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Perception of empowerment level of working women in rural West Bengal: A region-specific comparative study

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Abstract

Women empowerment signifies enabling women to act with their full potential through education, economic participation, decision-making and self-esteem. It breaks traditional barriers, promotes gender equality, and strengthens social and economic development. The participation of women in the workforce not only enable them to support their family, but it also makes them a different place in their family and society. This study compares the empowerment status of rural working women across West Bengal, examining regional differences and the influence of socio-economic factors on their empowerment levels in the state of West Bengal, India. 400 working women were randomly selected and surveyed with a pre-tested interview schedule from 5 regions of West Bengal as specified by NSSO, GoI. The result explored that there are significant differences in the empowerment level of women in different regions of West Bengal. The women of the central plain are more empowered compared to the other regions because of their geographical situation. Age, marital status, caste, education, occupation and income also play a significant role in women empowerment. In the western region, the empowerment level is low and as a result, though in most cases, women are the bread earner of the family, while male members take the financial decisions. The overall decision-making power and empowerment status can be enhanced through the development of specific socio-economic conditions. The regional imbalances need to be addressed with proper region-specific women development plans.

Keywords: Working women, women empowerment, rural, financial decision, workforce

Introduction

Women empowerment is a vital aspect of contemporary society that emphasizes the significance of women beyond traditional familial roles. Empowering women involves providing them with the tools, resources, and opportunities necessary to achieve their full potential, both personally and professionally. It recognizes that women are not only integral to family structure but are also pivotal contributors to the overall progress of society. Women form a key component of society. Historically, they were mainly part of the family structure, but now, in modern society, women actively participate in various activities beyond domestic life (Tamkeen and Bose, 2019) ^[1]. Education facilitates women's empowerment (Sundaram *et al.*, 2014) ^[2], but the process is not always straightforward. In India, a large segment of the female workforce lives below the poverty line. Most are illiterate or have minimal education (Sathar and Desai, 2000; Das and Desai, 2003) ^[3, 4]. In developing countries, the relationship between education level and women's labor force participation forms a U-shaped curve. Education is crucial for all women, as an educated woman can lead a life of dignity and respect. Through education, women can develop self-confidence, enabling empowerment and protection against abuse and

mistreatment (Shetty and Hans, 2015) ^[5].

Economic and financial crises within families compelled women to leave their household roles and participate in various livelihood activities. Women have participated in different levels of the workforce but their contribution to this society is rarely recognized. Nowadays, women are involved in different kinds of work to support the family economically and also for their financial security. They can also establish their own identity and take an important part in the family as well as in decision making (Noreen, 2011) ^[6]. Most of the women in India contribute to the economy in different forms of work, but their contributions are not documented officially every time. Men, who were the family's primary bread earners, made most of the decisions in early societies. Women are now empowered to manage the family with the best use of resources, including time and energy with the modernization and education. (Bhatti and Srivastava, 2003) ^[7].

In India, women do not face problems with their voting rights as compared to America and Britain. They got their vote right after the independence of the nation. But research has indicated that women hold 11.7 percent of seats in parliament all over the world (Nayak, 2012) ^[8]. At the three Tira Gram Panchayat, women have to face several

challenges. The male members of the Panchayat rarely consider women equal to them. Sometimes, family members experience problems and are forced to resign from their posts. But the picture is a little bit different in the states of Karnataka and West Bengal, where women reserved 33 percent and 42 percent of seats, respectively. This proves that if women get the opportunities, they can shine in any field.

Women empowerment is about breaking down societal barriers and challenging stereotypes that limit women's roles. Promoting female leaders in politics, business, and other areas influences policy decisions and encourages the next generation of women to aspire to leadership positions. The empowerment of women is not only a matter of justice and equality but also an essential driver of development. By investing in women's education, workforce participation, and leadership opportunities, we pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous society for all. The present study has tried to compare the women empowerment status of the working women in different regions of West Bengal. The main objective of the study is to identify the existing differences and the reasons behind that. The hypothesis of the study is no significant differences in the status of women's empowerment of rural working women of different regions of West Bengal. The second hypothesis of the study is that different socio-economic factors have no significant impact of women empowerment level of working women in rural West Bengal.

Methodology

This study is designed as a quantitative method using a cross-sectional analysis, utilizing primary data obtained from female respondents. Following the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 68th round Employment-Unemployment survey, West Bengal was divided into five regions for study. One district from each five regions was selected randomly. In each district, two blocks were randomly selected as the study areas. So a total of ten Blocks from five district were considered as the study location. A total of 40 respondents from each block and 80 respondents from each district were randomly selected, resulting in a total sample size of 400 respondents for the study. Primary Data was collected using a pre-tested semi-structured interview schedule. Adult women engaged in any form of economic activity and earn money were eligible to participate in the study. Data was collected from willing and eligible respondents. A set of statements on 5 point scale determining the status of perceived women empowerment status was developed and considered for the study. The Total women empowerment score has been calculated by summing up the individual scores of all statements. Impact of Socio-economic factors on perceived empowerment status of working women has been analysed with the Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis chi-square test. The mean difference between the levels of working women was also calculated by the Kruskal-Wallis Chi-square test.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Perception of women empowerment by working women

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Women are equally intelligent as men	1.25	1.5	14.25	28	55
Women and men should be paid equal for same work	0.25	4.5	17	32.5	45.75
No specific job preference for men and women	3.5	4.75	25	33.5	33.25
Women should only take care of their family and household duties	15	8.25	19.5	23.75	33.5
Men are the decision maker of the family.	13.25	11	26.5	26.5	22.75
The savings and expenditure of the family should be decided by men	6.5	17.5	22.25	35.25	18.5
Married people are happier than unmarried one	17.75	13.25	24	22.5	22.5
Women should obey the orders and decision of their elderly parents.	10.25	18	26.25	26	19.5
Women can act as their wish	3.5	11.5	30.5	39	15.5
The group of women can prevent social obstacles	2	5.25	8.75	42.75	41.25
Working women having self-confidence than non-workers	0.75	4.5	11.75	37.25	45.75
Economic freedom is most important for women.	2.25	1	6.25	18.75	71.75

From the study, it was found that more than half of the women (55%) strongly agree that women and men are equally intelligent and 45.75% respondents strongly agree that both men and women should be paid equally for the same work. Most of the respondents (33.5% respondents agree and 33.25% respondents strongly agree) think that there is no specific job for men and women. A large number of women (33.5%) strongly agree that women should only take care of their household duties but only 8.25% and 15% of women disagree and strongly disagree with the statement respectively. A maximum of the respondents (26.5% and 22.75% agree and strongly agree respectively) have a positive view that the male members of the family are the main decision makers. Only a few of the women (13.25% strongly disagree and 11% disagree) deny it. A maximum of the respondents (35.25% of the respondents agree and 18.5% of the respondents strongly agree) think that the financial matters of the family like savings and expenditure,

should be look after by men. Only 6.5% and 17.5% of total respondents strongly disagree and disagree with this statement. It was found by Leach and Sitaram (2002)⁹ that the increase in women's income does not lead them to be empowered.

Various opinions were found against the statement that married people are happier than unmarried ones. 22.5% and another 22.5% of women agree or strongly agree with it. Whereas 17.75 and 13.25% women strongly disagree or disagree with the statement. On the other hand, 24% of the respondents have a neutral view on it. The same picture is found against the thought that the orders and decisions of elderly family members must be obeyed by the women. Most of the women (39%) have a positive view of the statement that women can act as their wish but 30.5% women have a neutral view on it. A large no of respondents (42.75% & 41.25%) think that a group of women can prevent any social obstacles. The same picture is found

against the statement that working women have more self-confidence than non-working women. A maximum of the women (71.75%) strongly agree that economic freedom is most important for all women.

Table 2: Region wise perceived women empowerment level

Region	Women empowerment (As perceived)
Central Region	51.53
Western Region	41
Himalayan Region	45.4
Southern region	45.63
Eastern region	44.56
Test Statistics ^{a, b}	
Chi-Square	129.167
df	4
Asymp. Sig.	0.001

Regions have a significant mean effect on women empowerment. It has been found that the respondents of the central region are comparatively more empowered than the other regions. In the study, it is observed that the educational level of the respondents of the central region is

higher compared to the rest. Education has a great impact on empowerment. So it is stated that a higher educational level of the central region is one of the main reasons for more empowerment. Besides this, it is also found that the majority of the women of the central region are service holders and earn well. So they are more self-confident and empowered than others. The location and the social culture have also a major effect on women empowerment. As the central region is near Kolkata, the state capital and a metropolitan city, the respondents can connect easily with the city and incorporate the social culture of the city within them. So compared to the other regions, as the women of this region have more exposure, they are more empowered.

Age has a significant mean effect on women empowerment. It is found that the younger group of respondents (18-30Years) is more empowered than the older groups. The lower age group has a higher educational level and more exposure compared to the older women. They can also accept new ideas, technology but aged people are traditionally bounded. So, it may be one of the reasons that women empowerment is higher in lower lower-aged group.

Table 3: Mean Effect of Socio-economic status on perceived level of women empowerment

Variables	Category	Women empowerment	Chi-square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Age	18-30 years	47.41	16.485	3	0.001
	31-40 years	45.43			
	41-50years	44.44			
	51-60years	44.65			
Marital status	Unmarried	49.72	29.143	3	0.001
	Presently married	44.88			
	Divorced	48.4			
	Widow	44.96			
Religion	Hindu	45.44	7.287	4	0.121
	Muslim	45.65			
	Christian	48.7			
	Buddhist	48.45			
	Other	41			
Caste	General	46.04	8.853	3	0.031
	OBC	46.5			
	SC	44.66			
	ST	46.07			
Education	Illiterate	43.29	35.353	6	0.001
	Can read only	40.3			
	Can read and write only	44.19			
	Primary	44.44			
	Secondary	44.85			
	Higher secondary	46.91			
	Graduate and above	48.38			
Main occupation	Service	47.77	34.31	4	0.001
	Business	43.84			
	Agriculture and animal husbandry	43.05			
	Labour	45.00			
	Professionals	45.19			
Total income	Upto 2000	45.24	13.12	6	0.041
	2001-5000	45.17			
	5001-8000	45.51			
	8001-15000	44.9			
	15001-25000	48.48			
	25001-40000	48.29			
	Above 40000	47.71			

Marital status also has a significant mean effect on women empowerment. It seems that unmarried and divorced respondents are significantly more empowered. The unmarried respondents have less family responsibility. Their exposure is high and they can easily incorporate new things or ideas within them. So, their empowerment level is naturally higher than other respondents. On the other hand, the respondents who are divorced, their situation forced them to be independent and also struggle to face it. As a result, they become empowered. In the study of *Chakraborty* (2017) ^[10], it has been defined that married women with long marital periods are more empowered than young married women. According to *Sridevi* (2005) ^[11], in India, the chances of empowerment of women are reduced with age. In the case of married women, when husbands are equally educated, the chances of empowerment increase.

Caste has a significant mean effect on women empowerment. It is found that the women belong to the Scheduled caste category were the least empowered than others. Most of the respondents in the study are from the SC category. Caste has a clear pattern in the work participation market of India as well as in the study area. The upper caste has a lower work participation rate than the lower caste (*Datta et al.*, 2020) ^[12].

Education has a significant mean effect on women empowerment (*Sundaram et al.*, 2014) ^[2]. In the study area, it is found that the higher educated women are more empowered (*Mukhopadhyay*, 2008) ^[13] than the women who have low education level. Higher educated respondents are more knowledgeable and have more exposure to the outer world. Education is the most powerful instrument for the development of women in society. Education also improves the status of women in their families (*Kumar*, 2014) ^[14]. Moreover, they are not confined or tradition-bound and are

also eager to incorporate new things. So, it may be one of the reasons that more educated respondents are more empowered. *Galvankova* (2013) ^[15] found that in spite of several investments of the government on the education of women their participation in the workforce is still low. Only 44 percent of women participated in the workforce.

The occupation of women has a significant mean effect on women empowerment. It has been revealed from the study that women who are service holders are more empowered. The women who are service holder naturally having more education level and more exposure to the outer world, which leads to more empowerment. In 2017, *Nath and Dutta* ^[16] found that income-based occupation made women more empowered than others. According to *Habib et al.* (2019) ^[17] education helps women to get employment and employment helps them to be economically strong and independent, which leads them to be more empowered.

The total income of respondents has a significant ($p < 0.05$) mean effect on women empowerment. When the respondents earn more, they can bear their expenses, which made them more confident. Moreover, they become the decision makers of their earnings. These may make them more empowered. Women who are in any occupation and have a sufficient amount of income are likely to have decision-making power in the home and can better secure their wellbeing and build up asset (*Dutta*, 2000; *Salway*, 2005) ^[18, 19]. The contribution of income in the family makes the women more valuable to the household and their voice becomes the choice of other family members as well as greater influence in the community (*Blumberg*, 2005) ^[20]. In Bengal, husbands are still deciding on different domestic decisions (*Dutta*, 2002) ^[21]. Besides that, the income and education levels are the key factors for the empowerment of women (*Biswas*, 2017) ^[22].

Table 4: Region wise financial behaviour of working women

Variables	Central plains	Western plains	Himalayan Region	Southern plains	Eastern plains	All regions
Spend money for herself	93.8	90	58.8	5	15	52.5
Spend money for Family	88.75	90	83.75	97.5	87.5	89.5
Spend money for savings	76.25	11.25	23.75	5	8.75	25
Spend money to support child expenses	47.5	76.25	58.75	18.75	12.5	42.75
Spend money for child education	37.5	48.75	47.5	13.75	35	36.5
Spend money for health	47.5	56.25	36.25	7.5	0	29.5
Spend money for household	95	87.5	50	82.5	85	80
Spend money for elders' treatment	22.5	21.25	12.5	7.5	1.25	13
Spend money for loan repayment	17.5	5	5	6.25	6.25	8
Spend money for others	18.75	28.75	27.5	2.5	0	15.5
Self decision on spending	82.5	20	46.25	82.5	87.5	61.75
Spending decided by other family members	17.5	80	53.75	17.5	12.5	38.25

Most of the women in Central (93.8%) and Western region (90%) spend their earnings for their own purpose but only 5% and 15% of the respondents of Southern and Eastern plains do the same. Around 90% of respondents of all regions spend their earnings for family need. Very few respondents of all regions (11.25% in the Western region, 23.75% in the Himalayan region, 5% in the Southern plains and 8.75% in the Eastern plains), except the Central plains (76.25%) have savings. 37.5% in the Central region, 48.75% in the Western region, 47.5% in the Himalayan region and 35% in the Eastern region bear the expenses of children education, whereas only 13.75% of women in the Southern

region do the same. Except Eastern region few respondents of the Central, Western, Himalayan region and very few (7.5%) of the Southern region, spend their earnings on health care. Most of the women in all regions (95% in Central region, 87.5% in Western region, 82.5% in Southern region and 85% in Eastern region) bear household expenses. Only in the Himalayan region is the percentage less (only 50%) compared to the other regions. 22.5% respondents in the Central region, 21.25% in the Western region, 12.5% in the Himalayan region, 7.5% women in the Southern region and only 1.5% women in the Eastern region spend their earnings for the treatment of elder family members. Very

few of the respondents spend money on loan repayment and other expenses. Through the study, it is found that in most of the cases in the Central region (82.5%), Western region (82.5%) and the Eastern region (87.5%), women are the decision makers about spending their earnings.

But in Western and Himalayan regions 80% and 46.25% of the respondents said that their husbands decide on spending the money they earn. Very few respondents said that their father or family members do the same. According to Sarkar (2017) [23] generally, 38.1 percent of women participate in decision-making at home. In a rural area, it is 34.26 percent but the urban area is improved a lot i.e. 47.5 percent.

In most cases, it is found that the earnings of women in all the regions are spent for their family but in the Central region, the respondents spend money for themselves and savings also. As most of the respondents of this region are service holders, their income level is high and they can bear both household expenses and self-expenses and also can save money. Besides this, the women are more empowered in this region and they are the decision makers of their own expenses. So this may be a reason behind the observation. On the other hand, in the Western region, in many cases, women are the bread earner of the family. So, they have to bear all the expenses of the family along with savings, Children's education, health issues and many more. It was found in the study of Tuteja Usha (2000) [24] that female agricultural labour contributed significantly to family income.

It has been found that in most cases of the Western region, husbands are the decision makers of the expenses, though the women are the bread earner of the family. The reason behind it may be the low women empowerment level of the region. Moreover, the social structure and culture differ from region-to-region which effects women empowerment as well as decision making power.

Conclusion

In the rural areas of West Bengal, most women belong to the middle-aged group and have family responsibilities. Thus, their earnings are primarily utilized to cover household expenses. However, educated women tend to work in the service sector, leading to higher income levels. It is clear that the education and job opportunities available to women have a direct impact on their financial stability and overall empowerment. Decision-making power also varies as the culture and education levels change from region to region. The need for greater access to regular service-related jobs and increased educational opportunities is, therefore, of utmost importance to ensure that women are adequately empowered to lead fulfilling and economically sustainable lives.

The impact of women's education in the workforce is a fascinating subject to explore. These factors hold immense significance in shaping the economic and social status of women, and consequently, the overall development of our society. It is vital to recognize the crucial role played by these determinants and strive towards creating an inclusive and diversified workforce that caters to the needs of all individuals, regardless of their gender.

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Authors contribution

R. Paul: Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, visualization, manuscript drafting; A. Goswami: Conceptualization, manuscript finalization, supervision; B. Pal: Data Analysis, manuscript drafting and finalization.

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