

Exploring the Social Empowerment of Women through SHG Approach

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ABSTRACT

Women play pivotal role in any developmental process within the society and they also participate actively in various social events. Therefore, it is imperative to empower women socially so that they can realize and make others aware of the social responsibilities appropriately and thereby raise their voice regarding various social issues related to women for betterment of the society. The Self Help Group approach can be an effective instrument for this purpose. Therefore, the present study has attempted to assess the status of social empowerment of the women after joining Self Help Group (SHG) and thereby, exploring different factors associated with their social 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 social empowerment of the women SHG members was considered as the dependent variable and the other attributes of the women respondents were considered as the independent variables for the study. The data were collected with the help of structured questionnaire schedule through personal interview method. The statistical methods used for the analysis of the data were coefficient of correlation and multiple regressions. Results showed that the variables like education level, asset possession, extension contact and mass media exposure are positively and significantly correlated with the social empowerment of women. In multiple regression analysis, education has been found to be significantly and positively characterizing towards the social empowerment of the women SHG members whereas the variable mass media exposure was significantly and negatively characterizing towards the social empowerment of the women. The R^2 value being 0.669, it is also to infer that the selected predictor variables put together have explained 66.90 per cent variation embedded with the predicted variable, social empowerment of women after joining SHGs.

Keywords: Extension contact, mass media exposure, rural women, Self Help Group, social empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

In the present global scenario with the women empowerment, poverty eradication and conserving the human rights for the women as the key indicators for measuring a society's development, reciprocating the ideas of societal development through social empowerment and economic empowerment can better be publicised with the exploration of right to speak and making the society more conducive towards raising the voice. In the same direction, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have also expressed the integration of objectives like poverty eradication, employment generation, nutritional security and gender mainstreaming (UN Women, 2014). But, in the country like India, the society in its present dynamic dimension is often experiencing deviation from social norms and regulations and erosion of social values and rituals. This

issue can be addressed through an in-depth analysis of social process explaining the interaction and relationship among the members of the society taking place in the form of accommodation, assimilation and acculturation.

Now the basic unit of any social system is the family and in most of the rural families, women play a pivotal role in managing the farm and home. Besides their job of assisting their male counterparts in the farming activity, they also need to maintain good relationships with the other members of the society on behalf of their families which requires them to be well aware of the existing social norms and values of their societies. Through performing this responsibility, the women members of the families become the custodian of society's culture, norms and values which they pass on to their children, the future citizen of our country, through bringing them up properly. Therefore, women have a crucial role in the development

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of a society if we can empower them truly in various social aspects because social empowerment is a multidimensional process which can make the social transformation towards desirable direction through developing and improving the social attributes of the people like cooperation, social interaction, social integrity, social values and so on (Page and Czuba, 1999). Social empowerment can be conceptualised as a process of developing a sense of autonomy and self-confidence and acting individually and collectively to change social relationships and the institutions and discourses that exclude women from the mainstream and keep them vulnerable (UNIDO, 2013).

Hence, women's social empowerment means not only expanding their knowledge about various social norms, regulations and values but also strengthening their social status through providing them educational opportunity, freedom to outside activity, increased participation in family decision-making and community action, ensuring the social security, access to health facility, modern technology, resources and also offering the opportunity for appreciation and motivation for doing their job – both outside and inside their families. But the task of women the women socially is indeed a tough one as the effort has often been constricted by the 'gender roles' assigned to the women especially in a culture like India which resists changes (Singh, 2013).

Gender discrimination is the major problem which the Indian women face in the present day society. Even after so many years of our independence, women are still powerless and marginalised section of Indian society. Most of the working women remain outside the organised sector. After realising the deprivation of women particularly in the rural areas, there may be some strategies to be sought towards engendering and feminising the society through promoting and enhancing the capacity of rural women towards shouldering the outside activities with the male counterparts as increasing the efficacy for developing a network through interaction with key cosmopolite persons.

In this connection, the Government has initiated the concept of self help group for empowering the rural women by raising their voice, making them able to decide upon and restructuring the financial assistance by their own. A self help group (SHG) can be defined as 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 (Dash, 2013). It is discernible that SHG is not a panacea for empowering the rural women but, still it is the means to achieve the empowerment goal. The self help group

approach through its micro-financing scheme creates empowerment promoting environment for the 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 can act as safeguard for rural women to protect them from social and economic exploitation. Moreover, participation of women in self help groups has made a significant impact on their empowerment both in social and economic aspects (Thangamani *et al.*, 2013).

Therefore, under such a research climate, the present study has been carried out to assess the role of self help group in the social empowerment of the rural women and also to identify those factors which are contributing towards bringing about women's social empowerment through formation of self help groups in the rural areas.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in four villages of the Coochbehar-I block in Coochbehar district of West Bengal. Purposive as well as multistage 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 social empowerment of the women SHG members was considered as the dependent variable and the other attributes of the women respondents were considered as the independent variables for the study. The data were collected with the help of a structured interview schedule through personal interview method. The statistical methods used for the analysis of the data were co-efficient of correlation and multiple regressions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Distribution of the women SHG members according to their social empowerment score

Variable	Range		Mean	SD	CV
	Min	Max			
Social Empowerment	17	35	27.21	4.60	16.91

Table 1 reflects the distribution of the women members of the selected Self Help Groups in Coochbehar district of West Bengal according to the scores of social empowerment as achieved by them. The dependent variable, social empowerment of women stakeholders in SHGs follows a mean score of 27.21. The lowest score is 17 and highest score is 35 in this perspective. It may be concluded that the majority of the women SHGs members selected as respondents are still at the lower than the desired level of social empowerment. The standard deviation of the distribution is 4.60. The coefficient of variation value within the distribution is 16.91 per cent which signifies high level of consistency of the distribution for the variable 'social empowerment'.

Table 2: Correlation coefficient of Social empowerment (Y) of the respondents with causal variables

Variables	Coefficient of correlation (r)
Age	0.017
Education	0.504**
Family size	0.113
Family education status	0.146
Migration	0.058
Annual income	0.111
Land holding	0.211
Farm power	0.156
Family Asset possession	0.383**
Livestock possession	0.020
House type	0.211
Extension contact	0.634**
Mass media exposure	0.543**
Group age	0.221

** at 1 per cent level of significance

Table 2 represents the correlation between the selected predictor variables and the predicted variable i.e. the social empowerment of the women self help group members selected for the study. The results show that the four variables namely education, family asset possession, extension contact and mass media exposure are positively and significantly associated with the dependent variable, social empowerment of the women members of the self help groups.

Education and Social 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 coming across various social events and social institutions like economic, political and educational institutions. This enables them to better understand the

behavioural and relationship patterns that are densely interwoven and enduring and function across the entire society. Here, in the present study, the women members with higher educational status have been able to acquire knowledge and understanding about various social issues related to law, governance and politics effectively which aids in their social empowerment. Hence, the variable education is positively and significantly associated with the social empowerment of the women SHG members.

Family Asset Possession and Social Empowerment

Family Asset possession can be treated as an economic indicator of the individual. The individual enjoys the higher social prestige and esteem if he or she possesses a greater number of assets within his or her family. It is discernible that resource richness of the family always creates an enabling environment for its women members to be acquainted with social norms and values through interaction with other members of the society and access to many sources of information about related social issues and events which, in turn, helps to empower the women socially. Similarly, the women members in a self help group who have high family asset possession have greater chance for their social empowerment through participating and running their SHGs. Therefore, it may be inferred that the family asset possession can act as a catalyst in empowering the women socially. That is why the family asset possession is positively and significantly associated with social empowerment of women self help groups.

Extension contact, Mass media exposure and Social empowerment

Rural people can be made aware of various social issues and events by developing contact with village level extension workers. Extension contact also helps people in developing strong linkage with various grass root organizations and social institutions like self help groups, farmers' clubs, NGOs etc. in rural areas which, in turn, enhance their accessibility to various resources and enables them to raise their voice in decision-making leading to their empowerment in social aspects. In case of running the groups effectively, the women SHG members also need to nurture social values within their group to achieve their group objective in a participatory way and in this way the self help group contributes significantly to the social empowerment of its women members. Still, there are many people who cannot be reached through extension contact. Mass media can play an important role in this context and helps to generate awareness among a large number of rural people about various social values and issues through campaigning, sensitization programme, radio, television, newspaper etc.

Consequently, it improves social integrity and cohesiveness, develops empathy and arouses feeling for each other among the members of the social system. Likewise, the women members of the self help groups are also exposed to various mass media to collect information about established social values and norms to perform their group activities in an effective manner and by doing so, their social empowerment is also observed. Moreover, both the extension contact and mass media exposure improve educational opportunity, access to health facility, participation in community action, access to modern technology and resources for the rural women which provides an enabling environment for their social empowerment. That is why these two variables namely extension contact and mass media exposure are positively and significantly associated with social empowerment of women self help group members.

Reasons for joining group and social empowerment

The reason for joining group is a motivational attribute to comply with the norms for formation and strengthening of a group. Though, individual joins in any cooperative or group structure for their own specific reason but, ultimately this contributes to the group objectives and self-reliance of the group members. After joining the group the individual prepares themselves more motivated to raise the voice within the group for achieving the group goal. This motivation further encourages them to raise their voice and participate in decision-making in their family as well as in the society. The women, therefore, try to be attached with various social values and norms so that they could be confident enough to build a strong opinion about a social issue or event. In this way, reasons for joining group acts as an intrinsic motivation for the women members of the self help group for their social empowerment.

Table 3: Multiple regression analysis of Social empowerment (Y) with predictor variables

Variables (X)	Standardized regression coefficient ()	Unstandardised regression coefficient (B)	S.E of 'b'	t value
Age	.141	.091	.074	1.236
Education	.248	.664	.295	2.247*
Family size	-.032	-.089	.286	-.310
Family education status	-.082	-.440	.572	-.770
Migration	.166	.667	.403	1.657
Annual income	.109	.005	.004	1.229
Land holding	.116	.306	.277	1.103
Farm power	.076	.456	.605	.753
Family Asset possession	.062	.030	.062	.493
Livestock possession	-.110	-.133	.112	-1.187
House type	-.119	-.898	.830	-1.081
Extension contact	.198	.250	.194	1.287
Mass media exposure	.082	.192	.338	.570
Group age	-.324	-.480	.167	-2.880**

The table 3 indicated that variable education is positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing social empowerment of women self help group members while the variable group age is negatively and significantly contributing towards characterizing the dependent variable that is the social empowerment of the women SHG members.

Education and Social Empowerment

Education is the process through which one individual can acquire knowledge and apply this knowledge to their real life situation. Education provides an individual the opportunity to expose themselves to other people and institutions of the society. They come in touch with other society's culture and make a comparison of those with their own culture. Higher education builds the confidence of the people in choosing appropriate social values and norms which can help in the development of individuals as well as the society. Hence, social empowerment can be obtained through higher level of educational exposure. It is also true for women self help group members. That is why the variable education is positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing social empowerment of women self help group members.

The variable education is directly contributing 24.80 per cent in case of characterizing the social empowerment of women SHG members. One unit change of the variable education is delineating the 0.664 unit change in the predicted variable, social empowerment of women self help group members.

Group age and Social Empowerment

Group age primarily delineates the chronological aging and experience gaining by the members of any SHG. With the increase in the age of any social group particularly the self help group, some of its members start losing their interest in running the group because they find the group not to be viable to achieve their individual goal of economic upliftment since the groups fail to provide them with some profitable venture except for only inter-lending. This disinterest of the members demoralizes them to function actively in the group and this acts as demotivating factor for sustaining the group. As a result, the women members of the self help group pay less attention to the group activity and thereby, group cohesiveness is reduced. Conflicts also arise in a greater way in various group related activities and decisions due to disenchantment of its members and differences in their opinions. All these together pose a negative impact on the social empowerment of the women members of the self help group. Hence, the variable group age is negatively

and significantly contributing towards characterizing social empowerment of women self help group members.

The variable group age is directly contributing 32.40 per cent in case of characterizing the social empowerment of women SHG members. One unit change of the variable age group is delineating the 0.480 unit change in the predicted variable, social empowerment of women self help group members.

The R^2 value being 0.669, it is to infer that the selected predictor variables put together have explained 66.90 per cent variation embedded with the predicted variable social empowerment of women SHG members. Still, 33.10 per cent variable embedded with predicted one remains unexplained. Thus it would be suggested that inclusion of some more contextual variables possessing direct bearing on the social empowerment of women SHG members could have increased the level of explicability.

CONCLUSION

The primordial implication of empowering rural women through generating microeconomic strategy can help in developing the society in terms of empowering rural women. In Indian context, the formation and strengthening of self help groups play a pivotal role in providing impetus to empowering rural women in terms of social attributes. The social attributes like solidarity, cohesiveness, communication ability, linkage development are primarily developed with the help of constant monitoring. The present study explored the social empowerment of women SHG members in terms of strengthening their social attributes. The cognitive element of human psyche is creating an atmosphere to acquire the social attributes from their own society or outside the same. Accordingly, the economic affluence, cosmopolitaness attaching with the concept of group always create some space to strengthen and develop socially inclusive traits. Consequently, the more focussed relationship in between the social empowerment of women SHG members and other contributing factors can usher a new strategic era for the policy makers towards women empowerment and mainstreaming.

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