



HARNESSING THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY OF WOMEN WITHIN THE SELF HELP GROUPS

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Abstract- Conceiving the distress situation of rural women, the edulcorative phase can be overcome by providing social, political and economic justice to the rural women with the help of cooperative Self Help Group approach. Under this research climate, the research work was conducted to analyse the status of economic empowerment of women after joining Self Help Group (SHG) and thereby, exploring different factors associated with their economic empowerment. The study was conducted in four villages of the Coochbehar-I block in Coochbehar district of West Bengal. Purposive as well as multistage sampling and random sampling procedures were followed in selecting the respondents. The economic empowerment of the women SHG members was conceptualised as the predicted variable and the sixteen other factors of the women respondents were delineated as the predictor variables in the present research work. The structured interview schedule was used to collect the information with the face to face interview method. The statistical tools like co-efficient of correlation and multiple regressions were the key analysers for drawing a definite conclusion from the collected data. Results showed that variables like education level, extension contact and mass media exposure are positively and significantly correlated with the economic empowerment of the women and the variable family size has negative and significant correlation with the economic empowerment of women. 47.90% variations within the predicted variable, economic empowerment of women after joining SHGs was explained with the help of sixteen antecedent variables' influence which was reflected with the help of R^2 value (0.479).

Keywords- Self Help Group, economic empowerment, rural women, mass media exposure, extension contact.

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Introduction

Today the world is experiencing a great revolution in its economic affairs creating a new era with trade liberalization involving all the nations, which is deemed to be the resultant of the open market policy across the world. Consequently, all the aspects of economic activity like agriculture, industry and service sectors have, more or less, witnessed this change. The change is occurred not only in its structural component but also in its functional component. And India being one of the largest pillars of the world economy could not escape the effect of this change. India is also experiencing a dramatic change in its economic sectors – agriculture, industry and service. Among several changes, one important change has occurred in the involvement status of the women in farming activity in the rural areas besides their housekeeping functions. Nowadays, because of the fact that women account for 43% of the agricultural work force [1], their involvement in the farming activity in our country has been recognized and accordingly, the policy-makers in the centre as well as in the state are trying to prepare appropriate policy framework to empower them in every aspect that is psychological, social, cultural, political and most importantly in the economic aspect. Women's role is so important that a 10% rise in the female to male worker ratio can increase the GDP of the country to 8% [2]. In most of the rural farm families, female members are directly helping their male counterpart in their cultivation in every aspect right from land preparation to harvesting of crops. In fact, they have to work harder than the male members of their families as because they have the responsibility of maintaining a balance between the farm and home. But, unfortunately, they are not getting equal access to various economic assets and services and hence, they are losing their interest and it becomes a burden for them to work in the field after managing their home. This will, in the long run, adversely affect our agricultural production and productivity too. Considering the very need of the hour, many

initiatives are being planned and promoted both from government and non-government sectors to empower this vulnerable section of the society – the women.

In this direction, economic empowerment of the women is very crucial to achieve their financial independence without which they cannot defend their rights. Economic empowerment aims to make all women economically independent through training, employment and income generation activities, allow women to enjoy not only the de-jure but also the de-facto rights and fundamental freedom at par with men in all spheres [3]. Women's economic empowerment is a process that at its core has two dimensions: resources and opportunity. With greater control and access to assets, a woman has more power to make decisions that will positively impact her well-being. At the same time, greater opportunities to make choices in relation to the economy would allow her to accumulate more resources to secure her sustained economic success. When a woman is economically empowered, she can meaningfully contribute to and benefit from economic activity occurring around her in ways that recognize the value of her contribution and make it possible for her to obtain a fairer distribution of economic gains [4].

In Indian context, the Self Help Group (SHG) strategy is one of the powerful instruments for empowerment of women through economic intervention [5]. A SHG is a small economically homogeneous affinity group of the rural poor who have volunteered to organize themselves into a group for eradication of poverty of the members. The members of the group come together to save a small amount regularly, which are deposited in a common fund to meet members' emergency needs and to provide collateral free loans decided by the group. SHGs have been recognized as a useful tool to help the poor and work as an alternative mechanism

to meet the urgent credit needs of poor through thrift. SHG is a media for development of savings habit among the women. It enhances the equality of women, as participants, decision makers and beneficiaries in the democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of life [6]. The Scheme of Micro-financing through SHGs create empowerment-promoting conditions for women to move from positions of marginalisation within household decision making process and exclusion within community, to one of greater centrality, inclusion of voice. Self help groups have saved rural women from social and economic exploitation and the additional income has provided them moral support to initiate new changes in the grassroots [7]. Similarly, it has been found that participation of women in Self Help Groups (SHGs) made a significant impact on their empowerment both in social and economical aspects [8]. It has also been shown that SHG members were able to contribute towards their family income and also gained other benefits like skill upgradation, better understanding, banking operations, better leadership and communication skills [9].

Therefore, in such a research background, this research work has been conducted to assess the role of self help group in the economic empowerment of the rural women and at the same time to analyse the contribution of different factors in case of bringing women's economic empowerment through formation of self help groups in the rural areas.

Materials and Methods

The study was carried out in four villages of the Coochbehar-I block in Coochbehar district of West Bengal. Purposive as well as multistage and random sampling procedures were followed for selection of the final respondents. The district and block were selected purposively. The SHG of the blocks were selected purposively in terms of their year of formation and continuation of activity. From the exhaustive list of the women self help group members the respondents were selected purposively to get a total eighty number of women respondents who were the women self help group members in the study area. The economic empowerment of the women SHG members was conceptualised as the predicted variable and the sixteen other factors of the women respondents were delineated as the predictor variables in the present research work. The structured interview schedule was used to collect the information with the face to face interview method. The statistical tools like co-efficient of correlation and multiple regressions were the key analysers for drawing a definite conclusion from the collected data.

Results and Discussion

Table-1 Distribution of the women SHG members according to their economic empowerment score

Variables	Range		Mean	S.D	C.V
	Min	Max			
Economic empowerment (Y)	17	32	22.50	3.82	16.98

[Table-1] presents the distribution of the women members of the selected Self Help Groups in Coochbehar district of West Bengal according to their economic empowerment score. The dependent variable, economic empowerment of women stakeholders in SHGs carries the average score of 22.50. The lowest score is 17 and highest score is 32 in this perspective. It may be concluded that the majority of the respondents were in low level of economic empowerment affiliations. The standard deviation of the distribution is 3.82. The coefficient of variation value within the distribution is 16.98%, which signifies the high consistency level of the distribution for the variable 'economic empowerment'.

[Table-2] presents the correlation between the sixteen-predictor variables and the predicted variable i.e. the economic empowerment of the women self help group members selected for the study. The results shows that the four variables namely education, extension contact, mass media exposure and reasons for joining the group are positively and significantly associated with the dependent variable, economic empowerment of the women members of the self help groups. The result also shows that the predictor variable family size of the women members is negatively and significantly associated with the predicted variable, economic empowerment of the women members.

Education and economic empowerment:

Education provides an individual with the exposure to various sources of knowledge and information, which helps to build one's confidence and nurture his/her creativity. Through formal education, one gets the opportunity of exposure to outer world too which, in turn, helps in efficient management of any organization. Here, in the present study, the women members with higher educational status have been able to manage their economic affairs more successfully. Hence, the variable education is positively and significantly correlated with the economic empowerment of the women SHG members.

Table-2 Correlation co-efficient of Economic empowerment (Y) of the respondents with sixteen causal variables

Variables (X)	Coefficient of correlation (r)
Age (X ₁)	0.082
Caste (X ₂)	-0.043
Education (X ₃)	0.350**
Family size (X ₄)	-0.238*
Family education status (X ₅)	0.141
Migration (X ₆)	-0.023
Annual income (X ₇)	0.183
Family land holding (X ₈)	0.184
Family farm power (X ₉)	0.177
Family asset possession (X ₁₀)	0.164
Family livestock possession (X ₁₁)	0.031
House type (X ₁₂)	0.131
Extension contact (X ₁₃)	0.377**
Mass media exposure (X ₁₄)	0.260*
Group age (X ₁₅)	-0.007
Reasons for joining group (X ₁₆)	0.404**

* 5% level of significance, ** 1% level of significance

Extension contact and economic empowerment:

Extension contact means the two way communication between the extension service provider and the rural people who actually avail the extension services for solving their day to day problems related to their farm and home. This extension services are provided both from public sector and from private sector through their respective extension functionaries. These functionaries include Krishi Prayukti Sahayak (KPS), Asst. Director of Agriculture (ADA), Pranibandhu, NGO workers, Bank staff etc. When the rural people have contact with these extension people on a daily and continued basis, they get better access to various extension services and facilities to do their job better in a profitable way. This is same for the women SHG members. Through greater extension contact, they come to know more about various schemes and programmes from where they can get funds for their groups which, in turn, helps them to get better financial assistance from their SHGs. They become aware of different economic aspects and can develop their decision making power in the financial matter related to their families. Hence, their economic empowerment is reflected in their behaviour. This may be a plausible reason behind the positive and significant relationship between the extension contact and economic empowerment of the women SHG members.

Mass media exposure and economic empowerment:

The variable mass media exposure indicates the exposure of the people towards communication sources like radio, television, newspapers, posters etc. Mass media exposure also builds the capacity, which deals with the complex occurrence in any organization. The information gathering, information sharing as well as capacity building develops a positive attitude towards formation of SHG and its management in an efficient manner. Mass media exposure of the women members of SHGs leads to development of their proficiency in doing various economic activities within and outside their group in a better way. That may be the possible reason behind the significant and positive correlation between the mass media exposure and the economic empowerment of the women SHG members.

Reason for joining group and economic empowerment:

The rural women come together to form a self help group with the primary objective to harness an economic advantage from the group. And it is better to raise the fund collectively than through individual effort. SHG approach will

generate more economic outcomes through collective efforts of the SHG members, which will help to satisfy the financial needs of the individual member from time to time. Joining a SHG also provides a scope to lower the financial risk and uncertainty through sharing it among the members of the SHG. That is why the variable reason for joining group is positively and significantly correlated with the economic empowerment of the women members of the SHGs.

Family size and economic empowerment:

The variable family size indicates the total number of family members in the family of the women respondents selected for the study. Generally, Family size performs the role of analyzing a situation more critically through the vision of the family

members. As a result, more number of family members logically and realistically analyze the situation and creates conflict in decision making in any matter. Always more number of family members develops a differential opinion platform leading to a situation of ambivalence. That time it is very difficult to come into a final decision, particularly in the participation of the women family members in various economic activities both inside and outside their families because they are put into a dilemma that whether their participation is useful for themselves and their families or not. Ultimately, the economic empowerment of the women is very difficult in a perplexed situation arisen due to more number of family members. Due to this, the variable family size is negatively and significantly correlated with the dependent variable, economic empowerment of the women SHG members.

Table-3 Multiple regression analysis of Economic empowerment (Y) with sixteen predictor variables

Variables (x)	(β)	B	S.E of 'b'	t value
Age (X ₁)	-.111	-.060	.077	-.777
Caste (X ₂)	-.017	-.113	.909	-.125
Education (X ₃)	.270	.600	.308	1.948#
Family size (X ₄)	-.513	-1.168	.298	-3.915\$
Family education status (X ₅)	-.123	-.545	.596	-.916
Migration (X ₆)	.129	.432	.420	1.028
Annual income (X ₇)	.170	.006	.004	1.530
Family land holding (X ₈)	.163	.357	.289	1.237
Family farm power (X ₉)	.300	1.501	.631	2.379#
Family asset possession (X ₁₀)	.089	.036	.064	.564
Family livestock possession (X ₁₁)	-.045	-.045	.117	-.387
House type (X ₁₂)	.014	.091	.865	.105
Extension contact (X ₁₃)	.143	.150	.202	.743
Mass media exposure (X ₁₄)	-.109	-.211	.352	-.600
Group age (X ₁₅)	-.079	-.097	.174	-.561
Reasons for joining group (X ₁₆)	.336	.282	.111	2.530#

R²= 0.479, # at 10% level of significance, \$ at 5% level of significance

[Table-3] represents the multiple regression analysis of psychological empowerment with other sixteen causal variables. The table indicated that the variables education, farm power and reasons for joining SHG are positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing economic empowerment of women self help group members while the variable family size is negatively and significantly contributing towards characterizing the dependent variable that is the economic empowerment of the women SHG members.

Education and economic empowerment

Education is the process through which one individual can gather knowledge and use this knowledge in their own situation to solve their problems. The problem may be related to any economic aspect. In other words education makes an individual well aware of different financial matters relating their home affairs and professions. People with higher educational level can perfectly select from many alternatives as an opportunity for economic upliftment. Hence, economic empowerment can be achieved through higher level of educational exposure. It is also applicable in case of women self help group members. That is why the variable education is positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing economic empowerment of women self help group members. One unit change of the variable education is delineating the 0.60 unit change in the predicted variable, economic empowerment of women SHG members.

Family farm power and economic empowerment

The possession of farm power like power tiller, tractor etc. in the family has a positive impact on the family's economic affluence. Having farm power implements saves the cost of hiring it and also provides an opportunity to earn through giving the implements on rent basis to others. This helps in economically gain from those implements and thereby provides the family members with a chance to explore various economic opportunities for their economic upliftment. The women members of the SHGs are not outside their families. They can also get the advantage of having different farm power implements in their families as the economic gain from those implements can help them to explore different areas of their economic empowerment. Consequently, the variable family farm power is positively and significantly contributing in case of characterizing the economic

empowerment of the women SHG members. One unit change of the variable knowledge about the technology is delineating the 1.501 unit change in the predicted variable, economic empowerment of the women SHG members.

Reasons for joining group and economic empowerment

The rural women come together to form a self help group with the primary objective of getting financial assistance from the group at the time of financial crisis or any other economic need. Through collectively and regularly depositing and saving money in the SHG, the women members raise a large amount of monetary fund of the group which helps its members to get financial support in the form of loans during credit-needs of their family or for starting a new enterprise. In this way, joining SHG helps its women members to assist their families financially and thereby empower themselves economically. Hence, the variable reasons for joining group is positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing the economic empowerment of the women SHG members. One unit change of the variable knowledge about the technology is delineating the 0.282 unit change in the predicted variable, economic empowerment of the women SHG members.

Family size and economic empowerment

As the number of family member increases, there is every possibility of arising conflict in many aspects of the family affairs. Among various issues, economic issue occupies a major position in a family. During any decision related to financial matter of the family, there arises a great difference of opinions among its family members. Like other family members, the women members too have different opinions and also they get confused about their role in the decision-making in that particular financial matter. This situation hinders the economic empowerment of the women. They are put in a doubtful state of mind regarding their ability to achieve themselves the economic empowerment. This situation is also reflected in their active involvement and management of the SHGs. They are not in a position to take any venture for the economic upliftment of their group as well as themselves. Therefore, the variable family size is negatively and significantly contributing in case of characterizing the economic empowerment of the women SHG members. One unit change of the variable family size is delineating the 1.168 unit change in the predicted variable that is the economic empowerment of

the women SHG members.

The R^2 value being 0.479, it is also to infer that the sixteen predictor variables put together have explained 47.9% variation embedded with the predicted variable, economic empowerment of women after joining SHGs and rest 52.10% variation embedded with the predicted one remains unexplained. Thus it would be suggested that inclusion of some more contextual variables possessing direct bearing on the economic empowerment of the women SHG members could have increased the level of explicability.

Conclusion

With the current scenario prevailing in the rural India, the empowerment of rural women has occupied a central theme in the agricultural and rural development perspective. Without empowering the women folk, it would not be possible at all to achieve an all round development of the rural community. And until and unless, these rural people are empowered, we cannot think of the rising India in a true sense. Therefore, women empowerment is the need of the hour to bring about a sustainable development of the nation. As the women are the most deprived section of the society in terms of poverty and unemployment, the eradication of poverty and unemployment are the two very vulnerable issues for them as most of the women are suffering from economic, social and political deprivation. In this background, the women SHGs are helpful in empowering the women in terms of economic, psychological, social and political aspects. The primary focus is that women's empowerment in their economic aspects plays the role of a precursor in achieving their empowerment in social, political and psychological aspects in the subsequent phases. So, the first and foremost need is to empower the SHG members economically. The study shows that the educational level of the women members, their cosmopolitanness, positive communicational behaviour, information exposure through extension functionaries and mass media are constantly creating some impulses on economic empowerment of women SHG members. Intrinsic motivation for developing and managing the SHGs effectively is another factor having positive impact on women's economic empowerment. Moreover, the rural women, after forming and joining the SHGs, have been able to empower themselves economically within their families and societies too which have been manifested in their increased urge for entrepreneurship development, institutional capacity enhancement, addressing the training needs in the grass root level and development of positive attitude in them. Though there is a positive impact of Self Help Groups on Women empowerment but the real empowerment is possible only when a woman has increased access to economic resources, enhanced psychological attributes and self motivation, more strength, more recognition and say in the family matters. Therefore, the policy makers should follow the ground reality of the women SHG members in case of economic empowerment of the women.

Conflict of Interest: None declared

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