

Women's Empowerment in India: Issues, Challenges and Future Directions

Soumitro Chakravarty

(Corresponding Author)

Faculty Member, Department of Management
Birla Institute of Technology
Lalpur Campus, Ranchi
BIT Extension Centre, Lalpur, Ranchi, Pin- 834001
E-mail: soumitrochakravarty123@gmail.com

Anant Kumar

Assistant Professor, Xavier Institute of Social Sciences, Ranchi
XIIS, Camil Bulke Path, Purulia Road
Ranchi- 834001
E-mail: anantkumar@xiss.ac.in

Amar Nath Jha

Prof. & Centre in-Charge, Department of Management
Birla Institute of Technology
Lalpur Campus, Ranchi
BIT Extension Centre, Lalpur, Ranchi, Pin- 834001
E-mail: anjha06@rediffmail.com

(Received: 28-11-12 / Accepted: 14-1-13)

Abstract

Women's Empowerment has been an issue of immense discussions and contemplation over the last few decades world-wide. This as an agenda has been on top of the lists of most government plans & programs as well. Efforts have been made on a regular basis across nations to address this issue and enhance the socio-economic status of women. However, it has been observed that most of the policies and programs view empowerment in the economic sense only working in the belief that economic self-reliance empowers women ignoring other variables like health, education, literacy etc. This working research paper attempts to understand the concept of women empowerment on a holistic basis and critically examine the efforts initiated towards empowering women with special emphasis upon the Self Help Groups(SHG) based upon empirical work undertaken in the Ranchi district of Jharkhand state in India. It further aims towards understanding the linkages between SHGs & women empowerment and proposing suggestions to accelerate the empowerment drive paying due attention to the local level area specific factors for a developing country like India which have a crucial impact upon region specific women empowerment process and thereby point the way for further research in the area.

Keywords: Women Empowerment; SHGs; Socio-economic status; income generation; economic self reliance; India.

I. Introduction

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact, the status, employment and work performed by women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economical or political progress of a country will be stagnated.

Women constitute half of the humanity, even contributing two-thirds of world's work hours. She earns only one-third of the total income and owns less than one-tenth of the world's resources. This shows that the economic status of women is in pathetic condition and this is more so in a country like India. Among total Indian population of 1027.10 million, women constitute 495.73 million. Therefore, "women constitute nearly 50 per cent of population, perform two-thirds of the work and produce 50 per cent of food commodities consumed by the country. They earn one third of remuneration and own 10 per cent of the property or wealth of the country" (Reddy et al., 1994).

Concept of Empowerment

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process, which should enable women or group of women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life (Surekharao and Rajamanamma, 1999). It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or to have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free from shocks imposed on them by custom, belief and practice. Generally development with justice is expected to generate the forces that lead to empowerment of various sections of population in a country and to raise their status specially in case of women.

"Empowerment comes from Women's groups who seek to empower themselves through greater self-reliance. They have right to determine their own choices in life. They also seek to gain control and access to resources". Empowerment is process, which helps people to gain control of their lives through raising awareness, taking action and working in order to exercise greater control. Empowerment is the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one's goals (Indiresan, 1999).

Empowerment: Summing it up

In context of the above however, it should be noted that the term 'empowerment' has till-date not been very explicitly defined and it may be assumed that based upon context the term may be interpreted contextually & situationally. However, in context of women, empowerment essentially refers to a feeling of awareness of one's own situation backed up with the knowledge, skills and information which could enable women to gain higher self esteem and facilitate their role as decision makers in the current patriarchal society where women have always been subordinate to men.

SHGs as Tools for Women Empowerment

Of late SHGs, a voluntary association of 10-20 people (mainly women) who come together to solve their problems based upon mutual help and self help have emerged as a vital tool to alleviate poverty and bring about empowerment of women who join the SHGs. Self help groups have emerged as one of the major strategies for women's empowerment and various schemes of the Government of India have shown that strong women's groups could contribute

substantially to the development and convergence of services and activities. Women cannot be ignored while devising various policies for rural and socioeconomic development. So, treating the women with equality of opportunities is very much required.

Taking a look at the working and impact of SHGs across various countries it can be inferred with a reasonable degree of confidence that SHG approach towards poverty alleviation & women empowerment have been reasonably successful. The grameen groups of Bangladesh is a burning example of the success story of SHGs.

However, in a developing country like India, there are some issues that need to be explored & critically examined before coming to any tangible conclusion regarding the success of SHGs as women empowerment tool.

II. SHGs: The Indian Scenario

Review of Literature on Extent of Women Empowerment in India

Giriappa (1997) analysed the women empowerment with the corresponding levels of discrimination and effectiveness of decision-making by women in different rural enterprises and concluded that the female headed households were effective in taking decision in respect of work mobility, schooling, health care, asset creation, employment generation and social participation in low social status households. The informal empowerment was wide spread through women earning members, their decisions were subjected to various degrees of discrimination by males.

Jyothi (1998) reported in her study on employment pattern and empowerment of rural women in Kolar district that the distribution of women according to the level of empowerment showed that most of the women had medium level of empowerment (58), while few women (8) belonged to high level of empowerment, remaining 54 women had low level of empowerment.

Saradha (2001) reported that the product empowerment of women in self-help groups was found to range from high and low with 35.80 and 35.00 per cent, respectively. It indicated that even though the women are psychologically empowered but their real empowerment level was low. The possible reasons for this may be the patriarchal society where the women are regarded as weaker section and the managerial competencies, decision-making power, reduction in drudgery, assessing information and resources and critical awareness of rural women were found to be low because of the lack of general media exposure, low level of education and lack of recognition.

Thus it can be said with a reasonable amount of confidence that reviews on the extent of empowerment generally reveal that majority of the women belonged to low and medium level of empowerment. It indicated that even though they are statistically empowered the real empowerment level was very low.

III. Jharkhand: The Socio-Economic Scenario

Jharkhand, the 28th state of the Indian republic, came into existence on 15th November 2000 after the bifurcation of the Bihar state. About 23% of the state is covered by forests. Being the oldest geological formation of India, the state has vast deposits of minerals like iron-ore, bauxite, copper, uranium etc. The land is criss-crossed by hills and rivers. However, despite its mineral richness and natural resources, Jharkhand remains one of the most backward states in India and ever since its inception it has been plagued by adverse conditions like low average income, very high incidence of poverty and very little social development.. The health,

demographic and socio-economic profile for most parameters does not compare favourably with the all India figures.

The State of Rural Women

In the Indian context, the pattern of society is predominantly patriarchal and the state of Jharkhand is no exception as well. Women in the state especially in the rural areas have been at the receiving end of caste and class divisions coupled with other inherent problems associated exclusively with women and they have been forced to play a sub-ordinate role both within and outside the family.

Literacy & Health Profile

As per census the 2001 figures, the female literacy level in the state is at a dismal 39% and the state has a second highest rate of gender disparity in the country after Rajasthan. The cases of child marriage, miscarriages, anemia, pregnancy deaths, HIV/AIDS and other health related issues are rampant among the women in the rural areas. The sex ratio of Jharkhand is 941 females per 1000 males. Literacy rate is 54.13 of which 67.94% is for males and 39.38% for females.

Occupational Structure and Work Participation

Women are still at the lower end of the labour market in pay and authority. They typically occupy lower-paid and lower status jobs. Women's unemployment rate is higher than that of men and far more women than men work in the informal sector. In organised sector the number of women is significantly small even if they have the benefit of education and skills. Various factors are responsible for this like Socio-cultural and traditional patriarchal society, which discourages women's working outside the house, perception that women have domestic managerial role to play leads to low female participation in formal employment, society's dictum of sparing females from being employed as wage labourers as social prestige. Poverty-stricken people do allow their women who do not have any alternative for themselves and their families. She works on disadvantages since education and skills decide the level at which one can enter the labour market, most women are engaged in low-skill and low-wage work. Majority of them are found in vast rural and urban un-organized sector as landless workers and petty share-croppers in the agriculture sector and as contractual wage-labourers in mining and construction sectors and also as domestic help. They together form an exploited segment of population and contribute to the numbers below poverty line.

In such a scenario, the role of SHGs as a potent tool for over-all empowerment for the rural poor women assumes critical significance for a state like Jharkhand.

IV. The District of Ranchi, Jharkhand: Some Statistical Considerations

The study is based upon field surveys, interviews and select case studies on a sample of 50 women self help group members in the Bero block of the Ranchi district which is the state capital of Jharkhand. The findings of the study are based upon qualitative & quantitative data which critically explores the impact of SHGs upon women empowerment.

Background of the Study Area

Ranchi, Capital of Jharkhand is also called as city of Water falls and lakes. Ranchi is a city of Falls and Forest. Administrative Setup in Ranchi is divided into Ranchi and Bundu subdivisions and each subdivision is further divided into blocks, panchayats and villages.

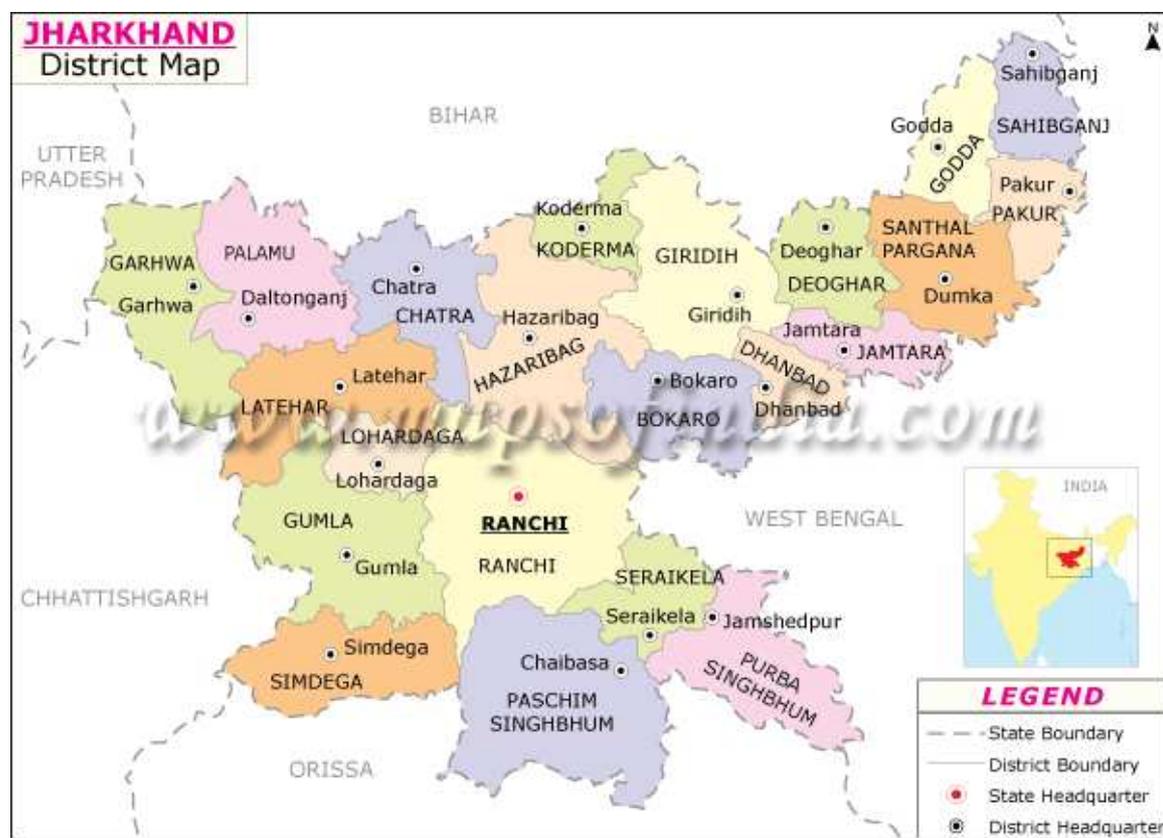


Figure 1: Map of Jharkhand showing Ranchi district

Source: www.mapsofindia.com

Table 1: Administrative Setup of Ranchi

Subdivision	Block	Panchayat	Village		
			Inhabited	Uninhabited	Total
Ranchi	Kanke	36	101	3	104
	Ratu	27	84	0	84
	Chanho	17	67	0	67
	Mandar	19	69	0	69
	Lapung	11	78	1	79
	Burmu	23	93	0	93
	Bero	26	114	0	114
	Namkum	23	93	6	99
	Ormanjhi	18	88	3	91
	Angara	23	91	1	92
	Silli	22	106	3	109
Bundu	Bundu	11	87	1	88
	Sonahatu	19	101	0	101
	Tamar	23	128	1	129

Source: www.ranchi.nic.in

Table2: Major development indicators of Ranchi District

Indicators	2001	2011
Population (in lakhs)	23.5	29.1
Average annual exponential growth rate	2.44	2.57
Population Density (per sq.kms.)	449	557
Sex ratio	929	950
Percent urban	43.18	56.82
Population		
Total	127340	1654682
Male	654655	838721
Female	602685	815961
Percentage of literate population		
Male	87.68	68.81
Female	92.48	80.08
Female	82.48	57.26
Source: Census,2001& provisional figures of census 2011(released by directorate of census operations in Jharkhand)		

As the comparative figures of 2001 & 2011 reveal the population density, annual exponential growth rate, of the district has increased drastically over the last ten years and there has been an alarming decrease in female literacy as well.

V. Research

Research Sample and Methodology

There was no study conducted in Ranchi district related specifically to assess the impact of SHGs upon women empowerment and so this district was chosen for this study. The rationale behind choosing the Bero block was the larger number of inhabitant villages in this block as compared to the other blocks in the district. In Ranchi SHGs function with the help of a President & Secretary. However, SHGs there are in the initial stages of development. The members were selected randomly from 10 SHGs with one leader & one animator from each

group. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been employed to critically explore the existing linkages between SHGs and women empowerment and its impact upon their socio-economic status. Women self-help group members were interviewed and selected case studies were conducted. The interviews aimed at obtaining an idea of the problems envisaged and the prospects of involving SHG in over-all empowerment of women joining the group. Select focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with group members from selected SHGs. FGDs were aimed at determining individual members' perception about their roles, expectations and their achievements in enhancement of socio-economic status as a result of joining the self help group.

Socio-Economic Profile of the Respondents

Most of the respondents (33) were in the age group of 30-40 years, 12 respondents were in the age group of 20-30 years and only 5 respondents were above 40 years of age. Most of the respondents (39) studied up to 10th standard, 7 respondents were illiterate and 4 respondents studied higher secondary education courses. 97% of the respondents were married, 2% unmarried and 1% were widows. Only 13% of the respondents reside in their own houses while 87% reside in rental houses.

Objective of the Study

The study was undertaken with the specific objective to assess the impact of SHGs upon women empowerment and determine the current status of SHGs as far as their impact upon women empowerment is concerned.

Analysis & Discussions

Table 3: Distribution of respondents on the basis of age

Age	No. of respondents	%
<20 years	00	00
20-30 years	12	24
30-40 years	33	66
40-50 years	05	10
>50 years	00	00
Total	50	100

(Source: Survey Data)

The data clearly shows that age group between 30-40 years is mainly engaged in SHGs and it suggests that middle aged people are more interested in joining the group.

Table 4: Marital status of respondents

Marital Status	No. of respondents	%
Married	33	66
Unmarried	12	24
Widow	05	10

Total	50	100
-------	----	-----

(Source: Survey Data)

The data shows that 66% of the participating women are married and they are responsible for the household activities in addition to being involved in income generation activities as well.

Table 5: Impact of SHGs on empowerment

Impact of SHGs on Women Empowerment	Count	Total %
Why did you join the group?		
For income generation	40	80
For health services	03	06
For peer support	02	04
No response	05	10
Are you allowed to use the income on your own?		
Yes	03	06
No	43	86
No response	04	08
Do you know about family planning		
Yes	06	12
No	41	82
No response	03	06
Do you go to the doctor at times of illness?		
Yes	04	08
No	43	86
No response	03	06
Are you aware of the free medical services provided by the government?		
Yes	07	14
No	41	82
No response	02	04

(Source: Survey Data)

The data brings to light some extremely important observations. 80% of the participants joined the group for income generation while only 6% are allowed to spend their income on their own. Further, 82% of the participants don't visit doctors in times of illness nor are they aware of the free medical services provided by the government.

VI. Discussions of Preliminary Findings

It was observed that a majority of the women joined SHGs for getting involved in income generating activities to augment their family income as is obvious from the following comment:

We were facing acute shortage of money and it was difficult even to feed our kids properly. We needed money and after I joined the SHG I have been engaged in selling pickles along with other members and now my earnings supplement my husband's earning who is a farmer owning a very small piece of land. So, I am satisfied as a result of joining this group as our family income has now increased. (Respondent 11)

However, most of the participating women revealed that they had no spending rights over the income that they generated on their own after joining the group as the following comments indicate:

I give all my daily earnings to my husband and he utilizes it. I am not allowed to spend it as per my wishes and though I feel bad about it but I don't complain. At least our earnings have improved. (Respondent 17)

Further, generally most of the respondents felt that they have been enjoying increased importance at home from the family members due to the fact that they have now become capable enough to contribute to the family income but, they were unsure of whether it has indeed changed their socio-economic status in a significant way. Their awareness related to their health and welfare of their children and the possible contribution of SHGs towards the same remain dismal.

So, it is quite evident that the SHGs working in the region are excessively concentrating upon the income generation activities and this economic-centered focus is not translating into overall empowerment of women as far as their role in decision making and health related issues are concerned.

To fulfill their true potential as a potent women empowerment tool SHGs should broaden their horizon and view empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process giving due importance to allied issues such as women's health, their decision making role, access to basic health amenities & infrastructural facilities etc and therefore it is proposed that greater in depth research needs to be undertaken into SHGs so that more evidence can be obtained in order to ascertain the consistency and long-term accomplishments of SHGs as a potent tool for holistic women empowerment.

References

- [1] C. Badiger, V.S. Gavimath and P.A. Katarki, Impact of non-farm income raising demonstration on knowledge and adoption pattern of rural women, *Karnataka Journal of Agricultural Sciences*, 6(1&2) (1994), 60-62.
- [2] A.R. Desai and A. Mohiuddin, Involving women in agriculture – Issues and strategies, *India Journal of Rural Development*, 11(5) (1992), 506-648.
- [3] H.D. Dwarakanath, DWCRA in Andhra Pradesh, *Kurukshetra*, 47(12) (1999), 14-18.
- [4] S. Giriappa, Women empowerment and decision making analysis in rural enterprises, *Paper Presented at International Conference on Gender Equity through Women's Empowerment*, 23-29 December (1997), Lucknow.

- [5] G.T. Govindappa, Rural women entrepreneurship- Constraints and strategies, *Kurukshetra*, 48(2) (1999), 11-14.
- [6] D.P. Hardikar, Perception of development programmes and benefits derived by women beneficiaries of Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra, *Ph. D. Thesis*, (1998), University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad.
- [7] A. Jhamtani, Rural women: The powerless partners in development, *Kurukshetra*, 43(8) (1995), 61-63.
- [8] K.S. Jyothi, Employment pattern and empowerment of rural women – A study in Kolar district, *M. Sc. (Agri.) Thesis*, (1998), University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore.
- [9] N. Nikhade and A. Patwardhan, Economic contribution of home-makers through household production, *Maharashtra Journal of Extension Education*, 9(1990), 81-86.
- [10] R. Parekh and K. Mehta, Empowerment of rural women – A case study of Udawa, *Proceedings of the National Consultation on Gender Issues in Credit in the Rural Non-Farm Sector*, 14-15 September (1992), Organized by SNDT Women's University, Bombay.
- [11] M.P. Prita, A study on the performance of self-help groups in Dharwad district, *M.Sc. (Agri.) Thesis*, (2001), University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad.
- [12] K. Ramesh, *Banking with the Poor*, (1996), National Institute of Bank Management Pune.
- [13] C.M. Rajani, Overcoming immobilities of women for sustainable development, *Kurukshetra*, 43(8) (1995), 94-95.
- [14] A.H. Sharada, Women, fertility and empowerment: Some issues in the contemporary debate, *Samya Shakti: Centre for Women Development studies*, New Delhi, 6(1997), 28-43.
- [15] K.J. Sherin, Dynamics of self-help group formation – A case study in Thrissur district, *M. Sc. (Agri.) Thesis*, (1999), Kerala Agricultural University, Thrissur.
- [16] M. Snehalatha, A study on the impact of thrift and credit groups in improving the status of rural women, *Journal of Research*, Andhra Pradesh Agricultural University, 22(2&3) (1994), 179.
- [17] Srisankari and K. Uma, Women's participation in agriculture, *Kurukshetra*, 43(8) (1995), 103-104.
- [18] A. Tejaswini and S. Veerabhadraiah, Knowledge assessment of rural women on DWCRA and their problems, *Kurukshetra*, 51(4) (1996), 46-47.
- [19] Thangamuthu and N. Manimekalai, Generation of employment for women through DWCRA, *Journal of Rural Development*, 8(4) (1989), 431-438.