

To What Extent Has India's National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) Improved Rural Incomes and Women's Economics Empowerment Compared with Similar Programs in Other South East Asian Countries and What Policies Can the Government Initiate Now to Ensure A More Equitable Growth Pattern to Support the Vision of Vision of Viskit Bharat 2047?

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ABSTRACT: Since its launch in 2011, India's National Rural Livelihoods Mission, now called the Deendayal Antyodaya yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), has mobilised over 10.05 crore rural women into over 90 lakh self-help groups (SHGs) (Ministry of Rural Development [MoRD], 2025a). This paper analyzes how the mission enhances rural incomes and how it contributes to economic empowerment of women as compared with other community-driven development programmes in Southeast Asian countries such as the PNPM Mandiri in Indonesia and the KALAHI-CIDSS and Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program in the Philippines. The analysis is based on the National rural Livelihoods Project (NRLP) impact assessment, the official mission data, Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data and programme evaluations from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam.

Results indicate that NRLM has made substantial progress in savings, access to credit and women's empowerment as well as moderate progress in household income. But its contributions to employment and enterprise growth are less than expected for such a large programme. In some of its most important aspects, NRLM has successfully built enduring and women-led institutions which have not been possible in Southeast Asia with many other programmes. The paper then suggests five policy recommendations covering various areas of enterprise development, rural care infrastructure, etc., to enable the mission to play its own part effectively in achieving equitable growth as part of the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047.

KEYWORDS: NRLM, self-help groups, women's economic empowerment, community-driven development, rural livelihoods, Viksit Bharat 2047

1. INTRODUCTION

In June 2011, the Government of India initiated the world's largest program for the organization of rural women in groups for economic purposes - called the Women Self-Organisation for Rural Women. The Government of India launched what was to be the world's largest programme for the organisation of rural women in groups for economic activity in June 2011, under the name of Women Self-Organisation for Rural Women. After 14 years Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission has created 90.9 lakh self-help groups (SHGs) with 10.05 crore rural women households in 745 districts organized in 7,145 blocks (MoRD, 2025a). The programme is huge in scale. Now, approximately half of rural households in India are members of a SHG. No other country has a programme of this size and delegations from Ethiopia, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have come to India to learn the model (World Bank 2017).

But a big programme does not automatically imply a successful programme. The bigger issue is whether or not the NRLM has really brought an improvement in the livelihoods of the rural poor and women's economic empowerment. It is also essential to know its impact vis-à-vis other similar programmes in the Southeast Asian region, and the lessons learned from them for India's efforts to create a more equitable rural development in its journey to become a developed country by 2047.

For the purposes of the analysis in this paper, two fundamental definitions are used. First, income is measured in rural areas, which include incomes of households, consumption, savings, ownership of assets, and household debt. Second, women's empowerment is conceptualised in terms of the concept established by Kabeer (1999), which views empowerment as an increase in women's strategic life choices, through the three interlinked dimensions: resources (material, human and social), agency (decision-making

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and bargaining power), and achievements (actual improvements in women's well being). This is key to note because although women may have access to financial resources, they may not be empowered. For instance, a loan is a resource but whether or not it results in empowerment depends on who is empowered to use it.

This study is facilitated by the comparison with the countries in Southeast Asia, where some countries have launched programmes with the same goal but different approaches. In its heyday, PNPM Mandiri was the world's largest community-driven development (CDD) programme, encompassing over 70,000 villages and urban wards in Indonesia (World Bank, 2014). The Philippines adopted the conditional cash transfer programme KALAHI-CIDSS, which has a significant gender focus, as well as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), one of the largest conditional cash transfer programmes in Asia. Vietnam's poverty reduction strategy was based on subsidised credit, partly provided by the Vietnam Women's Union. There were different types of programmes for reducing poverty and enhancing livelihoods. Indonesia and the Philippines primarily invested in infrastructure and direct financial transfers while India emphasized on creating permanent women's institutions and credit through them. This comparison of various approaches can be useful in understanding the differences in Outcomes.

The primary finding of this paper is that NRLM has achieved some meaningful yet modest results in rural incomes, and has had a greater impact on financial inclusion, and agency of women. The programme's most notable achievement has been its institutional structure, which has built long-term, women-led institutional structures that have sustained beyond specific projects. Unfortunately, however, the mission has not been equally successful in mobilizing the resources of collective savings into large-scale enterprise development or paid employment, and this is one of its greatest challenges. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Literature review on SHG based development and community driven development programmes is done in section 2. The methodology and limitations are discussed in section 3. Sections 4 and 5 look at the effects of NRLM on incomes of the rural masses and on the economic empowerment of women. In Section 6, India's experience is compared with other similar programmes in the Southeast Asian region. The Policy recommendations to achieve the goals of Viksit Bharat 2047 have been presented in Section 7 and the work is concluded by Section 8.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Why groups? The principles of SHG based development

Three principal arguments are put forward to suggest that by establishing small savings groups it is possible to organise poor women. The first one is financial. This is called group lending and it involves the use of social collateral instead of physical collateral, enabling households with less or no assets to borrow at much lower interest rates than moneylenders. The second is an informational letter. Since members are familiar with each other and each member keeps an eye on the other, banks don't need to spend as much time and money evaluating borrowers, and don't need to spend so much following up on the repayments. The third argument, and the one most subject to debate, is sociological. Social capital is developed through regular group meetings, that can boost women's confidence and raise their influence in their households and communities.

The Andhra Pradesh microfinance crisis of 2010 had a significant impact on the design of NRLM. In this time period, private micro-finance institutions engaged in heavy and aggressive lending activities, which were then followed by coercive recovery activities, and a number of borrower suicides, sparked the government to stop much of the micro finance industry's activities. This presented a dilemma to Indian policy makers: between two means of group financing. The commercial microfinance institution (MFI) model was one, as it grew rapidly but also had a tendency to make over-the-lending. The other one was the SHG-bank linkage model under which groups formed their own savings clubs and took loan from regulated banks. The latter was followed by the NRLM, which took a further leap by forming permanent federations of individual SHGs, that are fully owned by their members. This design focus on building strong institutions, is evident in many of the outcomes of the programme, such as low default rates, sustainable long-term operation and slow growth of enterprises.

The third argument is generally analyzed in the light of the framework set out by Kabeer (1999). She differentiates resources, agency and achievements and claims that these are not synonymous. Access to a resource is an opportunity, but does not imply that a woman has the ability to make decisions. For instance, where a woman's husband collects her SHG loan, and then chooses how it will be spent, the woman has accessed a resource, but not agency.

The most extensive review of evidence is the Campbell systematic review by Brody et al. (2015) which reviewed 23 quantitative and 11 qualitative studies of economic SHG programmes. The review found that SHGs have positive and statistically significant effects on women's economic and political empowerment as well as their mobility. It also did not discover any negative effects, like domestic backlash, that some had predicted. Income and asset ownership increased but not as much or consistently as

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empowerment. This is a distinction between more ambitious empowerment outcomes and less dramatic income improvements, which can be found again throughout the Indian evidence, and is one of the primary themes investigated in this paper.

2.2 Evidence on NRLM and its predecessors

NRLM was not a spontaneous movement. On launch in 2011 it was succeeded by Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana and was based on many concepts from successful state programmes like Andhra Pradesh's Indira Kranthi Patham and Bihar's JEEViKA (Sambodhi, 2023). The two programmes are progressing well. The Andhra Pradesh programme was found to have an impact on household consumption and nutrition, especially among the poorest households by Deininger and Liu (2013). Datta (2015) found that JEEViKA was effective in lowering the dependency of the households on high interest informal loans, and that the SHG credit refinance was effective in reducing the informal loans. A World Bank sociological study by Sanyal et al. (2015) revealed that JEEViKA also enabled women to question the traditional power dynamics in their homes and villages through collective action.

The best available evidence on NRLM is from the impact evaluation of the National Rural Livelihoods Project, undertaken by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation in collaboration with the Ministry of Rural Development, the World Bank and Gates Foundation (Kochar et al., 2020). The study included approximately 5,000 SHGs and over 20,000 households in nine states, including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. Households in programme areas reported incomes which were 19 per cent higher, savings which were 28 per cent higher, reduction in dependence on informal loans by 20 per cent, and increase in the proportion of women with secondary occupation by four percentage points after participating in the programme for about two and a half years, compared with those in the comparison areas (Kochar et al., 2020; MoRD, 2025b). The study also revealed that the older SHGs performed better than the newer ones indicating that the impact of the programme is greater with time. This evidence is extended to the mission's enterprise-development phase (around 23,000 households) through a follow-on evaluation of the National Rural Economic Transformation Project (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation [3ie] 2025).

Other research finds a more complicated pattern of programme effects on incomes. According to the survey conducted at Ashoka University in Maharashtra in 2020, significant strides were made in political participation, financial literacy, mobility and decision-making with a particular focus on women from marginalised caste and tribal communities. However, the survey of SHG members showed that over 90 per cent of the members had not used the group fund for a new income generating activity (Kumar, 2023). Likewise, a study by the World Bank in Odisha revealed a 12.8 per cent rise in women's readiness to seek help from formal institutions for community matters like domestic violence and issues in the public distribution system (Kumar, 2023). Combined these studies indicate that NRLM has been most effective in improving financial inclusion and women's empowerment, and in increasing income and enterprise development, this has taken a longer time.

2.3 Evidence of community-driven development in SEA

In Southeast Asia, the poverty alleviation approach of community driven development programmes was different. The Kecamatan Development Program was initiated in 1997 and then extended to the country as PNPM Mandiri in 2007 which disbursed block grants to sub-districts and then villages were selected through participatory planning. The majority of the money has gone towards infrastructure including roads, bridges and water systems, and a small amount into revolving funds for women's savings and loan associations (World Bank, 2014). The impact evaluations revealed a rise in consumption by approximately 19 per cent for poor households. They also discovered that there were no significant income benefits for households that were not poor, indicating that local elites did not reap the greatest benefits of the programme (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2014; Voss, 2012). In a review of World Bank CDD programmes, Wong (2012) agrees that CDD programmes are mostly successful in providing infrastructure and enhancing consumption, but less successful in enhancing social capital and governance.

The Philippines has the closest gender outcome comparison with India. A community-driven development programme (CDDP) similar to the model in Indonesia lowered the incidence of households being poor by six percentage points, and raised the employment rate of women by eight percentage points (ADB, 2014; Labonne, 2013). The programme also incorporated a Gender Incentive Grant that caused the proportion of women employed in paid skilled and unskilled construction work to climb from 3 per cent in 2010 to 10 per cent in 2015 (Millennium Challenge Corporation [MCC] 2016). The Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) was also a direct conditional cash transfer to mothers for their children's school attendance and timely health check-ups, in addition to KALAHI-CIDSS. The programme was evaluated and was found to be successful in enhancing education and health outcomes (Orbeta et al., 2021). Poverty reduction was partially attributed to the provision of credit facilities at subsidized rates through the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, as well as a general trend of rapid economic growth that pulled poverty down from almost 60 per cent in the early 1990s to low single digits (World Bank, 2022).

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In the case of Bangladesh one thing has to be noted. It will be appreciated by readers that Grameen Bank and BRAC, two institutions that brought the world the idea of group lending, are missing from the central comparison. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the research question is more specific as it targets only Southeast Asia whereas Bangladesh is included in South Asia. Second, while Government led programmes like NRLM are at work, the two non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – Grameen Bank and BRAC – are not. Reliable information on what states can achieve on a national scale can be gained by comparing government programmes. Therefore, the case study of Bangladesh is discussed as an important influence on the development of the SHG model rather than as one of the main case studies.

2.4 How the paper addresses this gap

While numerous studies have been done on the SHGs and NRLM and community development programmes, there are limited studies that directly compare the infrastructure-based and cash-transfer models that are implemented in the Philippines and Indonesia with the institution-building model adopted in India with regards to women's economic outcomes. Even lesser studies focus on the implications of these comparisons for the long-term vision of Viskit Bharat 2047 to be realised for India. The Economic Survey was one of the factors that highlighted women's labour force participation as one of the crucial issues that needs to be addressed to reach developed country income levels by the 100th anniversary of Independence Day in India (Government of India, 2025). To fill this gap, this paper compares these various development models and examines the lessons learnt from these models in terms of how they can be applied to better prepare for more equitable rural development.

3. METHODOLOGY

The method of this study is comparative case study method with secondary data. This can be used to compare different programmes and countries, but there are some pitfalls to this approach.

In this paper the Indian evidence is derived from three different sources. First, there are quasi-experimental impact evaluations, especially by Kochar et al. (2020) and via the NRETP endline study (3ie, 2025) which can be used to estimate the impact of the programme. Second, Administrative information from the DAY-NRLM Management Information System (MoRD, 2025a, 2026) is available that includes information on programme coverage, credit and repayment. Third, national surveys, especially the Periodic Labour Force Survey, provide information on labour market trends (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2024).

The evidence for Southeast Asia comes from World Bank and Asian Development Bank evaluations of PNPM Mandiri and KALAH-CIDSS (ADB, 2014; Labonne, 2013; Voss, 2012), the Millennium Challenge Corporation's evaluation of gender outcomes in the Philippines (MCC, 2016), and the World Bank's poverty assessment of Vietnam (World Bank, 2022). Women's empowerment is measured according to Kabeer's (1999) resources-agency-achievements framework throughout the analysis, ensuring that all programmes are analysed using the same framework.

There are four crucial points that are limited in this approach. Selection bias is a problem such as women who volunteer for SHGs might be distinct from those who don't, and second, women who do join SHGs might not be the same as women who don't. While the use of matched comparison groups is used for the major evaluations, this can not be completely eliminated. Second, the data used for rural household surveys are self-reported income, which is not necessarily reliable, and the percentage rise from low incomes may at times overestimate the impact of programmes. Thirdly, the programmes studied in this paper are not the same. Comparisons in Section 6 of the SHG-credit model and the community-driven development programme and the conditional cash transfer programme should be viewed with caution as they have different objectives. This is reflected in Figure 5. Last but not the least, it is hard to gauge the effect of the NRLM since it works in conjunction with other schemes like MGNREGA, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana and various state government schemes. Consequently, certain outcomes might be a result of more than one programme, and not NRLM. The limitations do not diminish the value of the analysis, but should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of the analysis.

4. NRLM AND RURAL INCOMES: WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE?

4.1 Performance in relation to scale, credit and repayment

The development of NRLM is clearly evident from the graph shown in figure 1. The programme expanded from roughly 4.5 crore women by 2017 (World Bank, 2017) to 8.6 crore by 2023 (Sambodhi, 2023) and reached 10.05 crore women by 2025 (MoRD, 2025a). Growth was not continuous. While the number of annual SHG formation was 9.77 lakh in 2019-20, it fell to 6.02 lakh in

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2020-21, but it has picked up in subsequent years (Dataful, 2025). This indicates that the programme was community-based, and relied on mobilisation activities in the field, which were affected during the pandemic.

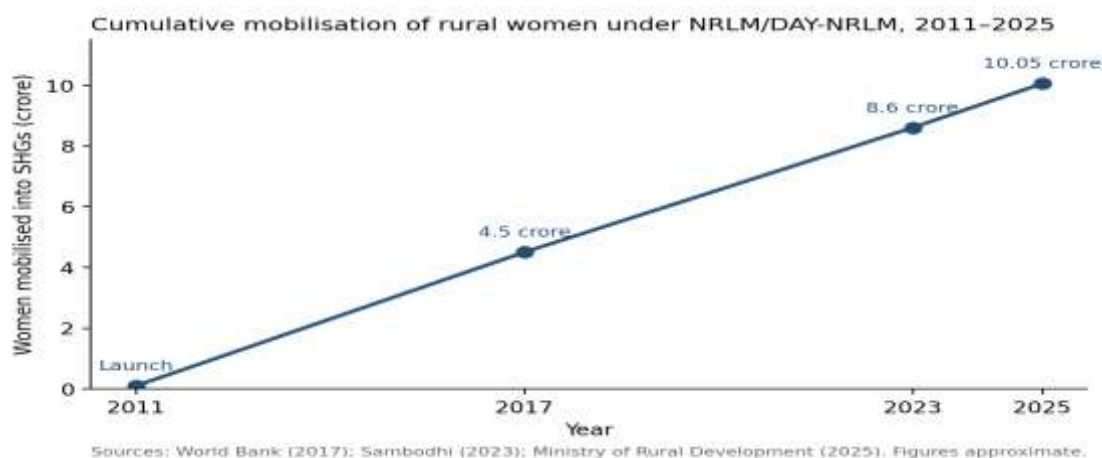


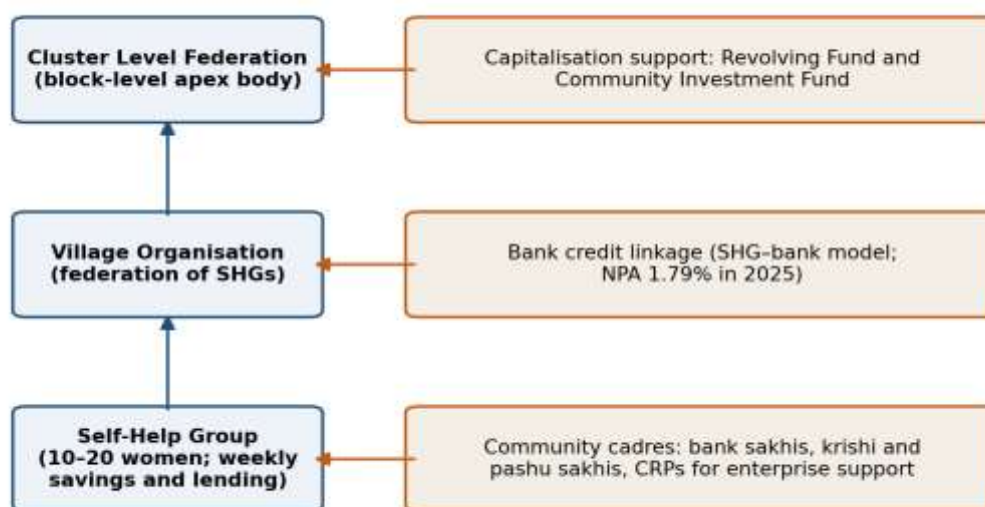
Figure 1. Cumulative mobilisation of rural women under NRLM/DAY-NRLM, 2011-2025.

Figure 1. Cumulative mobilisation of rural women under NRLM/DAY-NRLM, 2011-2025. Sources: World Bank (2017); Sambodhi (2023); MoRD (2025a). Figures approximate.

Significant progress in financial inclusion has also been made in the growth of the programme. In 2017, SHG members had saved a total of USD 1.4 billion and drawn USD 20 billion in commercial bank credit (World Bank, 2017). Banks have extended over 2 lakh crore rupees of loan to SHGs in first 10 months of 2025 while NPA has stayed at just 1.79 per cent (MoRD, 2026). This is a comparative abnormally low default rate for Indian banks. It reveals that despite modest financial resources, members of SHG have been very good on repayment. This trend is also reflected in the broader microfinance landscape, as observed in the annual report of the SHG-bank linkage programme by NABARD (2024).

The three institutional structure of DAY-NRLM is shown in figure 2. The Primary SHGs are of size of 10 to 20 women each organised into Village Organisations which in turn constitute Cluster Level Federations. This structure is the gateway for financial support (including the Revolving Fund and Community Investment Fund) and trained community professionals like bank sakhis, krishi sakhis, pashu sakhis and enterprise resource persons provide support at various levels (MoRD, 2025a, 2026). In the current situation, over 1.44 lakh SHG members are engaged as banking correspondents in their villages (MoRD, 2026). The community institutions continue to operate even after individual projects are finished, one of the strengths of this model.

The three-tier community institutional architecture of DAY-NRLM



Source: Author's illustration based on Ministry of Rural Development (2025, 2026).

Figure 2. The three-tier community institutional architecture of DAY-NRLM.

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Figure 2. The three-tier community institutional architecture of DAY-NRLM. Source: Author's illustration based on MoRD (2025a, 2026).

4.2 The causal evidence on income

While programme coverage and access to credit is significant, the main focus is on whether NRLM has boosted household incomes. The best evidence is from Kochar et al. (2020). Household income was 19 per cent higher than in comparison areas, savings 28 per cent higher, dependence on informal loans 20 per cent lower and four percentage points more women had a secondary occupation, as shown in Figure 3, after around two and a half years of participation (Kochar et al., 2020; MoRD, 2025b). The evaluation also identified increases in household food diversity and productive assets ownership with better results for older SHGs.

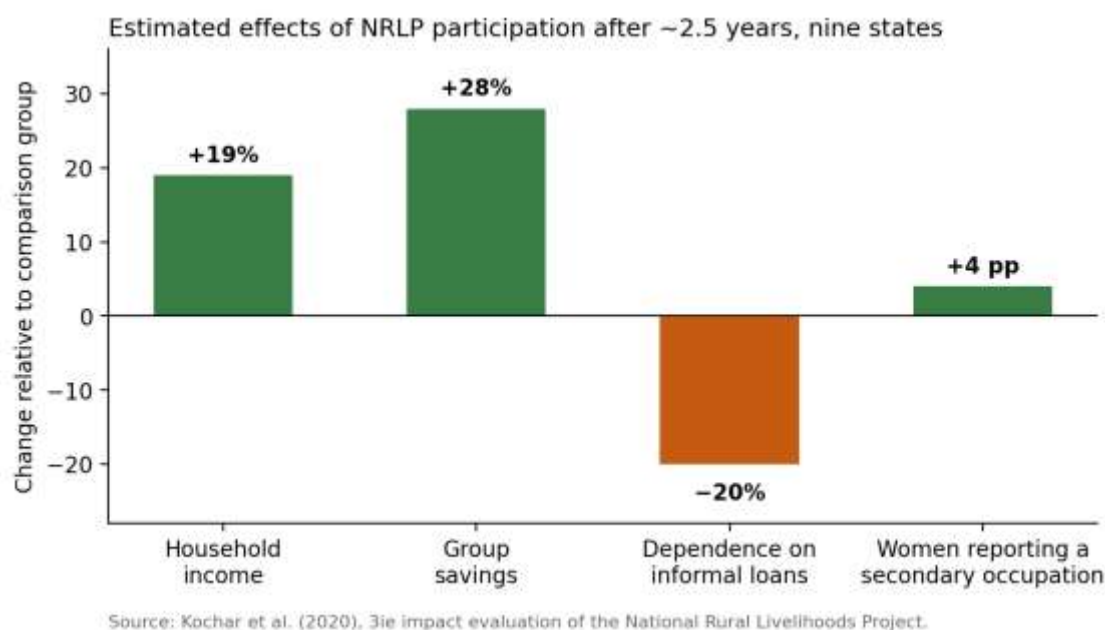


Figure 3. Estimated effects of NRLP participation after approximately 2.5 years.

Figure 3. Estimated effects of NRLP participation after approximately 2.5 years, nine states. Source: Kochar et al. (2020).

These results should be viewed with caution. First, a 19 per cent rise in income is significant, but isn't game-changing. It is an addition of about 1,500 rupees to the monthly income of a 8000/- per month family. Secondly, the availability of lower-cost SHG credit could have played a larger role in the improvement of household finances than would the income gains. According to Datta (2015), this was one of the primary reasons of the success of JEEViKA from its inception. Third, most income increases were from increasing existing livelihood activities (agriculture, livestock and other work) not from creating new activities. This is also consistent with the findings of the Maharashtra survey on which it is observed that over 90 per cent of SHG members did not utilize group resources for initiating a new income generating activity (Kumar, 2023).

4.3 From credit to livelihoods: the next challenge

This is a limitation that has been acknowledged by the mission and over time it has moved away from mobilisation of groups, to livelihood development. The Lakshpati Didi initiative was launched in 2023 and further strengthened in the 2024 Budget, with the goal of ensuring that three crore women in SHG groups can make at least 1 lakh rupees every year (MoRD, 2025a) which is approximately 10,000 rupees per month for four agriculture seasons or business cycles. In total, 1.48 crore women achieved this income level by June 2025, with Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar having the largest number of women in this category (MoRD, 2025b). The number was later reported to be more than two crore at the end of 2025 from the Ministry's year-end review (MoRD, 2026). Along with this growth, funding has also been allocated to the mission, which is 15,047 crore rupees in 2024-25 (MoRD, 2024).

4.4 Progress and its geography

Regional differences are not reflected in national averages. The SHG movement emerged earlier in the southern part of India, where some programmes had been functioning since late 1990s, like Indira Kranthi Patham in Andhra Pradesh and Kudumbashree

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in Kerala. The model was later extended by the NRLM to northern and eastern India. Based on Mission data, the top five states containing the highest number of SHGs and households mobilised during the period of five years up to 2024, together accounted for approximately 57 per cent of the mobilisation of SHGs and households. (Dataful, 2025)

This trend can also be observed in the Lakhpati Didi programme. Maharashtra had the maximum number of Lakhpati Didis followed by Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh (MoRD, 2025b). Bihar's case stands out as prominent. Although it had the lowest indicators of rural development in the early 2000s, it is now third among all districts in terms of SHG women's earnings of at least one lakh rupees per year and it had the highest allocation from the central government under the mission in 2025-26. The improvement could be attributed to an early institutional development by JEEViKA or late expansion by NRLM, but indicates that the model has the potential to work in less developed states as well as in more advanced ones. This is significant because a livelihood programme working only in relatively prosperous states would raise inequality within the regions, not lower it.

The Lakhpati Didi figures can be interpreted in two ways. On the other hand, it allows the mission to set an income-earning target and not just the number of SHGs established. It is backed by livelihood planning and asset support (WEAF). However, a threshold of one lakh per annum is not a high ceiling and many households may eventually be able to achieve it without programme support, with their rural incomes rising. The figures also include some self-reported data which can impact the accuracy of the figures. The actual effect of the program is probably somewhere in between these two extremes. In the future, as the mission turns 15 in 2026, the next 3ie endline evaluation should offer more conclusive evidence of 3ie's long-term impact (3ie, 2025).

5. WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

5.1 Resources

The first dimension of empowerment, according to Kabeer's (1999) analysis, is resources and NRLM has done well in this dimension as well with ample evidence across studies. Institutions and organizations now have more than 10 crore women members, who can save money in their own name, and the mission also gives training in financial knowledge in accounting, record keeping and loan management via SHGs (MoRD, 2025a). Access to credit is another important resource. The low NPA rate of 1.79 per cent (MoRD, 2026), indicates that women borrowers are able to pay back loans and that the SHGs have helped the women members to develop financial habits as well. There's also been an increase in social resources. Many members of the SHGs have been trained as para-professionals in the community cadre system, such as banking correspondent sakhis, the krishi sakhis and the pashu sakhis. As per MoRD, in the year 2025 alone 12,241 banking correspondent sakhis were mobilized for delivery of financial services in their respective villages.

5.2 Agency

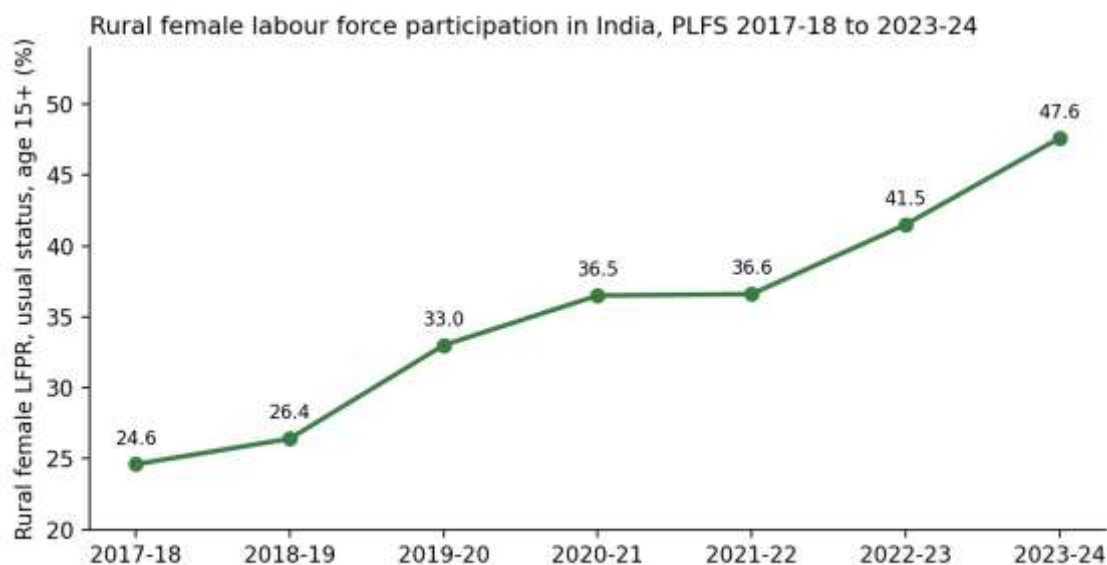
The most telling signs of the impact of NRLM are found in the second element of Kabeer's framework, agency. Sanyal et al. (2015) have reported that women involved in JEEViKA utilized the support of these groups to empower themselves in the households and to confront traditional power dynamics. Likewise, the Odisha study noted that SHG participation boosted women's motivation to seek formal assistance for community issues such as domestic violence and inadequacies in the mid-day meal scheme by 12.8 per cent on its empowerment scale (Kumar, 2023). There was also an improvement in the mobility of women, and in their participation and decision making in politics, in the Maharashtra survey, although the greatest gains have been made by women from marginalised caste and tribal groups (Kumar, 2023). This is especially relevant as it implies that the programme is helping the most disadvantaged pupils to reach the largest gains.

The results of this study are similar to those of Brody et al. (2015) in their systematic review. Empowerment shows signs of change earlier and more frequently than income. A possible explanation is that women have opportunities to learn practical skills through frequent attendance at the SHG sessions. The ability to chair meetings, keep the financial records and to communicate with the bank officials can help to build confidence and decision making processes in people and beyond the group.

5.3 Achievements: the labour market test

Thus, the last element in Kabeer's framework is achievements, while one of the most obvious measures of accomplishment is women's engagement in paid employment. The participation of the female workforce has seen a gradual rise in rural areas, with 24.6 per cent in 2017-18 to 47.6 per cent in 2023-24 (MoSPI, 2024). It was during this time that NRLM has grown so fast and launched new livelihood projects.

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Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey annual reports (MoSPI, 2024).

Figure 4. Rural female labour force participation in India, 2017-18 to 2023-24.

Figure 4. Rural female labour force participation in India, PLFS 2017-18 to 2023-24 (usual status, age 15 and above). Source: MoSPI (2024).

This must not be interpreted as resulted from NRLM alone, however. There are multiple alternatives. The methodology of the PLFS may have resulted in more unpaid work for family farms and enterprises and higher participation rates measured. Part of the rise could be due to economic pressures which prompted a larger proportion of people in the household to start working. This was concurrent with an increase in the proportion of women who reported having secondary occupations of 4 percentage points, which could be attributed to the NRLM too (Kochar et al., 2020).

It is more positively stated that most of the growth has been in self-employment and not in regular salaried employment. The percentage of rural women engaged in regular wage employment has remained almost unchanged. This indicates that the mission has been successful in increasing women's involvement in economic activities, but has yet to significantly change the nature of work available to them. In the context of Kabeer's framework, progress has been made, but the gains have been limited to informal and own account activities, where incomes tend to be less.

The mission has also introduced newer livelihood opportunity that seek to enhance the economic role of women. SHG members have become banking correspondent sakhis (boys) to deliver banking, pension, insurance and remittance services in the villages. The NAMO Drone Didi scheme is also targeting to train 15,000 women from the SHG to operate agricultural drones from 2023-24 to 2025-26. The programme resulted in the distribution of 503 drones by fertiliser companies during its first year (MoRD, 2025b). These figures are still low, but are a positive step towards more skilled and earning service roles for more than 10 crore women. Whether these can be scaled up to a much more significant number of women will be the key to their long-term success.

5.4 A caution about burden

There is one aspect to be noted as a limitation. SHGs lower the requirement for financial collateral by depending on members' time and participation. This requires a lot of effort from women, with women in leadership in the Village Organisations and federations doing much of this work for free in the weekly meetings, keeping records and monitoring repayment. The empowerment literature draws a line between empowerment and responsabilisation, where women are given more responsibility but without appropriate support. While the available evidence does not seem to indicate that SHGs have had a net adverse impact (Brody et al., 2015), this should be taken into account when considering the future of the mission. The time of women is precious and policies should acknowledge this by providing support for women such as care facilities etc.

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6. SOUTHEAST ASIAN COMPARISON: DESIGN CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

6.1 Three models, three theories of change.

On comparing the programmes discussed in this paper in their side by side presentation, it can be seen that there are different approaches in reducing rural poverty. India's NRLM emphasizes the creation of permanent, member owned financial institutions with the belief that improved institutions will foster long-term improvements in livelihoods. The idea of local community involvement to enhance local governance was introduced with the block grants given by Indonesia's PNPM Mandiri and the Philippines' KALAHICIDSS to the communities. On the other hand, the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) in the Philippines, and some degree of the subsidised credit system in Vietnam, went for the opposite strategy of supplying resources to households and letting market forces do the rest in terms of livelihood improvement. Design features, scale and key outcomes for these programmes summarised in Table 1 and main evaluation findings in Figure 5.

Programme (country, period)	Model	Peak scale	Headline economic result	Gendered result	Institutional legacy
NRLM/DAY- NRLM (India, 2011-)	Women's SHG- credit federations	10.05 crore women, 90.9 lakh SHGs (MoRD, 2025a)	+19% household income, +28% savings after ~2.5 years (Kochar et al., 2020)	Large agency gains, biggest for SC/ST women (Kumar, 2023)	Permanent three- tier federations, community cadres
PNPM Mandiri (Indonesia, 2007-2014)	CDD grants	block 70,000+ villages and wards (World Bank, 2014)	+19% consumption for poor households (ADB, 2014; Voss, 2012)	Mandated participation quotas; weak sustained economic effects	Wound down; functions folded into Village Fund transfers
KALAHICIDSS (Philippines, 2003-)	CDD grants gender grant	block with 160+ poorest municipalities (MCC, 2016)	-6 pp probability of being poor (ADB, 2014; Labonne, 2013)	+8 pp female employment; women's share of paid project labour 3% to 10% (Labonne, 2013; MCC, 2016)	Scaled into national CDD programme
4Ps (Philippines, 2008-)	Conditional cash transfer to mothers	~4 million households	Strong education and health compliance effects (Orbeta et al., 2021)	Cash paid to women; limited labour-market effects	Institutionalised by statute in 2019
VBSP credit (Vietnam, 1995-)	State-subsidised credit via mass organisations	National	Contributor within a growth episode that cut poverty below 5% (World Bank, 2022)	Delivery partly through Women's Union	State bank endures; not member-owned

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Figure 5. Headline evaluation results across Asian livelihood and CDD programmes.

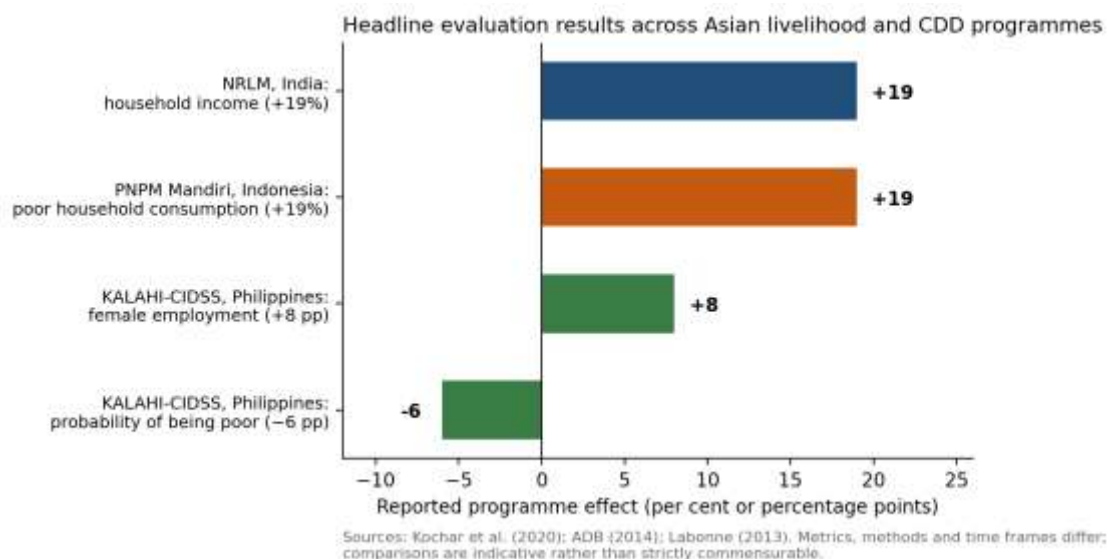


Figure 5. Headline evaluation results across Asian livelihood and CDD programmes. Sources: Kochar et al. (2020); ADB (2014); Labonne (2013). Metrics, methods and time frames differ; comparisons are indicative.

6.2 In reality, what the comparison indicates?

On the face of it, the programmes delivered similar economic results (see Figure 5). The results of NRLM in boosting the income of households were also appreciable in comparison with the positive impact of PNPM Mandiri in enhancing consumption of poor households, and the increment of female employment as reported by the KALAH-CIDSS. A more careful comparison, however, shows that NRLM has three features which are important, while the Philippines programme has one feature which is superior.

The first difference is that of institutional durability. The PNPM Mandiri approach came to an end when the Village Law in Indonesia was introduced in 2014 and it has been integrated with direct financial transfers to governments at the village level instead of project approach community development. Many of the participatory institutions that were established under the programme failed to remain as autonomous institutions (World Bank, 2014). NRLM's federations, on the other hand, are owned by its members and are functioning as a variety of services beyond project cycles, such as banking correspondence, agricultural extension and insurance services, etc. (MoRD, 2026). Wong's (2012) conclusion that community-driven development programmes result in more consistent infrastructure construction, which also makes less long lasting, is an explanation for the less durable nature of PNPM's institutions following the end of the programme.

The second variation is with respect to asset ownership. While the development of infrastructure via PNPM Mandiri and KALAH-CIDSS can be enjoyed by the entire community, the infrastructure are not owned by the participants but by the community as a whole. NRLM is different. One way in which the savings, group funds and federation resources are directly related to identifiable women is through their SHG membership. KALAH-CIDSS has been implementing a Gender Incentive Grant which has boosted the economic participation of women, from three per cent of paid construction work in 2010 to 10 per cent in 2015 in the Philippines (MCC, 2016). Although it is a step in the right direction, it is a small step compared to NRLM achieving financial membership for over 10 crore women.

The third difference is with regard to employment outcomes, and this is where the Philippine programme is doing better. The labour market impacts of KALAH-CIDSS were measured at eight percentage points more in employment for women than was captured in NRLM evaluations (Labonne, 2013). While infrastructure projects provide paid employment directly, SHG-based programmes typically offer women credit, but fail to provide paid work opportunities. The comparison is quite instructive to the Indian policy makers. Although NRLM has achieved good results in enhancing women's agency and financial inclusion, greater attention should be given in the future to directly increase the opportunities for women to get paid employment.

The comparison is then completed by Vietnam and the 4Ps programme. Vietnam's poverty rate fell one of the fastest in the region, but most of this is due to broad economic growth and structural transformation, with subsidised credit working as a supporting factor (World Bank, 2022). Thus, Vietnam offers a wider macroeconomic lesson than a direct model of programme for India. The

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4Ps programme exemplifies the effectiveness of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) in safeguarding children's education and health in times of economic crisis (Orbeta et al., 2021). But it offers scant evidence of progress in women's lifetime earnings.

6.3 Cost, Fiscal logic and Political Economy

It is important to consider the outcomes of these programmes beyond the immediate and not compare them. An important difference lies in how they are financed. Conditional cash transfer programmes like the 4Ps need ongoing government funding, otherwise the benefits of the programmes are reduced. One of the reasons why the Philippine Congress formally institutionalized the programme in 2019 (Orbeta et al., 2021). CDD programme based on block grants is generally less cost effective per village but needs to find new funding for each project cycle. Reform in funding mechanism in Indonesia led to the gradual disappearance of the institutions established under PNPM Mandiri (World Bank, 2014).

The financial model of NRLM is different. It allocates most of its public investments to the initial steps of institution-building. The mission received an allocation of 15,047 crore rupees in 2024-25 (MoRD, 2024) and 13,608.75 crore rupees in 2025-26 (MoRD, 2025b). These public funds have played a significant role in mobilizing vast amounts of member savings and commercial bank credit, such as the disbursement of bank loans worth over 2 lakh crore rupees during 2025 alone (MoRD, 2026). Financial independence of SHGs and Federations is increasing and they are able to mobilise their own resources to a greater extent. None of the programmes studied in this paper has established a similar financial mechanism for the members.

The other difference is in the sustainability of the programmes. Today, NRLM has grown to involve over 10 crore organised women, and is one of the world's largest community-based development programmes in the world. The large membership might offer some protection against wholesale shifts in the programme as the institutions are owned by their members, not just as government projects. An important contrast is found in Indonesia. The Village Law was introduced and led to the replacement of PNPM Mandiri, which produced positive outcomes, but could be restructured when policy priorities change, as is the case with even successful government programmes (World Bank 2014). Thus, the ownership of the members provides an important leverage to the NRLM regarding continuity of institutions in the longer term.

The comparison indicates that the effectiveness of NRLM is comparable with some of the best programs in the Southeast Asian region in enhancing household income over the evaluation period. It is more effective in increasing women's agency and developing long-term community institutions, in which no other programme in the region has established a similar federated system. The Philippine experience indicates, however, that there are greater improvements in terms of women's paid participation in labor markets which is an area that NRLM can benefit from.

7. THE POLICY OF ENSURING AN EQUITABLE WAY TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL OF VIKSIT BHARAT 2047.

India's per capita income needs to grow manifold in the next 20 years to achieve the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. This will be challenging if the labour force participation rate of the rural population remains low, and productivity is low (Government of India, 2025). NRLM has mobilised over 10 crore women, creating the largest platform so far for this challenge. This paper makes five policy recommendations based on the evidence presented. Each recommendation is linked to its rationale, its contribution to equitable growth and the main challenge involved in implementing it. These recommendations have been mapped with goals of Viksit Bharat 2047 in figure 6.

First, promote shift from the credit groups to the producer enterprises. The evaluation evidence points to stronger income impacts when financial inclusion is paired with skills, enterprise development and market access, as opposed to financial inclusion and credit (Kochar et al., 2020; 3ie, 2025). This means that the top tier of the SHG federation system should be slowly transformed into SHG federations' producer companies, with preferential government procurement and support from working capital from the Women Enterprise Acceleration Fund. This would benefit members as opposed to just a few successful entrepreneurs. The greatest difficulty would be managerial capacity that can be overcome by offering professional managerial support for the first five years of operation.

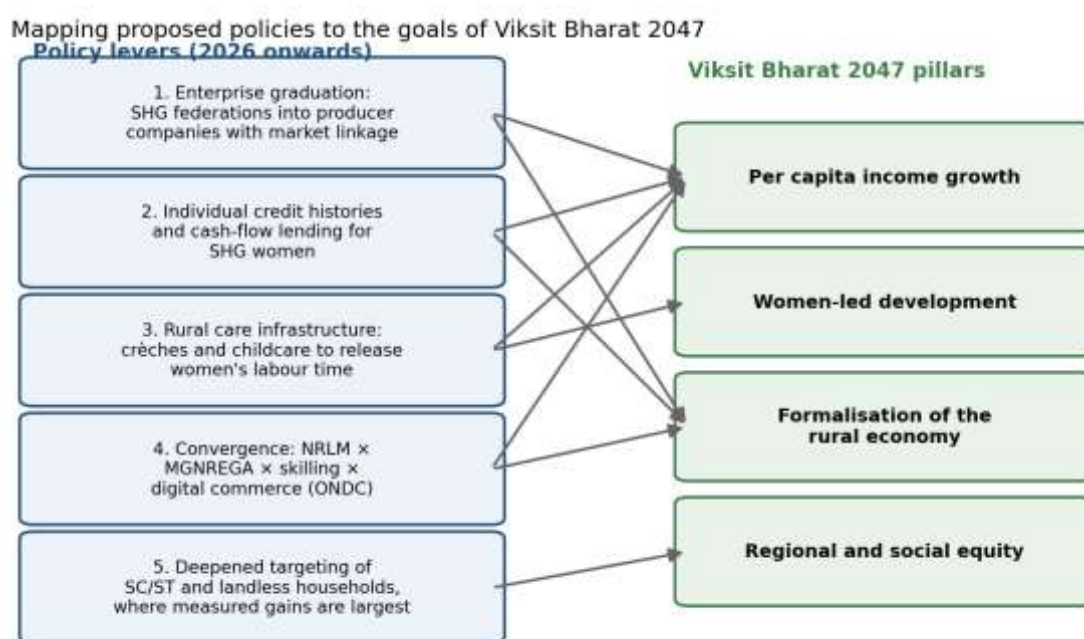
Second, develop SHG women's individual credit history. The problem of collateral has been solved by group lending, but although many women's have been able to make their credit files available through responsible repayment in SHGs, many remain not. With the creation of portable individual credit histories, digital records from the mission, combined with account aggregator infrastructure, provide access to individual credit histories. This would allow women to obtain a formal loan, depending on their own borrowing history instead of the group history. The low NPA rate of the programme (1.79 per cent - MoRD, 2026) gives adequate proof of the reliability of the group of SHG members as lenders. This reform would enhance women's economic autonomy, and bolster the agency dimension of Kabeer's (1999) model.

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Thirdly, see rural childcare as economic infrastructure. One of the biggest barriers to increasing women's earnings is the amount of time spent on unpaid care work. SHGs also require a lot of unpaid time as discussed in Section 5.4. The comparison with the Philippines also points to the fact that the potential for better women's labour market outcomes is faster with programmes generating paid employment (Labonne, 2013; MCC, 2016). The concept of a national programme of village childcare centres, with trained SHG members working on them, and working within the framework of existing government schemes would not only cut back on the burden of care on mothers, but also provide employment to people in rural communities. This is the most likely to positively impact women of poverty, who have the least options for childcare.

Fourth, converge, convergence, convergence. NRLM is already engaged in collaboration with various programmes, including MGNREGA, food processing programmes and MSME schemes (MoRD, 2025a). The same approach could be extended and the agricultural extension outreach through the agricultural Krishi sakhi, insurance outreach through the Bima sakhi, digital commerce outreach through ONDC could be rolled out using the SHG network as the last mile delivery mechanism. Administrative coordination among departments is a major obstacle, not financial viability.

Fifth, reinforce targeting in the areas where evidence indicates it is needed. The findings of the studies by Deininger and Liu (2013) and the Maharashtra survey (Kumar, 2023) have been consistent that the benefit of the programmes has been highest for the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and the landless households. The next step of Community Investment Fund support and the Lakhpati Didi initiative should thus focus on regions that have higher density of these groups. Progress in Lakhpati Didi programme should also be tracked separately for social groups to allow better monitoring of equity improvement.



Source: Author's synthesis.

Figure 6. Mapping proposed policies to the goals of Viksit Bharat 2047.

Figure 6. Mapping proposed policies to the goals of Viksit Bharat 2047. Source: Author's synthesis.

The order in which these reforms are implemented is also important. The first priority would be to be able to create individual credit histories, as this can be achieved with mainly enhancements of existing digital systems and the positive effects are not just one-time but can increase over time. Increasing the number of producer enterprises as well as childcare services would demand more financial resources and hence could be implemented progressively starting from areas with strong SHG involvement and where women's labour force participation rate is the highest. There is scope for considerable convergence within government programmes and increase in the targeting of resources within the current administrative and budgetary arrangements.

Financially, these changes can be made. The annual allocation of Rs 15,000 crore to the mission is less than 1 per cent of India's GDP (MoRD, 2024). Meanwhile, the federation structure makes it possible to tap into far greater savings and commercial bank

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credit from member banks. The focus instead should be on whether India can reach the targets of Viksit Bharat 2047 without putting more money into NRLM — or whether India can afford to do so — than it can afford to do not.

All these recommendations do not involve the development of a new programme. Rather, they rely on institutions which are already in place. This is one of the largest advantages of India. Countries like Indonesia have to build new-institutions that do not currently exist, whereas India does have a community network on a national scale which can be reinforced and extended.

The order in which these reforms are implemented is also important. The first step should be to develop individual credit histories, which primarily involves upgrading digital systems, as opposed to substantial investment in the financial sector, and will continue to benefit over time. If producer enterprises and child care enterprises are to be expanded more financial resources would be required and can be introduced gradually starting from the areas where SHG federations are well established and the participation of women in the labor market is growing the most. There is a considerable amount of convergence possible among the programmes of all governments and of a higher degree of specific allocation of resources without the need for new structures or funds.

Fiscally, these reforms are possible. The annual budget of the mission is about 15,000 crore rupees (MoRD, 2024) which is less than one per cent of GDP of India. Simultaneously, member savings and commercial bank credit can be mobilised through the federation model considerably larger amounts of public investment. The real question is not whether India can afford to empower NRLM, but how India can make better use of the economic potential of over 10 crore organised rural women to become a Viksit Bharat 2047. There are no new programme developments required in any of these recommendations. Rather, they rely on institutions, which already exist. This is one of the biggest advantages that India has. Although countries like Indonesia would have to build up new institutions that were once not in place, India already has a community network that covers the country and could be strengthened and expanded.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to explore how NRLM has helped to enhance the rural income and economic empowerment of women. The evidence shows the mission has achieved significant progress in both domains, although more success has been seen in empowerment than in income. NRLM has been successful in terms of economic empowerment of women. They have over 10 crore members in the financial institutions that are their own, with the rate of default on loans being just 1.79 per cent; and studies have consistently found improvements in mobility, decision making and collective action, especially for women from marginalised communities (Kochar et al., 2020; Kumar, 2023; MoRD, 2026). Household income has also improved considerably, as assessed by the evaluations, which showed a gain of about one-fifth of the period of the study. But most of the improvements have been due to the reduction of borrowing rates and enlarging livelihood activities, not to the establishment of new enterprises. Likewise, while women have been moving into the workforce, the overall employment structure has shifted slowly, and the majority of women are still involved in self-employment and informal employment (Kochar et al., 2020; MoSPI, 2024).

NRLM is performing as well as the other two programmes in Southeast Asia in terms of economic gains at the household level, and is showing greater institutional development over the long term than the other two programmes, PNPM Mandiri (Indonesia) and KALAH-CIDSS (Philippines). There are no direct parallels to its federated SHG structure within the programmes analysed in this paper. The Philippine experience, however, indicates greater improvements in women's paid employment, which underscores the need for further improvement in NRLM in this area (ADB, 2014; Labonne, 2013). The comparison thus has relevance to both directions. There is a need to learn from India's experience in establishing sustainable institutions in the community and from programmes which provide direct jobs for women.

Recommendations for a policy are made in this paper, which are based on these findings. The next phase of the NRLM needs to concentrate more on the growth of the producer enterprises, building up individual credit history, investing in rural child care, deepening linkages across policies and working towards better targeting of disadvantaged communities. These recommendations do not create a new programme, but are based on existing institutions.

The success of NRLM in the future will have a significant impact in achieving the objectives of Viksit Bharat 2047. The country's biggest organised network of rural women must be strengthened to achieve a meaningful increase in rural incomes and women's productivity. The upcoming 15th anniversary, in 2026, of the mission will mark another moment to evaluate the extent to which interventions like Lakhpati Didi have led to measurable impacts on household income (3ie, 2025).

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