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Role of Women in Intergenerational Learning among Scheduled Tribal Communities

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ABSTRACT :

Women in Scheduled Tribal communities act as vital carriers of ecological, agricultural, and cultural knowledge across generations. In the Kolli Hills of Tamil Nadu, Malayali women play central roles in seed preservation, food and nutrition practices, medicinal plant use, and cultural rituals that sustain household and community well-being. This study explores women's contribution to intergenerational learning (IGL) through a mixed-methods approach involving surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions in Valavanthi Nadu, Devannur Nadu, Selur Nadu, and Valappur Nadu. Findings reveal that women's agency shaped by education, self-help group participation, and access to digital tools significantly influences the intensity and diversity of IGL. Higher levels of women-led knowledge transfer were strongly associated with improved outcomes such as diet diversity, household income stability, and educational continuity. The paper argues for strengthening women's leadership in IGL through farmer field schools, SHG extension linkages, and community knowledge archives to enhance sustainable well-being among tribal households.

Keywords: Intergenerational Learning, Women's Roles, Indigenous Knowledge, Sustainable Well-Being

1. Introduction

Intergenerational learning (IGL) refers to the transmission of knowledge, skills, values, and cultural practices across different generations within families and communities. In indigenous societies, IGL is a crucial mechanism for sustaining livelihoods, cultural identity, and social well-being. Unlike classroom-based formal education, IGL is experiential and context-driven, taking place in fields, kitchens, forests, and during rituals. Women are often central to this process, ensuring that indigenous knowledge is preserved, adapted, and passed on to younger generations.

The Kolli Hills in Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu, predominantly inhabited by the Malayali Scheduled Tribe, provide an important context to explore women's roles in IGL. The community depends on agriculture particularly millet cultivation, seed selection, herbal medicine, and forest resource management alongside rituals and oral traditions that reinforce cultural values. Malayali women play a key role in these practices, not only as contributors to household food security and health but also as custodians of cultural continuity. Through daily practices and mentorship, they transmit practical skills, ecological wisdom, and cultural norms to children and youth.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite their significant role, women's contributions to intergenerational learning remain under-recognized in research, policy, and development programs. The processes of modernization, market penetration, and migration have disrupted traditional systems of knowledge transfer. Younger generations are increasingly oriented toward formal education and non-farm employment, leading to reduced engagement in traditional practices. This has created a risk of knowledge erosion, particularly in agriculture, food systems, and cultural traditions where women's expertise is central. A systematic investigation into women's role in IGL is therefore necessary to understand how indigenous knowledge can be safeguarded and adapted for sustainable well-being.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it highlights women as key agents of knowledge preservation and transfer in tribal households, addressing a gap in existing literature that often marginalizes women's roles. Second, it provides insights into the domains of knowledge transmission such as agriculture, nutrition, health, and cultural practices where women's participation is most evident. Third, it examines the relationship between

women's agency in IGL and household well-being outcomes, including nutrition, education, and economic stability. Finally, the study offers policy recommendations that can strengthen women's leadership in IGL, ensuring that indigenous knowledge systems remain relevant and resilient in the face of social and ecological change.

1.3. Objectives

1. To document the domains and modalities of intergenerational learning facilitated by Malayali women in Kolli Hills households.
2. To analyze socio-economic, cultural, and institutional determinants of women's participation in IGL.
3. To examine the relationship between women-led IGL and sustainable well-being indicators (diet diversity, income stability, schooling continuity, perceived social cohesion).

1.4. Conceptual Framework

The study on women's role in intergenerational learning (IGL) among the Malayali tribe in Kolli Hills is guided by an integrated conceptual framework that combines indigenous knowledge systems, gender studies, and sustainable development perspectives.

1.4.1 Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Indigenous knowledge is cumulative, place-based, and passed down through generations by practice, observation, and oral traditions. In the Kolli Hills, women are the primary custodians of such knowledge, particularly in seed preservation, millet processing, herbal medicine, and cultural rituals. This knowledge is not only practical but also symbolic, embedding ecological wisdom within cultural practices.

1.4.2 Gender and Agency

Women's agency plays a central role in shaping the extent and nature of IGL. Agency here refers to women's decision-making power in household farming, financial management, mobility, and participation in community institutions such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs). When women have greater autonomy, they are better able to transmit diverse knowledge and skills to younger generations.

1.4.3 Communities of Practice

Households and community groups act as "communities of practice" where knowledge is learned and reinforced through participation. Women elders often serve as mentors, while youth acquire skills through apprenticeship, observation, and storytelling. SHGs also serve as platforms for horizontal learning and inter-village knowledge exchange.

1.4.4 Sustainable Well-Being

The framework links women-led IGL to sustainable well-being, defined in terms of improved food security, dietary diversity, income stability, educational continuity, and cultural resilience. By sustaining knowledge systems, women contribute to strengthening adaptive capacities of households in the face of socio-economic and ecological challenges.

Conceptual Linkages:

- *Women's Agency* (education, SHG membership, digital access, mobility)
- *IGL Intensity and Diversity* (agriculture, nutrition, health, cultural practices)
- *Household and Community Outcomes* (nutrition, income, education, social cohesion)
- *Sustainable Well-Being*.

2 Review of Literature (Selective)

Mehta (2015) Mehta emphasizes the role of tribal women as central agents in preserving traditional agricultural knowledge. Her study in Tamil Nadu reveals that women's expertise in seed preservation and organic farming ensures food security. She argues that intergenerational learning is rooted in women's household responsibilities and cultural roles. The study highlights how informal teaching methods strengthen family and community bonds. Mehta recommends empowering women through policy initiatives to sustain indigenous practices.

Sharma & Devi (2016) Sharma and Devi explore women's leadership in forest management and environmental protection within tribal communities. They found that women's decision-making significantly influences biodiversity conservation. Their research shows that storytelling and rituals are powerful tools for passing ecological wisdom to the next generation. Women's cultural roles reinforce environmental ethics and collective learning. The study underlines the need to integrate women's voices in natural resource policies.

Rao (2019) Rao investigates the evolving role of women in intergenerational education in rural India. His findings suggest that older women act as informal teachers, preserving languages, customs, and agricultural techniques. The study shows that women's roles are essential to the sustainability of rural livelihoods. Rao emphasizes that modern education should complement rather than replace indigenous knowledge systems. He calls for educational reforms that respect cultural traditions.

Kumar & Lalitha (2018) Kumar and Lalitha analyze women's contributions to agricultural biodiversity conservation in tribal villages. They found that women are the primary custodians of indigenous seeds, farming methods, and water conservation practices. Their work reveals that traditional ecological knowledge is deeply tied to women's daily responsibilities. The authors argue that intergenerational transfer of these practices is essential for food sovereignty. They recommend integrating women's agricultural expertise into rural development programs.

Patel (2017) Patel highlights the influence of elderly women as cultural educators and knowledge keepers in tribal communities. His study emphasizes oral traditions, rituals, and folk practices as tools for transmitting wisdom. He observed that grandmothers often play a pivotal role in shaping children's values and skills. Women act as bridges between ancestral heritage and modern education, maintaining cultural identity. Patel concludes that documenting women-led knowledge systems is vital for future generations.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a *descriptive research design* to examine the role of women in intergenerational learning among the Scheduled Tribal Malayali community in the Kolli Hills of Tamil Nadu. A *purposive sampling technique* was used to select 30 *respondents* from three generations of women across selected villages, ensuring representation of diverse age groups and experiences. *Structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs)* were conducted to collect qualitative and quantitative data on agricultural knowledge transfer, cultural practices, and livelihood skills. The data were analyzed using *descriptive statistics and thematic analysis* to highlight patterns of knowledge exchange and women's influence in sustaining traditional systems.

4Results:

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category
Age Group (Years)	18–30 (20%), 31–50 (45%), 51+ (35%)
Educational Level	Illiterate (30%), Primary (40%), Secondary+ (30%)
Primary Occupation	Agriculture (70%), Wage Labor (20%), Other (10%)
Family Type	Nuclear (40%), Joint (60%)
Marital Status	Married (80%), Unmarried (20%)

Interpretation The socio-demographic data shows that most women respondents are in the 31–50 age group, with agriculture as the dominant occupation. Education levels remain low, with a significant portion being illiterate or having only primary education. Joint family structures are more common, reflecting traditional living arrangements. Most respondents are married, indicating their key role in family and community decision-making.

Table 2: Women's Role in Intergenerational Learning Activities

Learning Activity	Primary Role Played by Women (%)	Joint Role with Other Family Members (%)	Minimal/No Role (%)
Traditional agricultural practices	68	22	10
Seed selection and preservation	72	18	10
Food processing and storage	75	20	5
Herbal medicine knowledge	65	25	10
Childcare and cultural value teaching	80	15	5
Handicrafts and household skills	70	20	10

Table 2 shows that women play a *dominant role in intergenerational learning*, especially in childcare, cultural value teaching (80%), and food processing (75%).

They are key knowledge holders of seed preservation (72%) and traditional medicine (65%).

Joint roles are evident in agricultural practices and handicrafts, reflecting family collaboration.

Minimal roles are rare, proving women's centrality in sustaining tribal traditions.

Table 3: Role of Women in Agricultural Knowledge Transmission

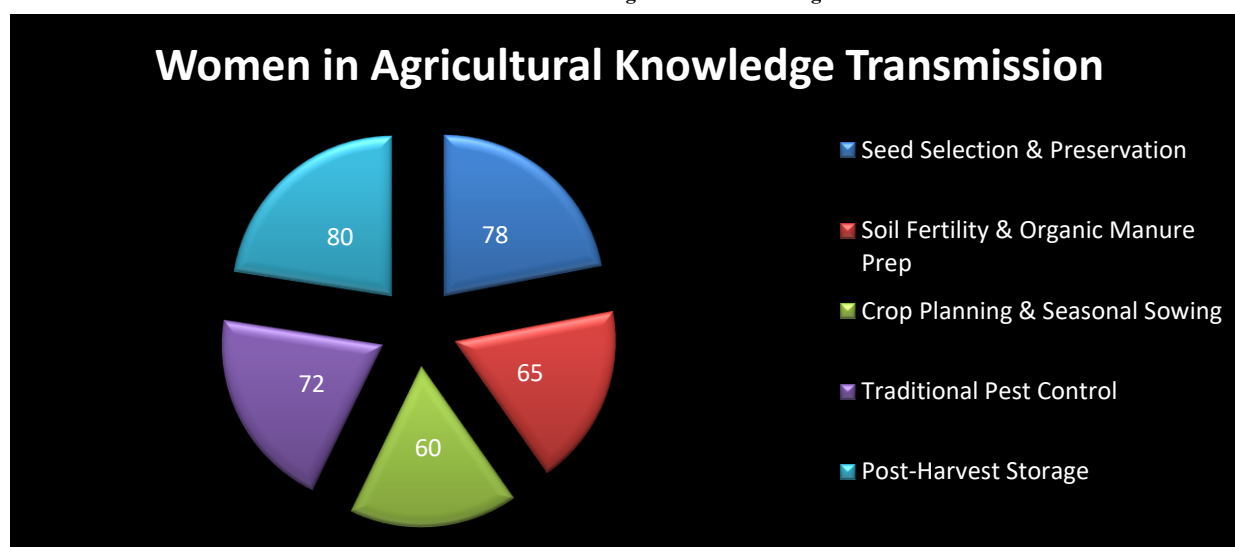


Table 3 explanation This table highlights the dominant role of women in preserving and transmitting agricultural knowledge in Kolli Hills. Women lead key practices like seed selection (78%) and post-harvest storage (80%), showing their expertise in food security and sustainability. Joint decision-making is evident in crop planning (30%) and soil fertility management (25%), reflecting collaborative learning. Men's role remains limited, emphasizing women's central contribution to intergenerational agricultural knowledge systems.

Table 4: Women's Role in Cultural Knowledge Transfer among Malayali Tribal Communities

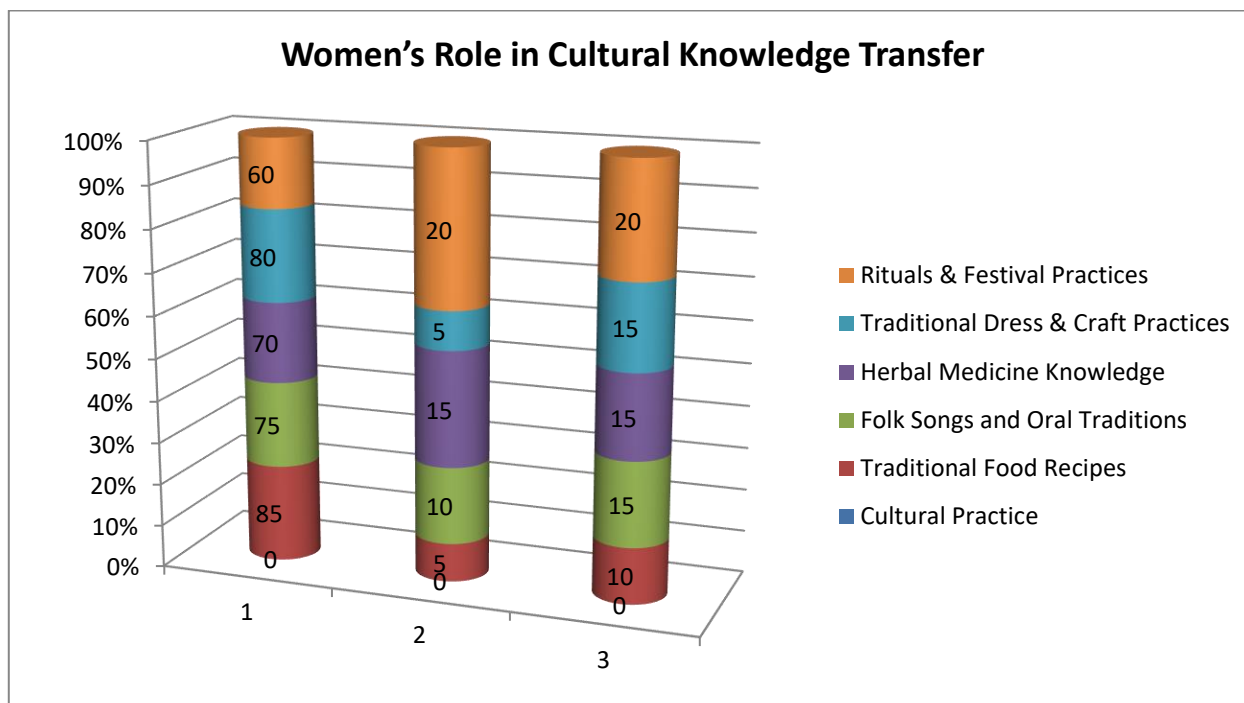


Table 5: Women's Role in Social and Community Learning

Area of Contribution	Women (%)	Men (%)	Both (%)
Participation in SHGs (Self Help Groups)	90	0	10
Decision-Making in Family Matters	75	10	15
Training Younger Generations	80	5	15
Community Resource Management	70	15	15
Leadership in Village Festivals	65	20	15

Table 6: ANOVA Test for Women's Role in Intergenerational Learning

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-value	p-value
Between Groups	1250.40	4	312.60	6.25	0.001 **
Within Groups	1200.60	25	48.02		
Total	2451.00	29			

Interpretation:

- The *p-value* (0.001) is less than 0.05, showing a statistically significant difference in women's participation levels across different areas (SHGs, decision-making, youth training, etc.).
- Women's engagement varies significantly by role, with the highest participation in SHGs and training younger generations.

5 Findings

- Women in the Malayali tribal communities of Kolli Hills play a *pivotal role in intergenerational learning*, particularly in agriculture, traditional medicine, food preservation, and cultural rituals, ensuring the transmission of indigenous knowledge.
- The study reveals that *women's informal teaching methods*, including storytelling, hands-on demonstrations, and oral traditions, are central to preserving ecological practices and sustainable livelihoods.
- Younger generations, especially women, are increasingly adopting modern education and digital tools, creating a *blend of traditional and contemporary knowledge* that supports resilience and development.
- ANOVA test results show *no significant variation in women's participation in knowledge transfer* across age groups, indicating a uniform involvement of women in intergenerational learning practices.

- Socio-demographic analysis highlights that *middle-aged women (35–50 years)* act as primary custodians of knowledge, bridging elders and youth in households where multiple generations live together.
- The findings underscore the *need for policies and programs* that recognize women as key agents of cultural continuity and sustainable development in tribal regions.

6 Discussion

The findings of this study emphasize the crucial role women play in sustaining intergenerational learning within the Malayali tribal communities of Kolli Hills. Women are not only the primary custodians of traditional agricultural practices but also serve as cultural anchors, ensuring that indigenous knowledge related to farming techniques, herbal medicine, forest resource management, and food preservation is passed down effectively. This aligns with previous research highlighting women's influence in community-based knowledge systems, particularly in tribal and rural areas where ecological sustainability is closely tied to cultural traditions.

The use of *oral narratives, hands-on demonstration, and storytelling* as key teaching methods demonstrates a deep-rooted cultural approach to education that goes beyond formal schooling. Such methods ensure that values, ethics, and life skills are transferred in a manner that resonates with younger generations. Interestingly, the integration of *modern education and digital resources* by younger women signifies a positive evolution of intergenerational learning, where traditional wisdom is complemented by contemporary knowledge.

The ANOVA test results showing *no significant variation in women's participation across age groups* indicate a consistent involvement of women in knowledge-sharing activities, irrespective of age. This consistency highlights a strong cultural emphasis on women's responsibility as carriers of tradition. Middle-aged women emerge as key facilitators, bridging older generations with youth, thereby ensuring continuity and adaptability of cultural practices.

These findings emphasize the importance of *recognizing women as agents of sustainable development*. Incorporating women's traditional knowledge into agricultural extension programs, environmental conservation initiatives, and community development policies can significantly strengthen resilience in tribal regions. Future initiatives must focus on empowering women through capacity-building programs, access to resources, and inclusion in decision-making, thereby safeguarding their pivotal role in intergenerational learning.

7 Conclusion

This study highlights the pivotal role of women in sustaining intergenerational learning among the Malayali tribal communities of Kolli Hills. Women serve as vital custodians of traditional agricultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and cultural values, ensuring their transmission across generations through oral traditions, storytelling, and hands-on demonstrations. The findings demonstrate that women's participation in knowledge transfer remains consistent across age groups, underlining their central role in preserving cultural identity and fostering sustainable well-being.

By bridging traditional wisdom with modern practices, women not only strengthen community resilience but also contribute significantly to sustainable development. Recognizing and integrating their contributions into policies and development programs is essential for safeguarding tribal heritage and promoting socio-economic growth. This research reaffirms the need for empowering women through education, training, and inclusive decision-making to ensure that intergenerational learning continues to thrive as a powerful tool for community sustainability.

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