



Research Article

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN THROUGH SELF HELP GROUPS (SHGs): A CASE STUDY IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA.

PAL SUBHADIP*

Department of Agricultural Economics, Faculty of Agriculture, Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswavidyalaya, Mohanpur, Dist.- Nadia, PIN- 741546, W.B., India

*Corresponding Author: Email-mrsubha19@rediffmail.com

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Abstract- The investigation was conducted in ten selected villages of Katwa Block- I under Burdwan district to know the role of rural SHGs and non-SHGs on the empowerment of rural farm women in ten selected villages of Katwa Block- I under Burdwan district. Data were collected through interviews scheduled for 200 rural women (100 SHGs and 100 non-SHG members) during 2014. Analysis was conducted on the extent of various levels of empowerment achieved by the members through their participation in SHGs. Findings revealed that majority of respondents (59%) were young women in the age group between 20 to 35 years. The samples were collected predominantly on nuclear families type. Most women respondents (98.5%) were from Hindu Scheduled caste and tribe. Mostly literate women sampled in this study engaged in various activities such as agriculture farming and farm labour. Among the sampled women, levels of empowerment such as social status, greater participation in democratic institution, greater participation and power of decision making in community and village, monthly savings, performing bank transaction, speaking during public meetings etc. increased after joining the SHGs. The significant differences between the SHG and Non-SHG women in relation to empowerment in social and economic aspects suggest that SHGs have great impact on rural farm women's empowerment.

Keywords- Self Help Group, socio-economic empowerment, rural women

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Introduction

The word 'empowerment' means giving power. Empowerment is defined as the processes by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. Thus, it is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability has previously been denied. Empowerment is expressed as the expansion of freedom of choice and action [1]. Kabeer's [2] view of empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been defined the ability to make choices acquire such ability. Women's empowerment is not a Northern concept. Women all over the world, including countries in the South, have been challenging and changing gender inequalities since the beginnings of history. The first Prime Minister of Independent India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, has rightly said that, "the women of India should play a vital role in building strong nation". Further, the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi has said, "the development of every village is nothing but the development of nation". Since women constitute 48.46% of total population in India as per census 2011, it is very essential to employ this resource optimally in the interest of the nation in general and her family in particular. In the past, women were not ready to undertake any work, job and business due to shyness, fear and male dominance in the society. However, of late, Indian women have come out of the four walls of the kitchen and shown their willingness to take up entrepreneurial activities. Women of today want more economic freedom. Further, many women have proved that they are more efficient than men in contributing to the growth of the economy. Being heavily dependent on agriculture, livelihood in rural areas could not provide employment for everyone. In the absence of significant industrial

growth, there has been severe unemployment and underemployment, resulting in poverty. To mitigate the problem of unemployment and underemployment, the role of women should not only be confined to generate employment, but also to provide employment to others. To mitigate the problem of unemployment and poverty agriculture sector should be developed and women have to undertake entrepreneurial activities. They have to create additional wealth for the nation and to solve the problem of unemployment and poverty. Entrepreneurship development among women, particularly among rural women, will strengthen the rural and national economy. The year 2001 had been declared by the Government of India as "Women's Empowerment Year", because women empowerment is the most important instrument for the socio-economic development of a nation. In this context, Self Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as the tool that wields power to create a socio- economic evolution in the rural areas of our country. Self-help groups (SHGs) are voluntary associations of people formed to attain certain collective goals that could be economic, social or both [3]. The origin of SHGs is from the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, which was founded by Mohammed Yunus. SHGs were started and formed in 1975. In India NABARD had initiated in 1986-87. But the real effort was taken after 1991-92 from the linkage of SHGs with the banks. The members of SHGs are common in respect to social background, heritage, caste or traditional occupation come together for a common cause to raise and manage resources for the benefit of the group members [4]. The Self Help Group is a registered or unregistered group of micro entrepreneurs having homogeneous social and economic backgrounds; voluntarily coming together to save regular small sums of money, mutually agreeing to contribute to a common

fund and meet their emergency needs on the basis of mutual help [5]. Women's empowerment has been conducted by several authors (e.g., [3-5]). However, no extensive studies have been done in West Bengal especially related to women's empowerment in comparison to SHG and non-SHG. The main objectives of the study were to study the socio economic background of the rural women. Levels of women's empowerment in relation to social and economic aspects through participation in SHGs were studied.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in four villages namely Koshigram, Nanagar, Khayerhat and Jagigram under Katwa block- I of Burdwan district (120° 12' 33" north latitude and between 75° 55' and 76° 55' east longitude). Usually the paddy is cultivated by the farmers followed by wheat, jute, potato and mustard. The important commercial crop grown in this district is sugarcane. Vegetable crops like cauliflower, beans, leafy vegetables, and plantation crops like coconut and banana are also grown in considerable area. In Katwa block- I, a total of 935 SHGs are working under the different banks like State Bank of India, United Bank of India, Bank of Baroda, Commercial Bank, Cooperative and Grameen Banks. Of all SHGs, 594 SHGs were engaged with agricultural works.

A sample of 200 rural women (100 SHGs and 100 non-SHG members) of Small Farm households from four villages was selected randomly. Survey was mainly done on a pretested and modified format by open ended interviews about the participation of both SHG and non-SHG members in different farm activities. The data on women contribution in decision making along with participation in SHGs were obtained for the year 2013-14. The sample respondents were classified based on age, family type, caste, education and their occupation. The age of respondents was studied at three levels - 20 – 35 yrs (young), 35- 50 yrs (middle), and > 50 yrs (old). Respondents with their unmarried children were considered as 'nuclear families' and respondents with their married children living together was considered as 'joint families'. Caste was considered as Forward caste (Hindu), Forward caste (Muslim), OBC (Hindu), OBC (Muslim), SC & ST (Hindu) and SC & ST (Muslim). The education level was distributed as illiterate, primary level and middle level or above. On the basis of occupation the respondents were classified as agriculture, agriculture labour, agriculture and labour. On the basis of their land holdings, women respondents were further classified as small farmers (1-2 ha) and marginal farmers (<1 ha). Women of marginal farmers were excluded in this study. In measuring the empowerment concepts of rural women in 18 selected aspects, a three point rating scale was developed and designed with 3 kinds of opinions ranged from disagree (DA), somewhat agree (SWA) and agree (A). The corresponding scores assigned for each response were 0, 1, and 2, respectively. This empowerment concept score of a respondent in 18 selected items regarding social, economic and capacity building affairs could range from 0 to 36. To have an in depth insight into the family opinion role of rural women in selected items, frequency distribution and rank order of each problem was made by developing Opinion Index (OI).

$$\text{Opinion Index (OI)} = A \times 2 + SWA \times 1 + DA \times 0$$

Where,

A = Number of women with agree in opinion

SWA = Number of women with somewhat agree in opinion

DA = Number of rural women with disagree in opinion

Opinion Index (OI) of any opinion making item could range from 0 to 200, where 0 indicates disagree (DA) and 200 indicates agree (A) in opinion making. Based on the extent of participation in family opinion making indices, rank order was done for each selected opinion making item. Data collected in this study were normally distributed. Pearsonian Chi-square model was followed to examine the differences among the women participants in relation to age, family size, caste composition, education level and occupation, and also to examine the differences between SHG and non-SHG women in relation to social, economic and capacity building empowerment. Paired t-test was used to examine the empowerment differences between the woman participants of SHG and non-SHG women in relation to social and economic aspects. I used a general linear mixed model (GLMM) to study to

test the variations among the opinion makings. I conducted all statistical analyses using the software SPSS 17.0. Probability level for rejection of the null hypothesis was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results and Discussion

The distribution of respondents in [Table-1] shows that 60% of the woman respondents belonged to young age (20-35 yrs.) followed by, 33% respondents were into middle age group (35- 50 yrs.). Therefore, most respondents were young women in the age group between 20 to 35 years ($\chi^2=42.17$, $df=2$, $p<0.0005$). This trend was supported by [6, 7]. Moreover, there were no significant differences between SHG and non-SHG members in relation to their age ($t=0.0001$, $df=2$, $p>1.000$). The classification of sample households based on family type shows that 73% belonged to nuclear families and 27% belonged to joint families [Table-1]; and therefore, the sample was collected predominantly on nuclear families type ($\chi^2=21.16$, $df=1$, $p<0.005$). The similar pattern was found in NABARD model III [7-10] where nuclear families appeared in largest proportion. Perhaps due to inability to maintain, large families with meager income may not be sufficient to fulfill needs and joint families are only an added burden. From the [Table-1] it was understood that among the woman respondents, 64% belonged to Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribe (Hindu), 28% to OBC (Hindu), 6% to Forward caste (Hindu), 1% to OBC (Muslim) and 1% belonged to Forward caste (Muslim). Therefore, there were significant variations among the woman respondents of SHGs ($\chi^2=116.80$, $df=4$, $p<0.0005$) as well as among the woman respondents of non-SHGs ($\chi^2=179.60$, $df=4$, $p<0.0005$) in relation to their caste composition. Findings of present study are coincided with of [8, 9]. Moreover, there were no significant differences between SHG and non-SHG members in relation to their castes ($t=0.0001$, $df=4$, $p>1.000$, [13]).

Table-1 Distribution of respondents according to their Demographic characteristics. Percentage in parentheses.

Characteristics	Category	Respondents	
		SHG members	non-SHG members
Age (Years)	Young (20 - 35 yrs.)	65 (65)	55 (55)
	Middle (36 - 50 yrs.)	30 (30)	36 (37)
	Old (above 50 yrs.)	5 (5)	9 (9)
Family size	Nuclear family	82 (82)	64 (64)
	Joint family	18 (18)	36 (35)
Castes	Forward caste (Hindu)	8 (8)	4 (4)
	Forward caste (Muslim)	2 (2)	0 (0)
	OBC (Hindu)	30 (30)	26 (26)
	OBC (Muslim)	2 (2)	0 (0)
	SC & ST (Hindu)	58 (58)	70 (70)
Education	Illiterate	12 (12)	24 (24)
	Functionally literate	31 (31)	38 (38)
	Primary	35 (35)	29 (29)
	Middle	26 (26)	7 (7)
	High school	5 (5)	2 (2)
	College	1 (1)	0 (0)
Occupation	Agriculture	18 (18)	8 (8)
	Agriculture labour	20 (20)	34 (34)
	Agriculture and Agri. Labour	23 (23)	26 (26)
	Agriculture and others	39 (39)	32 (32)
	Total	100	100

[Table-1] indicates that only 18% women respondents were illiterate, and therefore, mostly literate women sampled in this study participated in farm activities ($\chi^2=11.56$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$). Although, most woman participants were literate, there were significant variations among the woman respondents of SHGs ($\chi^2=50.70$, $df=5$, $p<0.0005$) as well as among the woman respondents of non-SHGs ($\chi^2=74.82$, $df=5$, $p<0.0005$) in relation to their educational levels. Moreover, there were no significant differences between SHG and non-SHG members in relation to their educational levels ($t=0.0001$, $df=5$, $p>1.000$); and it was previously reported by [10].

The women respondents sampled in this study were engaged in various activities such as agriculture, agriculture labour, agriculture and agriculture labour, agriculture and others [Table-1]; and there were significant variations among the

woman respondents of SHGs ($\chi^2=10.96$, $df=3$, $p<0.005$) as well as among the woman respondents of non-SHG ($\chi^2=16.80$, $df=3$, $p<0.0005$) in relation to their occupation. Moreover, there were no significant differences between SHG and non-SHG members in relation to their occupation ($t=0.0001$, $df=3$, $p>1.000$). Social empowerment: [Table-2] reveals the opinion of the respondents regarding the women empowerment through SHGs. Majority of the SHG women agreed for social empowerment concepts such as increased social status (75%) and greater participation and power of decision making in community and village (70.0%). Thirty percent of the SHG women somewhat agreed for social empowerment

concept such as mobility. The SHG women disagreed for almost all the concepts of social empowerment. Therefore, there were significant variations among the opinions in relation to empowerment on social contexts ($F=129.2$, $df=2$, 14 ; $P>0.0001$).

Contrarily, majority of the non-SHG women disagreed for almost all the concepts of social empowerment [Table-2]. The mean scores of social empowerment concepts were 152 and 35 for SHG women and non-SHG women respectively; and there were significant differences between the women of SHG and non-SHG in relation to social empowerment ($t=13.96$, $df=7$, $P<0.0001$).

Table-2 Response estimate of empowerment of women through participation in SHGs (Percent).

Concepts	Opinion							
	SHG women			Total score	Non-SHG women			Total score
	A	SWA	DA		A	SWA	DA	
A. Social Empowerment								
Mobility	60	30	10	150	10	25	65	45
Leads to equal status to participate and power of decision making in farm household	55	25	20	135	15	30	55	60
Greater participation and power of decision making in community and village	70	20	10	160	-	15	85	15
Increased social status	75	20	5	170	5	20	75	30
Participates in meetings regularly	65	20	15	150	-	10	90	10
Greater Participation in democratic institution	70	20	10	160	15	25	60	55
Freedom from violence	55	30	15	140	5	20	75	30
Mean	64	24	12	152	7	21	72	35
B. Economic Empowerment								
Purchase and sale of fixed assets	75	20	5	170	20	30	50	70
Purchase and sale of current assets	65	25	10	155	15	25	60	55
Purchase and sale of domestic animals	70	25	5	165	20	35	45	75
Purchase and sale of ornaments	60	25	15	145	15	30	55	60
Purchase of home appliances	90	10	-	190	25	35	40	85
Purchase of clothes	85	15	-	185	20	35	45	75
Construction and improvement of housing facility	80	15	5	175	25	30	45	80
Raising of loan	70	20	10	160	15	25	60	55
Repayment of loan	75	25	-	175	10	15	75	35
Savings and their investment	80	20	-	180	15	35	50	65
Education of children	85	10	5	180	10	20	70	40
Mean	76	19	5	171	17	29	54	37

[Table-3] shows that 64% and 7% respectively of SHG and non-SHG women fell into the high social empowerment category; and there was a significant difference between the women of SHGs and non-SHGs in relation to high level of level of Social empowerment ($\chi^2=45.76$, $df=1$, $P<0.05$). The significant difference in social empowerment suggests that participating in an SHG is strongly supportive in this respect. For the SHG members, social empowerment was manifest in such factors as increased social status, greater participation in democratic institution, greater participation and power of decision making in community and village etc. These observations are similar to the findings of [11, 12, 4].

Economic empowerment: Majority of the SHG women agreed for the economic empowerment concepts such as purchase of home appliances (90%), purchase of clothes (85%) and education of children (85%) [Table-2]. Twenty five percent of the SHG women somewhat agreed for economic empowerment concepts such as access / control of household budget, Spends money under desire will and decision making autonomy. The SHG women disagreed for almost all the concepts of economic empowerment. Therefore, in the case of SHG women there were significant variations among the opinions in relation to empowerment on economic contexts ($F=259.9$, $df=2$, 22 ; $P<0.0001$).

Table-3 Classification of women based on empowerment through participation in SHG's. (Percentage in parentheses).

Concepts	SHG women	Non-SHG women
A. Social Empowerment		
1. High Empowerment	64 (64)	7 (7)
2. Medium Empowerment	24 (24)	21 (21)
3. Low Empowerment	12 (12)	72 (72)
B. Economic Empowerment		
1. High Empowerment	76 (76)	17 (17)
2. Medium Empowerment	19 (19)	29 (29)
3. Low Empowerment	5 (6)	54 (54)

Contrarily, majority of the non-SHG women disagreed for almost all the concepts of economic empowerment [Table-2]. The mean scores of economic empowerment concepts were 171 and 37 for SHG and non-SHG women respectively; and therefore, there were significant differences between the women of SHG and non-SHG women in relation to economic empowerment ($t=19.76$, $df=11$, $P<0.0001$). As shown in [Table-3], 76% of SHG members exhibited high economic empowerment. In contrast, 17% of non-SHG members registered high economic empowerment, and there was a significant difference between the women of SHGs and non-SHGs in relation to high level of level of economic empowerment ($\chi^2=37.43$, $df=1$, $P<0.05$). Majority of the SHG women became engaged in income generating activities like labor and sale in agricultural production, household purchases, sale and purchase of assets etc. As non-SHG members did not engage in income generating activities, there was no stabilization of income, no improvement in family income and no increase in annual savings. Consequently, there was no improvement in their standard of living indicators (expenditure on education, healthcare and welfare). These observations are in accordance with the findings of [13,14]. It is evident from the [Fig-1] that average monthly income for individual SHG woman was Rs. 4506 and for individual non-SHG woman it was Rs. 2682. Therefore, SHGs helped the women in increasing their income by taking up productive activities ($\chi^2=462.85$, $df=1$, $P<0.05$). Average monthly expenditure for individual SHG woman was Rs. 2357 and for individual non-SHG woman it was Rs. 1983. This indicates that SHGs increased spending of the rural women ($\chi^2=32.23$, $df=1$, $P<0.05$). Average monthly savings for individual SHG woman was Rs. 2077 and for individual non-SHG woman it was Rs. 1402; and there was a significant difference between the savings of SHG and non-SHG women ($\chi^2=130.61$, $df=1$, $P<0.05$). Hence, it can be concluded that the SHG movement is in the right direction towards eradicating the poverty of the people. It was also previously reported by

[15-17]. According to APMAS [18], the economic benefits of SHGs as stated by their members are increased access to credit and financial institutions, habit of savings, increased income, employment generation and improved food consumption. Shylendra [19] noted that SHGs help members to experience improvement in their living standards reflected in increased consumption levels, better housing, clothing and education and many other qualitative changes.

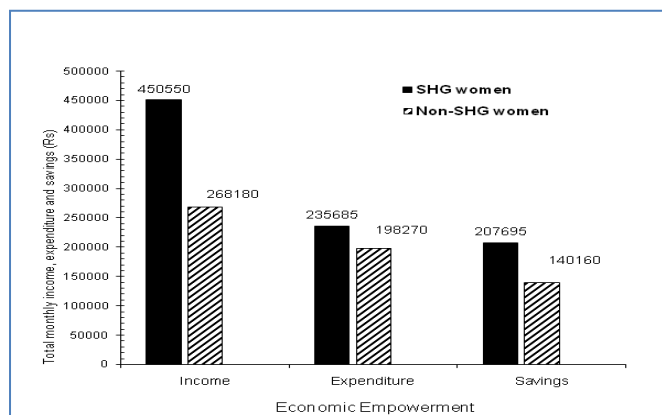


Fig-1 Total monthly income, expenditure and savings (Rs) of 100 SHG and 100 non-SHG women.

In summary, membership to SHGs creates easy access to financial services to finance expenditures on food grains and fodder, access to health care, acquisition of production inputs, households and farm improvements, education of children and performance of socio-cultural activities such as marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies and funerals of family members among others. Previous findings of [20] from India and of [21, 22] from Ghana were reflected in my studies. From the foregoing, it is concluded that SHGs have critical impacts on the livelihood outcomes of members, especially women in rural areas of developing countries like India.

Conclusion

This paper considered the role of self-help groups (SHGs) in promoting the livelihoods development of rural women in India. In India, in early period, women were confined within the four walls of their houses and were dominated by males. Of late, there has been tremendous progress in the social and cultural environment in India. With the concept of Self Help Groups (SHGs) the women are now participating in all productive activities and are at par with men. The monthly income of the women is in the rising trend properly matching with their monthly expenditure. Women, through this SHG movement have asserted a dignified position in the family as well as in the society. Their decision making power has immensely enhanced not only in their family but also in the society. This study confirmed that NGOs can play a significant role in bringing empowerment to rural women. Organizing women through SHGs provides opportunities to improve their self-confidence, taking leadership positions during public meetings, decision-making capacities, purchase of home appliances, savings and their investment, education of children, performing bank transaction, going and talking to Government office / police stations. Women who were members of an SHG were better empowered in social and economic respects than those who were not. Furthermore, the ultimate objective of microfinance, which occurs through SHGs, is to address food security by enhancing purchasing power. It is concluded that SHGs are able to empower members, particularly rural women socially and economically and personally, which help improve their livelihoods. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the government of India as well as their development partners should integrate formation of SHGs in their poverty alleviation and gender empowerment interventions. Such interventions must be socially acceptable, economically viable, politically neutral, culturally agreeable, environmentally sustainable and generationally stable for the people.

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

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