductive health. Cultural practices and stigma surrounding certain health issues further deter women from seeking medical help (Rao, 2018).
- **Immunization and Nutrition:** Many Koya children suffer from malnutrition, stemming from poor dietary practices and a lack of access to health services. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2020-2021) highlighted that 45% of children under five years of age in tribal belts are malnourished, reflecting the significant health challenges faced by Koya women and their families.

3.3 Economic Disenfranchisement

Economic participation is crucial for the empowerment of Koya women, but several barriers impede their ability to engage meaningfully in the economy:

- **Limited Employment Opportunities:** Most Koya women work in the informal sector, primarily in agriculture or forest-related activities. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020) estimates that over 70% of tribal women in Telangana engage in daily wage labor, which typically provides low earnings and lacks job security. Furthermore, the absence of land ownership among Koya women restricts their potential for agricultural entrepreneurship.

- **Marginalization in Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** Although self-help groups can be a significant avenue for empowerment, engagement remains limited for Koya women. Recent studies suggest barriers such as insufficient training, lack of awareness about SHG benefits, and low confidence levels hinder their participation (ActionAid, 2022). Only 12.2% of Koya women are part of SHGs, limiting their access to credit and communal support systems that could enhance economic independence.

3.4 Social Status and Cultural Barriers

Cultural norms and social structures profoundly impact the status of Koya women within their communities, creating additional layers of challenges:

- **Patriarchal Norms:** Koya society, like many tribal communities, is predominantly patriarchal. Women often experience limited agency in both familial and communal decision-making, which restricts their ability to advocate for their rights and access resources (Rao, 2018). This patriarchal structure relegates women to subordinate roles, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and inequality.
- **Traditional Practices and Stigmas:** Cultural practices such as early marriage and gender-based violence pose significant challenges for Koya women. Early marriage limits educational opportunities and contributes to health complications related to early pregnancies. Additionally, women's experiences of domestic violence often go unreported due to cultural stigmas that discourage discussions about personal grievances (Sharma & Singh, 2021).
- **Representation and Voice:** Koya women often lack political representation and voice in local governance structures. Their exclusion from decision-making processes perpetuates the neglect of issues affecting them and limits the potential for community-driven solutions (Sharma & Singh, 2021).

3.5 Summary of Challenges

The challenges faced by Koya women are deeply entrenched and interconnected. Limited access to education, healthcare issues, economic disenfranchisement, and cultural barriers create a complex web that impedes the empowerment of Koya women. Addressing these

challenges requires targeted interventions that recognize the unique context of the Koya tribe and aim to dismantle the socio-economic obstacles they face.

4. Opportunities for Empowerment

Despite the myriad challenges faced by Koya women, there exist numerous opportunities for their empowerment. These opportunities stem from government interventions, non-governmental organization (NGO) efforts, community initiatives, and the potential for transformative social change.

4.1 Government Initiatives

Several government schemes and programs aim to enhance the socio-economic conditions of Koya women. Some of these initiatives include:

- **Self-Employment and Skill Development Programs:** The Government of India has introduced various skill development schemes tailored for tribal women, such as the *Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)*. This program focuses on providing skill training to rural youth, including Koya women, to improve their employability in various sectors (Ministry of Rural Development, 2020).
- **Education and Scholarship Programs:** The government has instituted scholarship schemes such as the *Post-Matric Scholarship* for tribal students, aimed at increasing enrollment and retention rates of Koya girls in secondary and higher education (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020). Such initiatives could significantly enhance educational attainment and empower women through knowledge.
- **Health and Nutrition Schemes:** Programs like the *National Health Mission (NHM)* and *Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)* aim to address healthcare access and nutrition levels among tribal populations. These initiatives include maternal health services and nutrition education, which directly benefit Koya women and their families (National Health Mission, 2020).

4.2 Role of NGOs and Civil Society

NGOs play a critical role in mobilizing resources and providing support to Koya women. Their contributions include:

- **Awareness and Advocacy:** Organizations such as *ActionAid* and *Oxfam* work to raise awareness about the rights of tribal women and advocate for policy changes that promote gender equality. These NGOs conduct workshops aimed at educating Koya women about their legal rights, health, and economic opportunities (ActionAid India, 2022).
- **Economic Empowerment Initiatives:** NGOs frequently facilitate the establishment of self-help groups (SHGs) tailored to Koya women, offering them access to microfinance and entrepreneurship training. These groups empower women by providing the means to start small businesses, thereby fostering economic independence (Agarwal, 2021).
- **Community Engagement and Mobilization:** NGOs also engage in community-building activities that emphasize collective action, helping Koya women to organize, share experiences, and advocate for their needs. This collective strength can lead to greater visibility and influence in local governance (Ghosh, 2019).

4.3 Grassroots Movements and Community Initiatives

Beyond formal programs, grassroots movements present significant opportunities for empowerment among Koya women:

- **Participatory Development Projects:** Community-driven initiatives that focus on participatory development can enhance the capacity of Koya women to drive change within their communities. Such initiatives emphasize local knowledge, skills, and resources, fostering self-reliance and resilience among Koya women (Rao, 2018).
- **Cultural Revitalization and Education:** Efforts to integrate cultural education into formal schooling can also empower Koya women by instilling a sense of pride in their heritage. Community-led education programs that focus on traditional knowledge can foster identity and empowerment (Choudhary & Kumar, 2019).

5. Case Studies

5.1 Case Study 1: Empowerment through Self-Help Groups

One notable example of empowerment through SHGs is the *Koya Mahila Mandal* in Khammam district. Formed in 2019, this SHG consists of over 30 Koya women who focus on food processing and handicrafts. With guidance from a local NGO, the group received training

in entrepreneurial skills and financial management. Through microloans, they have established a cooperative business that produces local snacks and artisanal crafts. Their success has led to increased household incomes and improved decision-making power within their families. As noted by ActionAid (2022), such SHGs have garnered recognition for enhancing the socio-economic status of Koya women.

5.2 Case Study 2: Educational Initiative for Koya Girls

The *Koya Girls' Education Project*, implemented by the NGO *GyanVikas*, focuses on increasing educational enrollment among Koya girls in rural Telangana. This initiative provides scholarships, transportation assistance, and after-school tutoring to Koya girls who are at risk of dropping out. According to *GyanVikas* (2021), the project has resulted in a 40% increase in school enrollment among Koya girls and significantly reduced dropout rates. By prioritizing education, this initiative empowers Koya women with knowledge, skills, and opportunities for future employment.

6. Discussion

The analysis of challenges and opportunities for Koya women reveals a complex interplay of factors influencing their empowerment. While significant barriers persist, the potential for transformative change is evident through targeted initiatives and grassroots efforts.

6.1 Interconnected Challenges and Opportunities

The challenges faced by Koya women—limited educational access, healthcare disparities, economic disenfranchisement, and cultural barriers—are not isolated. Reducing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the systemic factors contributing to their marginalization. For instance, enhancing educational opportunities can have a ripple effect on healthcare outcomes and economic prospects. Educated women are more likely to seek healthcare services, advocate for their rights, and contribute to household incomes, fostering positive social change (Rao, 2021).

6.2 The Role of Collaboration

Collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, and community organizations is crucial in creating sustainable solutions for Koya women. By pooling resources, knowledge, and expertise, these stakeholders can amplify their efforts and expand the reach of empowerment

initiatives. For example, integrating educational programs with health and nutrition services can holistically address the needs of Koya women and their families (Ghosh, 2019).

6.3 The Importance of Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity is paramount in designing initiatives for Koya women. Programs that respect traditional practices while promoting gender equality are more likely to gain acceptance within the community. Incorporating Koya women's voices into program design ensures that their needs and aspirations are prioritized, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of empowerment efforts (Agarwal, 2021).

7. Conclusion

The empowerment of Koya women in Telangana stands at a critical juncture, with significant challenges to overcome and promising opportunities to seize. This paper has explored the socio-economic context of Koya women, the multifaceted challenges they face, and the avenues available for their empowerment.

To foster sustainable development, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that prioritizes education, healthcare access, and economic opportunities tailored to the unique needs of Koya women. Collaboration among stakeholders—including government agencies, NGOs, and community leaders—is vital to create a supportive ecosystem that enables Koya women to thrive.

In conclusion, the path to empowerment is not solely the responsibility of Koya women themselves; it requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society to dismantle the barriers that hinder their progress. By recognizing and investing in the potential of Koya women, we can contribute to building a more equitable future for the Koya community and enhance the resilience and vitality of this culturally rich group.

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