

Empowering Rural Women Through Inclusive Education

In a world where education is seen as the cornerstone of progress, millions of girls from rural regions remain locked out of opportunity. "Only 2% of the poorest rural females in low-income countries complete upper secondary school" (UNESCO 2020), making higher education an unattainable dream for most. This essay focuses on one of the most underrepresented groups in higher education: rural women, who face layered barriers shaped by gender, geography, and limited exposure. Drawing on my experience, I propose that universities engage stakeholders at two critical stages: pre-admission engagement, based on my undergraduate journey in India, and post-admission inclusion, informed by graduate studies in Canada.

Growing up in rural Haryana, India, the path to higher education felt like an impossible dream. Cultural norms prioritized marriage over education. My family's doubts echoed those of many others: "Why spend money on education when she will eventually marry and leave?" Safety concerns and fear of societal judgment made sending girls to distant cities for education unsettling. The perception that university curricula, focused heavily on urban careers, were irrelevant to rural livelihoods only reinforced the belief that higher education was a poor investment. These challenges weren't unique; many rural girls still face them (Cardozo 2021). My mother, denied an education herself, pushed against these odds so I could pursue mine.

Years later, when I began graduate studies in Canada, a new set of obstacles emerged. Despite the university's inclusive environment, I felt invisible under the broad label of "international student". Resources often overlooked the distinct needs such as differences in language proficiency, financial burden, and limited familiarity with academic norms. Struggling with lectures delivered in native-accented English, high tuition fees, and unfamiliar teaching styles made me realize that access alone is not enough. Even well-resourced institutions often fail to support marginalized women from rural backgrounds.

To genuinely enhance the learning experience for rural women, universities must engage stakeholders both before admission and throughout the academic journey. In countries where rural women face substantial barriers, proactive outreach is essential. Establishing Local Information Centres in rural areas is a key step. Staffed by university representatives, alumni, and volunteers, these centres can provide guidance in local languages, host village events, and share success

stories. Local female graduates serve as powerful role models, shifting perceptions through lived experience. Such centres bridge the knowledge gap, normalize higher education for girls, and build community trust. Universities should also introduce simplified application procedures at the local level. Walk-in facilities, supported by trained staff, can help first-generation applicants navigate the process. Printed materials and in-person assistance can further close the digital divide and ensure fair access for all.

To make education more attractive, universities must revise curricula to include rural realities. Integrating vocational courses in sustainable agriculture, entrepreneurship, and crafts demonstrates the practical value of higher education. Partnerships with women's cooperatives, self-help groups, and local businesses can link academic learning to livelihoods. Additionally, addressing safety concerns is essential. Universities, in collaboration with local governments, should offer subsidized transport and prioritize hostel spaces for rural women. Family-oriented safety sessions led by female educators can reassure parents and help dismantle cultural barriers.

For rural women pursuing higher education internationally, tailored post-admission support is essential. Universities should design orientation programs specifically for female international students from rural backgrounds. These sessions should address cultural adaptation, academic expectations, and local living skills, supported by dedicated staff and peer mentors with similar experiences. Language barriers can be mitigated through hybrid workshops focused on academic writing, class participation, and critical thinking tailored to host-country norms. Community-based conversation groups can further support language fluency and classroom integration.

Financial burden remains another critical hurdle. Universities should prioritize inclusive over competitive scholarship processes and provide multilingual financial advisors to help students access scholarships, affordable housing, and employment opportunities. Stakeholders such as scholarship boards and international funding agencies must be involved to ensure the sustainability of these supports. Finally, institutional accountability is vital to the success of these solutions. Transparent feedback systems should enable students to report challenges, while researchers monitor outcomes and guide data-driven improvements to ensure sustained progress.

Implementing these changes will inevitably face challenges from multiple perspectives. Institutionally, universities may resist due to budget constraints or reluctance to deviate from established models. Pilot programs with measurable outcomes can help overcome this resistance,

with early successes attracting funding from alumni networks, government bodies, and the private sector. Culturally, resistance may stem from entrenched gender norms. In such cases, continuous engagement by local educators, rural women alumni, and trusted community leaders is key to gradually shifting perceptions. For learners, fear of isolation or unpreparedness may discourage participation. This can be addressed through peer mentorship, culturally responsive teaching, and greater visibility of rural students in campus life. Educators must also be supported through inclusive pedagogy and incentivized by institutional recognition to meet the diverse needs of rural women.

If implemented, these strategies can transform not just campuses but entire communities. Improved representation of rural women in higher education will enrich campuses with diverse perspectives. At the institutional level, inclusive practices can attract greater investment, strengthen university's reputation, and reinforce commitment to social responsibility. Globally, these actions contribute to Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality), promoting long-term systemic change. Individually, these changes represent something more profound: the ability to exercise one's Right to Education. Educated rural women are more likely to invest in their families and lead change, as leaders like Malala Yousafzai have shown. By implementing these strategies, universities hold the power to shape brighter futures.

The dual framework I propose combines local outreach with global post-admission support. It offers a holistic, stakeholder-driven model that improves upon existing practices. Education helped me step beyond the roles society assigned to me. I am proud to be the first girl in my family to receive an education, to learn English, and to work outside the home. This journey gave purpose to my voice, and I hope it echoes in every rural girl's future.