



Research Article

EMPOWERING THE RURAL WOMEN POLITICALLY THROUGH SHG APPROACH

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Abstract- In the context of the gender equity issue for betterment of the society, women's empowerment in the political aspect is crucial for ensuring equitable representation of women in decision-making and policy formulation at the grass root level. Self Help Group approach, in this regard, could be an effective mean towards empowering the rural women politically. Under such a research niche, the present study has been undertaken to assess the status of political empowerment of the women after joining Self Help Group (SHG) and thereby, exploring different factors associated with their political 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 to select the final respondents from the study area. The political empowerment of the women SHG members was considered as the dependent variable and the sixteen 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 co-efficient of correlation and multiple regressions. Results showed that the variables like education level, family education status, extension contact, mass media exposure and reasons for joining the SHG are positively and significantly correlated with the political empowerment of women. In multiple regressions, the variable extension contact was found to be positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing the political empowerment of the women but, the other variable namely age of the SHG was found to contribute negatively and significantly in case of characterizing the political empowerment of the women SHG members. The R^2 value being 0.534, it is also to infer that the sixteen predictor variables put together have explained 53.40% variation embedded with the predicted variable, political empowerment of women after joining SHGs.

Keywords- Self Help Group, Political Empowerment, Gender Equity, Rural Women, Mass Media Exposure, Extension Contact.

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Introduction

From the time immemorial, the significant and unconditional contribution of the women in the development of the human civilization through their participation in various social processes has put forward the issue of ensuring social, political and economic justice for the rural women. Since women are globally under-represented at all levels of governance in relation to their share of the population, there is an enormous demand for more representation of women in political bodies and their political participation is now a major objective throughout the global women's movement [1]. Different women's groups and international organizations have demanded for actions and positive steps to upsurge women's political representation through affirmative action. According to Karen Ross (2002), the demand for greater rights for women including political rights has been at the forefront of many women's agenda for at least three hundred years with campaigning treatises by women such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) and Abigail Adams (L. H. Butterfield, ed. 1778) throwing down an early gauntlet for equality [2].

Political empowerment of women and their participation in decision-making are essential for women's interests to be incorporated into governance. Women's political empowerment means the autonomy of women to cast vote according to their consent, contest election, power politics, authority, decision-making and implementation regarding their actions, needs and priorities [3]. It has been widely experienced that political structures which do not provide for adequate participation of women previously have now brought significant changes in the

political scenario of our country with regard to women's participation in politics with the recent 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments [4]. At the local level, participation of women as an elected representative is high primarily because of the reservation introduced for women as per these amendments in the Indian constitution. For example, average of women representation in panchayats across the country is found to be 36.94 percent [5] and in 2011 Civil Services Examination, after the main examination 787 male and 212 female candidates (21.22%) were recommended for 2011 higher civil services posts including IAS and IPS [6].

Since women have been playing different roles and holding their own perspectives on social and political issues in the society, it is important for them to have knowledge of their rights in the society and be aware of legislation for women and have access to political institution in their working environment. This gives them the insight and perspective, which can be instrumental for their political empowerment. In this direction, self help group approach can be a powerful means for empowering the rural women by raising their voice, enabling them to decide upon and restructuring the financial assistance by their own and ensuring the women members equipped with able leadership. Self Help Group is a small economically homogenous affinity group of rural poor, voluntarily formed to save and contribute to a common fund to be lent to its members as per group decision and for working together for social and economic uplift of their family and community [7]. Some of the studies have revealed that even though it is very hard for the women SHG members to participate in Gram panchayat works, some of

them have managed to do it seriously and took active part in implementing their schemes in Bihar [8]. It is also evident that more than fifty percent of the women SHG members have become aware of political institutions after joining SHG in Akola district in Vidarbha region of Maharashtra [9].

With this backdrop, the present study has been conducted to assess the contribution of self help group in the political empowerment of the rural women and also to identify those factors which are influencing women's political empowerment through formation of self help groups in the rural areas.

Materials and Methods

The study was carried out in four villages of the Coochbehar-I block in Coochbehar district of West Bengal. Multistage sampling was employed for the present study. The district, block and also the SHGs of the block 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 randomly to get a total eighty number of women respondents who were the women self help group members in the study area. The political empowerment of the women SHG members was considered as the dependent variable and the sixteen other attributes of the women respondents were considered as the independent variables for the study. Personal interview method with the help of structured interview schedule was followed for data collection and the data were analysed through the statistical tools like co-efficient of correlation and multiple regressions.

Result and Discussion

Table-1 Distribution of the women SHG members according to their political empowerment score

Variables	Range		Mean	S.D	C.V
	Min	Max			
Political empowerment (Y)	6	16	8.69	1.95	22.44

[Table-1] represents the distribution of the women Self Help Group members in Coochbehar district of West Bengal according to their political empowerment score. The dependent variable, political empowerment of women stakeholders in SHGs carries the average score of 8.69 within the range of 6 (minimum) and 16 (maximum). It is indicative that majority of the respondents were in low level of political empowerment affiliations. The standard deviation of the distribution is 1.95. The coefficient of variation value within the distribution being 22.44% signifies the high consistency level of the distribution for the variable 'political empowerment'.

Table-2 Correlation co-efficient of Political empowerment(Y) of the respondents with sixteen causal variables

Variables (X)	Coefficient of correlation (r)
Age (X ₁)	0.070
Caste (X ₂)	0.030
Education (X ₃)	0.303**
Family size (X ₄)	0.023
Family education status (X ₅)	0.254*
Extent of migration (X ₆)	-0.017
Annual income (X ₇)	-0.094
Land holding (X ₈)	0.223
Farm power (X ₉)	0.184
Asset possession (X ₁₀)	0.194
Livestock possession (X ₁₁)	-0.063
House type (X ₁₂)	0.082
Extension contact (X ₁₃)	0.669**
Mass media exposure (X ₁₄)	0.453**
Group age (X ₁₅)	-0.192
Reasons for joining group (X ₁₆)	0.258*

*at 5% level of significance, ** at 1% level of significance

[Table-2] represents the correlation between the sixteen-predictor variables and

the predicted variable i.e. the political empowerment of the women self help group members selected for the study. The results shows that the four variables namely education, family education status, extension contact, mass media exposure and reasons for joining the group are positively and significantly associated with the dependent variable, political empowerment of the women members of the self help groups.

Education and Political Empowerment

Education helps individuals gain knowledge and apply this knowledge for solution of the problems they face in their daily lives. In other words, education provides an individual an opportunity to be aware of different political events and issues happening around their native places as well as outside the same. Higher level of educational exposure favours in case of developing a strong perception on various political aspects and thereby takes appropriate decisions in relation to those political aspects. The same is applicable in case of women self help group members. That is why the variable education is positively and significantly correlated with political empowerment of the members of women self help groups.

Family education status and political empowerment

Family education status of an individual indicates the present formal educational exposure of the family members in a given period of time. Family supports an individual to develop personalities, behaviour and attitude to be exercised in the outer environment. Therefore, in the present study, the women members of the SHGs who have higher family education status are motivated strongly by their family members to interact with officials and members, directly or indirectly associated with local political institutions and thereby increase their knowledge in political aspects like Indian polity, fundamental rights etc. Hence, women SHG members become politically empowered. That is why the variable 'family education status' is positively and significantly associated with the political empowerment of women self help group members.

Extension contact and political empowerment

Through developing contact with extension personnel working in the village, rural people become aware of various issues and events related to political aspect and they also get access to various extension organizations. This improves their knowledge in different areas of political aspect like Indian Constitution, Directive principles, Panchayat Raj Institutions etc. This also happens in case of women SHG members. They develop a strong linkage through extension contact with various local political institutions like gram panchayat, panchayat samity etc. as well as outside organizations. Through maintaining this liaison with various organization, the women members of the SHGs develop a clear perception about various political issues and events occurring around them. This may be a plausible reason for what the variable "extension contact" is positively and significantly associated with political empowerment of women SHG members.

Mass media exposure and political empowerment

Just like extension contact, exposure to different mass media like newspapers, television, radio etc. also plays an active role in case of generating political awareness among the women members of the self help groups. With the help of mass media exposure, they become well aware about various schemes and policies related to women, women's rights, laws for women's protection etc. Similarly, women members of the self help groups are also required to follow various mass media to get up to date information regarding various aspects including political one to run their groups effectively and efficiently. In this way, mass media exposure helps in political empowerment of women SHG members. Therefore, the variable "mass media exposure" is positively and significantly associated with the dependent variable, political empowerment of women SHG members.

Reasons for joining group and political empowerment

The variable reason for joining group acts as an intrinsic motivation for the group members to comply with the norms for formation and strengthening of a group. Initially, everyone joins in any cooperative or group structure out of their own

interest, but, with working in group, ultimately they contribute to the group objectives and self reliance of the group members. In this way, joining in the group builds their confidence to raise their voice within the group and even outside the group on various issues like social, cultural, economic and political too. On the other hand, the SHGs also often experience and need to handle a kind of political situation within the group in case of selection of office bearers, resolving conflicts etc. which again prepares them towards their political empowerment. That is why the variable reasons for joining group is positively and significantly associated with political empowerment of women self help groups.

Table-3 Multiple regression analysis of Political empowerment (Y) with sixteen predictor variables

Variables (x)	Standardized regression coefficient (β)	Unstandardised regression coefficient (B)	S.E of 'b'	t value
Age (X_1)	-.082	-.023	.037	-.609
Caste (X_2)	-.032	-.108	.440	-.245
Education (X_3)	.141	.161	.149	1.078
Family size (X_4)	-.045	-.052	.144	-.360
Family education status (X_5)	.177	.403	.288	1.398
Extent of migration (X_6)	.073	.126	.203	.619
Annual income (X_7)	-.082	-.001	.002	-.784
Land holding (X_8)	.104	.117	.140	.837
Farm power (X_9)	.124	.318	.305	1.042
Asset possession (X_{10})	-.096	-.020	.031	-.642
Livestock possession (X_{11})	-.082	-.042	.057	-.745
House type (X_{12})	-.127	-.407	.418	-.973
Extension contact (X_{13})	.629	.338	.098	3.449**
Mass media exposure (X_{14})	-.088	-.088	.170	-.514
Group age (X_{15})	-.272	-.171	.084	-2.040*
Reasons for joining group (X_{16})	-.030	-.013	.054	-.238

$R^2 = 0.534$, *at 5% level of significance, **at 1% level of significance

[Table-3] represents the multiple regression analysis of political empowerment with other sixteen causal variables. The table indicated that one variable namely extension contact is positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing political empowerment of women self help group members while the other variable group age is negatively and significantly contributing towards characterizing the dependent variable, political empowerment of the women SHG members.

Extension contact and political empowerment

Extension contact implies interaction between the extension personnel and the rural people. Extension contact also provides the people an opportunity to have access to different extension organizations and their activities taking place in their locality and also in some other places. People become aware of various issues related to economic, social or political aspects. Similarly, women members of SHGs, by managing their group effectively, develop a strong linkage with the extension officials and thereby come to know about various schemes and projects and the laws in favour of women members of the society. This helps them build their confidence to raise their voice on important political issues and thereby convince others to their points of views. This facilitates development of favourable environment in the society for the women in case of holding decision making positions in different political institutions. Hence, political empowerment of women becomes a reality. That is why the variable extension contact is positively and significantly contributing towards characterizing the political empowerment of women self help group members. The variable extension contact is directly contributing 62.90% in case of characterizing the political empowerment of women SHG members. One unit change of the variable extension contact is delineating

the 0.338 unit change in the predicted variable, political empowerment of women self help group members.

Group age and political empowerment

Group age indicates the chronological age and thereby experience gained 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 as 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. This also affects negatively in case of developing a common platform where the women members can discuss and share with others about various political issues and events and thereby getting a clear perception about those issues. Consequently, political empowerment of the women SHG members gets restricted. Hence, the variable group age is negatively and significantly contributing towards characterizing political empowerment of women self help group members.

The variable group age is directly contributing 27.20% in case of characterizing the political empowerment of women SHG members. One unit change of the variable group age is delineating the 0.171 unit change in the predicted variable, political empowerment of women self help group members.

The R^2 value being 0.534, it is to infer that the sixteen predictor variables put together have explained 53.40% variation embedded with the predicted variable political empowerment of women SHG members. Still 46.60% variable embedded with predicted one remains unexplained. Thus, it would be suggested that inclusion of some more contextual variables possessing direct bearing on the political empowerment of women SHG members could have increased the level of explicability.

Conclusion

The present study has attempted to find out the impact of self help groups on the political empowerment of its women members. Women's political empowerment helps them develop a sound knowledge on various aspects like Indian Polity, Indian Constitution, fundamental rights, Right to Education Act, Act for women's protection etc. which, in turn, builds their confidence in decision making related to political issues and convince others to their points of views. It has been evident with the present study that formation and management of the SHGs by the rural women has given them the opportunity to have access to different extension organisations and various political institutions. Besides this, SHG approach had provided the rural women a common platform to gain and share their knowledge and experiences on issues related to several aspects including political one and in this way motivates the women members to raise their voice both within the group and outside the group. The study has also revealed that the attributes like education, family education status, extension contact, mass media exposure and reasons for joining group have influenced women's political empowerment in a positive direction whereas age of the SHGs has negative implication on political empowerment of the women SHG members. So, in view of the findings of the present study, it is worth mentioning that SHG approach can be an effective instrument towards accomplishing women's political empowerment in rural areas of our country. Hence, any policy framework towards political empowerment of rural women through strengthening of self help group approach should follow the ground reality of the existing SHGs and thereby take care of the needs, interests and priorities of the women SHG members.

Conflict of Interest: None declared

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