



Rural Women Empowerment through Self-Help Groups in West Bengal with Special Reference to Bankura District

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Abstract

Rural women empowerment is a vital component which helps in development of an inclusive and sustainable society. In India, one of the key instrument of empowerment, especially in economically backward districts of rural India is Self-Help Groups (SHGs). This piece of writing majorly explores the role of microfinance industries and Self-Help Groups empowering lives of rural women, focusing on the district of Bankura. Using both primary and secondary data, this research underlines the path in which rural women of west Bengal and especially the district of Bankura, has gained access to the power of decision making, social status and most importantly, income due to the strong impact of microfinance provided by the SHGs. Mainly 3 blocks of Bankura district are shown in this study, those are Sadar Sub division, Khatra Sub division and Bishnupur Sub division.

Keywords: Bankura District, Microfinance, Self-help group, Women empowerment.

1. Introduction

For decades human development has been a serious concern for both government and non-government organizations on India. A succession of strategies ranging from assistance to partnership to self-reliance and sustainability has been intensively adopted. In India women constitute almost fifty percent of the population as well as in West Bengal women constitute 48.89% in the district of Bankura. Hence, any kind of development, whether socio-economic or political is incomplete without developing the women of the country, especially the marginalized section of women. Marginalization in education, social participation and employment are some of the major issues faced by the women of rural areas in our country. Self-Help Groups movement, which was launched in the 1990s provided rural women with a platform which was decentralized and a stage for participation of rural women. It was an opportunity for these women to come out of their socio-economic restrictions. Woman's empowerment has considerable attention as the indicators of development, in recent years. Empowering women is a huge task which includes many dimensions. It is a lengthy process, not a phenomenon that happens automatically. It guarantees equal opportunity to all with no discrimination on the grounds of sex. The government of India declared the year 2001 as "Women's Empowerment Year" with a vision of "Women are Equal Partners like Men". This could be possible in India only by transforming its colossal women force into an effective human resource and this is possible only through the role enhancement of women

in financial structure of our social system. Through my research I intend to show how self-help groups mould the process of women's empowerment both directly as well as not do directly. In the process I will also try to identify the role of microfinance as a tool for rural women empowerment and economic development through house hold work focusing on the area of my research – West Bengal with special reference to the district of Bankura. In view of these observations the present research would focus on examining the factors influencing women's decisions to engage in unorganized home based work and its impact on the lived realities if these women. This research focuses on women's empowerment in four levels namely economic, social, personal and family empowerment. The studies intend to:

- Examine roles of SHGs in empowering rural women of Bankura.
- Evaluating the impact of microfinance on the socio-economic status of rural women.
- Understanding problems faced by SHGs in rural areas of West Bengal.
- Recommending policies based on outcomes.

2. Conceptual Framework:

- a) **Self-help Groups (SHGs):** Self-Help Groups are an informal group of people who addresses common problems in the economy. These groups are created to promote thrift and credit among members and it functions based on mutual understanding and responsibility.

- b) **Microfinance:** Microfinance, also commonly referred to as microcredit refers to financial activities which includes small loans, debts and insurance provided to low-income individuals or small groups who lacks official methods of attaining credit from financial institutions, aiming to promote empowerment and self-dependency.
- c) **Rural Women Empowerment:** Women Empowerment, especially in the rural areas are regulated by these SHGs. Some methods in which SHGs majorly provide independency to these women are by providing adequate access to resources, improved socio-economic status and increased agency. The SHGs help women take decisions about education, health and family finances which results in transformation of household and dynamics of a community.
- d) **SHGs and Microfinance in West Bengal:** Promotion of SHGs through multiple schemes such as National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), which was formerly known as Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY), The state of West Bengal is saturated with female population, which is recorded over 1.75 crores as per 2022. (sourced from, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). Bankura is one of the backward districts of West Bengal which is often characterized by low literacy rates and drought-prone agricultural fields. However after introduction of SHGs these conditions have been alleviated.

3. Research Methodology

Secondary Collection of Data

This study entirely relies on secondary data which is obtained from credible sources such as NGO publications, Government reports, and personal research. These sources provide essential insight into the dynamics of SHGs in the Bankura district of West Bengal.

Tools Used

- For accessing SHGs, SWOT analysis is performed.
- Descriptive Statistics to analyze demographic data.
- Visual Representation by line graphs, bar graphs and pie chart.

4. Discussion and Analysis

• The Social and Economic Profile of SHG Members

As per a 2021 report by PRADAN, a major portion of SHG members in rural India are members of Scheduled Castes and Tribe and aged between 25 to 50, having limited access to financial institutions.

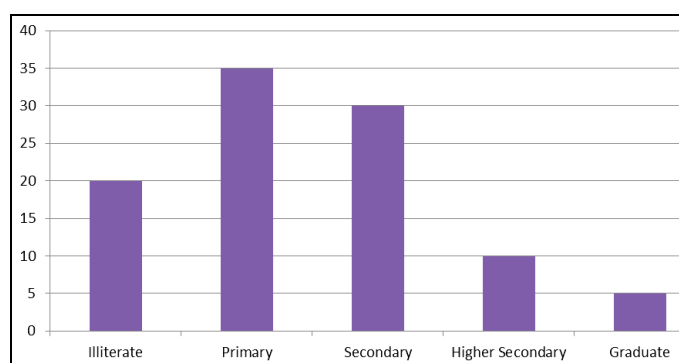


Fig 1: Educational Background of SHG Members.

• Economic Impact

The SHGs assists women to access microfinance for small business or micro enterprises like tailoring, handicraft or small scale agriculture. The average monthly income of these women rose from Rs.1500 to Rs.4000 after assistance from SHGs.

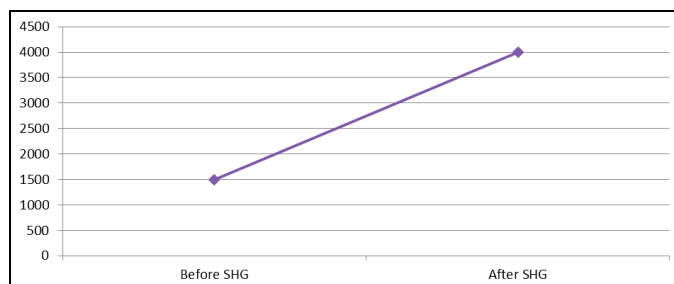


Fig 2: Income Changes before and after SHGs-

• Social Empowerment

Apart from income, the members of SHGs reported an increase in confidence, improved socio-economic roles, participation in local governance and improved decision making roles within family. Reports of domestic violence and child marriage reduced in places where SHG intervened.

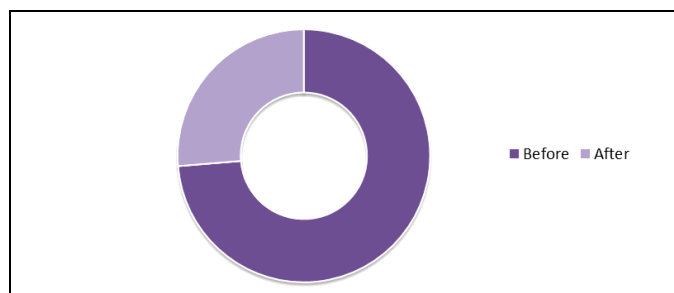


Fig 3: Decision-Making Role in Households before vs. After SHG Membership-

Challenges Faced by SHGs

- Irregular repayment schedule in some SHGs.
- Lack of literacy and training in business and finance.
- Socio-economic barriers such as caste position and dominance of males over females.
- Dependency of funding from SHGs and government schemes/grants.

Case Studies:

Case Study 1: Mamata SHG - Taldangra Block: The Mamata Self-Help Group began with just 12 members. Each members contributed Rs.50 per month. Over a span of a three years, the group with the aid of microcredit launched a a mushroom farming enterprise. Right now the group generates a monthly income of approximately Rs. 25,000 which is Rs. 3 lakh annually.

Case Study 2: Suraksha SHG – Indpur Block: The Suraksha SHG is formed by tribal women. This SHG initially engaged in bamboo handicrafts. The group participated in a training program sponsored by the government which helped improve their skills in handicraft and provided them access to markets. Their products are now sold to state emporiums and they have significantly tripled their previous income, this marked a successful transformation through support of institution and skill development.

Case Study 3: Amgora Adibasi Mahila Unnayan Samity-Chhatna Block: It's a non-Governmental organization, it works in the area of tribal welfare creating microfinance. The organization works towards the promotion of sustainable development.

5. Findings

- The SHGs in Bankura has significantly improved the lifestyle of women by improving socio-economic status and financial dependency,
- Access to microfinance and microcredit has improved productive employment.
- The SHGs cannot fix problems whose root causes are literacy and lack of entrepreneurial training.

Comparative Analysis: SHGs in Bankura vs. Other Districts

While the district of Bankura stands out for its success in SHGs, comparing it with similar districts such as Purulia and Birbhum helps identify the strengths and weaknesses for replication. For e.g., Bankura having higher linkage of credit as compared to Purulia, whereas Purulia shows better performance in digital literacy training.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis: SHGs in Bankura vs. Other Districts-

	No. of SHGs	Avg. Loan/SHG (₹)	Repayment Rate (%)	Income Growth (%)
Bankura	8,500	1,20,000	94	65
Purulia	6,700	95,000	89	48
Birbhum	7,400	1,10,000	91	53

This comparative view assists in targeted policy measures to replicate the success of SHG in Bankura in other underperforming districts.

Voices from the Ground: Testimonials

Here are some firsthand quotes from SHG members interviewed:

"Earlier, I had no say in household matters. Now, my opinion is asked for every big decision."
— Sunita D., Taldangra Block

"With SHG loans, we bought goats. I've tripled my income in two years."
— Rina M., Indpur Block

"Our daughters now want to join SHGs not just for savings, but to start businesses."
— Kakali S., Mejia Block

Role of Local Culture and Institutions in Bankura

Cultural Factors: Bankura's local culture emphasizes traditional arts and crafts, such as Terracotta art, Dokra metalwork and weaving. Therefore, SHGs have capitalized in these artworks, establishing an industry and therefore turning cultural assets into potential income sources.

Role of Panchayats and Local Governance: The Panchayat system has led to the development of SHGs. They have supported in forming the SHGs and have connected them with multiple state livelihood missions. Therefore many SHG members now are a part of the Gram Panchayat Committees, where they serve, and this therefore reflects increased political empowerment.

Market Access and Entrepreneurship

a) Product Diversification

Bankura has evolved beyond the traditions of savings and credit which embraces income-generating activities. Some of the products are-

- Handmade jewelry
- Organic vegetable
- Processed foods (e.g. Pickles, papad)
- Handicrafts for fairs and emporiums.

b) Marketing Channels

Despite repetitive improvements in production, the access to market remains limited. The SHGs majorly depends on fairs or middlemen to channel their products. A very few has digital presence or D2C (direct to consumers) strategies.

c) Need for e-Commerce Training

Digital literacy is a key element to help the SHGs participate in marketplace platforms such as GeM (Government e-Marketplace), Flipkart Samarth or Amazon Karigar. Now even easier to use marketplaces such as Facebook Marketplace for advertising and selling products as well as Shopify exists but even handling those software requires basic knowledge and literacy.

Youth and Second-Generation Participation

Youth of the second generation are engaging in SHGs in the following ways:

- They are assisting in digital marketing.
- They are also taking vocational courses through WBSRLM.
- They are launching multiple startups with the help of SHG capital.
- This shows us the transition from microfinance to micro enterprise, which is sustainable as well.

Environmental Sustainability and SHGs

The SHGs in Bankura have begun eco-friendly practices, such as:

- They practice organic farming without chemical fertilizers.
- They have started making and using jute bags instead of plastics.
- They are using solar dryers to process foods.
- These initiatives align with all the sustainable development goals or SDGs and also open niche markets.

Risk Factors and Resilience Strategies

a) Key Risks

- These rural women gets overly dependent on government grants and schemes.
- The market price for SHG commodities remains volatile.
- Internal conflicts within SHGs
- SHGs related to agriculture is prone to being affected by natural disasters.

b) Resilience Mechanism

- Requires rotational leadership to prevent concentration of power to a single person.
- Building corpus funds for emergency needs.
- Creation of SHG federation for bulk procurement and marketing.

Policy Recommendation

- For transparency, digitalization of SHG accounts and transactions.
- Building capacity through trainings conducted on a daily basis and workshops.
- Development of skills aligned with local markets and resources.
- Entrepreneurship education must be introduced in all the Schools in rural areas to prepare the youth for SHG roles.
- Incentives for digital adoption such as internet reimbursements or device subsidies for SHGs must be provided.
- To promote collaboration and increase innovation, cross-district SHG exposure visits must be encouraged.
- Men should take part and be involved in awareness campaigns to reduce resistance to women's leadership.

Emerging Opportunities

- a) **Adoption of Technology:** Adoption of new technology, like online banking, UPI based repayments and SHG management apps like e-SHG Bookkeeping are being plotted in Bankura. These tools can simplify operations and thus reduce frauds.
- b) **Integration with Government Missions:** SHG potential is enhanced when it is linked with multiple government schemes like PMEGP, Skill India and Digital India.
- c) **Cluster Development:** When SHG clusters are formed based on a particular trade field, like terracotta, dairy, it can help achieve collective bargaining.

6. Conclusion

Over the years in Bankura, the support of the local institutions, government schemes and active community engagement is an example of the transformative power of SHGs. Women who were once victims of exploitation, unfairness; inferiority and marginalization are now business owners, leaders and decision makers.

The SHG movement isn't just limited to micro financing anymore, it has now become a social and economic revolution. Due to continued capacity building, digital literacy and market access, Bankura's model can be replicated across India to empower millions more, leading to all round development of the country.

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