

A District-Level Analysis of Women Empowerment Issues in the Rural Areas of Darjeeling, West Bengal

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Abstract: Women empowerment has been globally recognized as a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable socio-economic development. Despite national policies and rural upliftment schemes in India, disparities in empowerment remain prominent in rural districts with complex socio-cultural fabrics such as Darjeeling in West Bengal. This study investigates the multi-dimensional aspects of women empowerment in the rural areas of Darjeeling, focusing on domains such as education, economic participation, decision-making autonomy, access to health services, and social mobility. Using primary survey data from 400 rural women across selected blocks, supplemented with secondary sources, the research evaluates the influence of socio-economic determinants on empowerment levels. Findings reveal that while literacy rates have improved, economic participation and decision-making autonomy continue to lag, primarily due to entrenched patriarchal norms and limited access to formal employment. The study underscores policy implications for targeted interventions in micro-credit access, skill training, and awareness programs to strengthen holistic empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Rural Development, Darjeeling, Socio-Economic Determinants, Gender Equality, West Bengal

I. INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment has emerged as a significant objective of contemporary development discourse. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals specifically highlight gender equality and women's empowerment (SDG-5) as critical to achieving sustainable development (UN, 2015). In India, rural women constitute a substantial proportion of the population and play pivotal roles in agrarian livelihoods, household management, and cultural continuity. However, women in rural settings often face socio-economic disadvantages due to traditional gender norms, limited access to education, and restricted labor market participation.

Darjeeling district of West Bengal presents a unique socio-economic landscape characterized by its hilly geography, ethnic heterogeneity, and historical marginalization. While the district is globally known for its tea industry and tourism, rural women face persistent challenges in accessing economic opportunities, education, and decision-making platforms within households and communities. This study seeks to systematically analyze these issues, assessing the extent, determinants, and implications of women's empowerment in Darjeeling's rural hamlets.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Runa Das, Kankan Roy (2024) – Demographic, economic and psychological drivers of women's participation in rural tourism in Darjeeling, West Bengal. This study shows how economic need, psychological factors, and limited leadership aspirations shape women's participation and empowerment through rural tourism in Darjeeling contexts.

Sardar Roy & Shnaoli Chakraborty (2024) – From Learning to Leading: The Impact of Education on Women's Empowerment in SHGs, demonstrating that formal education enhances social and economic empowerment among SHG women in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal.

Ekbal Hossain (2024) – MGNREGA and Women’s Empowerment: A Case Study from West Bengal. Analyses how employment under MGNREGA relates to women’s empowerment and constructs a Gender Empowerment Index at village/district levels.

Promita Mukherjee & Sreshtha Banerjee (2025) – Microfinance and Women Empowerment: A Case Study on Rural West Bengal. Finds that access to microfinance via SHGs improves women’s decision-making and utilization of loans for income-generating activities.

Chandan Bandyopadhyay (2014) – Empowerment of Women in Participating Self-Help Group in Bardhaman District. Early evidence of SHGs increasing women’s social status and economic participation in rural West Bengal.

Ujjaini Paul & Nidhi Patidar (2025) – Rural Women Empowerment through SHGs in Bankura District, West Bengal. Highlights how SHGs facilitate access to decision-making and income among rural women, advancing empowerment indicators.

Ratna Sarkar (2016) – Awareness and Participation of Tribal Women in Rural Development: Ghosepukur Gram Panchayat. Examines tribal women’s political engagement in panchayat governance, suggesting socio-political empowerment pathways.

Srijana Rai (2018) – Women in Development: Study of Women’s Labour Force Participation in Mountain Farming (Darjeeling Hills) [Doctoral Thesis, University of North Bengal]. A foundational thesis illuminating how women’s labour participation in mountain farming contributes to empowerment negotiations.

Dr. Bhaswati Saha (2024) – A Comparative Analysis of Decision-Making in Women’s Farming Community of Hill and Terai Regions (West Bengal). Shows that women increasingly manage agricultural work but still face structural barriers in land ownership and decision autonomy.

Journal of Global Research (2016) – Awareness and Participation of Tribal Women in Rural Development (Ghosepukur) by Ratna Sarkar chronicles grassroots tribal women’s involvement in rural development forums in Darjeeling district.

Indian Journal of Community Medicine (2024) – Construction of a Women’s Empowerment Index in Rural West Bengal. Offers an empirical methodology for measuring empowerment including decision-making, gender-based violence attitudes, and social independence dimensions.

Deepali R. Chandramore & Kanchan M. Sananse (2025) – Literature Review on Role of SHGs in Community Development and Rural Women. Reviews evidence that SHGs have mixed impacts on self-reliance, social status, and economic participation of rural women.

Shipra Basera & Chandan Bhatt (2025) – A Study on Empowerment of Women Through SHGs (IJERT). Although geographically outside Bengal, this empirical study on SHG impact in rural Haldwani parallels structural findings relevant to SHG empowerment mechanisms.

Bhajan Chandra Barman (2018) – Empowerment of Women through MGNREGA in Nadia District, West Bengal. Documents how rural employment schemes contribute to women’s socioeconomic empowerment by enhancing labour participation and income.

Women's Empowerment in Siliguri Municipal Corporation (2023) – Riya Roy’s study examines educational, social, and economic facets of women’s progress. While urban, the proximate region contextually informs rural-urban linkages

III. OBJECTIVES

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the level of women’s empowerment across key domains — education, economic participation, decision-making autonomy, health access, and mobility.
- To evaluate the socio-economic determinants (age, education, caste, marital status, family income) influencing empowerment levels.

- To analyze the role of institutional support mechanisms (e.g., SHGs, government programs) in facilitating empowerment.
- To identify major constraints faced by rural women in achieving holistic empowerment.
- To recommend policy actions for strengthening women's empowerment in rural Darjeeling.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopts a cross-sectional survey research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach helps capture both the measurable indicators and subjective experiences associated with women empowerment.

Study Area

The research was conducted in rural blocks of Darjeeling district, including Matigara-Naxalbari, Kurseong, and Mirik blocks, representing varying geographies and socio-cultural groups.

Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage stratified sampling technique was used:

- *Stage 1*: Selection of rural blocks purposively.
- *Stage 2*: Random selection of 20 villages across the blocks.
- *Stage 3*: Systematic sampling of households with eligible women (aged 18–60).

A total of 400 women respondents participated in the survey.

Data Collection Tools

- **Structured Questionnaire**: Captured demographic data, educational attainment, employment status, decision-making autonomy scale (Likert), and access to services.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**: Conducted with women's groups and SHG members.
- **Key Informant Interviews**: With local Panchayat representatives and NGO workers.

Measurement of Empowerment

Empowerment was operationalized using five domains:

- **Educational Empowerment**: Literacy, highest educational level, skills training.
- **Economic Empowerment**: Employment status, income contribution, asset ownership.
- **Decision-Making Autonomy**: Participation in household decisions (finance, mobility, marriage of children).
- **Health and Mobility**: Access to health care, freedom of movement.
- **Institutional Participation**: Membership in SHGs or community organizations.

Data Analysis Techniques

- Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, percentages)
- Cross-tabulations
- Correlation and regression analysis to examine determinants
- Qualitative thematic analysis

V. DATA INTERPRETATION AND MAJOR FINDINGS

The present section analyzes and interprets the primary data collected from 400 rural women respondents across selected blocks of Darjeeling district. The interpretation is organized objective-wise, ensuring clarity, coherence, and direct linkage between research objectives and findings. Quantitative analysis has been supported by descriptive statistics, while qualitative insights from field interactions complement numerical interpretations.

Objective 1: To assess the level of women empowerment across key domains

Women empowerment was assessed across five major domains: educational empowerment, economic empowerment, decision-making autonomy, health and mobility, and institutional participation. A composite empowerment index was constructed to measure overall empowerment levels.

Table 1: Domain-Wise Distribution of Women Empowerment Levels

Empowerment Domain	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)
Educational Empowerment	21.0	47.5	31.5
Economic Empowerment	38.0	42.0	20.0
Decision-Making Autonomy	44.5	39.0	16.5
Health & Mobility	32.5	45.0	22.5
Institutional Participation	40.0	37.5	22.5

The table reveals that educational empowerment is relatively stronger compared to other domains, with 31.5% of respondents falling under the high empowerment category. This improvement can be attributed to increased literacy rates, government incentives for girls' education, and awareness programs. However, economic empowerment and decision-making autonomy remain weak, with a majority of women placed in the low to moderate categories. This indicates that educational gains have not sufficiently translated into economic independence or authority in household decisions. Institutional participation also remains limited, reflecting women's marginal role in formal governance and collective decision-making structures.

Objective 2: To evaluate the socio-economic determinants influencing women empowerment

The study examined the influence of education, income, age, marital status, caste, and family type on women's empowerment levels.

Table 2: Empowerment Level by Educational Attainment

Educational Level	Mean Empowerment Score
Illiterate	24.5
Primary Education	36.8
Secondary Education	52.6
Higher Secondary & Above	68.4

Education emerges as the strongest determinant of empowerment. Women with higher secondary education and above record the highest empowerment scores. Educated women demonstrate greater awareness of rights, improved self-confidence, and increased participation in household and community decisions. Conversely, illiterate women remain highly dependent and vulnerable.

Table 3: Empowerment Level by Monthly Family Income

Monthly Family Income	Mean Empowerment Score
Below ₹10,000	33.5
₹10,001 – ₹20,000	47.2
Above ₹20,000	61.8

A positive relationship exists between family income and empowerment. Women from higher-income households exhibit better access to education, healthcare, and mobility, contributing to enhanced empowerment. Low-income women remain trapped in survival-oriented livelihoods, limiting their bargaining power within households.

Table 4: Empowerment Score by Caste Category

Caste Category	Mean Empowerment Score
General	56.0
OBC	48.2
SC/ST	39.6

Caste continues to influence empowerment outcomes. Women from SC/ST communities exhibit the lowest empowerment levels, reflecting historical deprivation, limited asset ownership, and restricted access to institutional resources. Intersectionality of gender and caste disadvantage remains a major concern in rural Darjeeling.

Objective 3: To analyze women's participation in economic activities and control over resources

Economic participation was assessed through employment type, income contribution, asset ownership, and control over earnings.

Table 5: Nature of Economic Activity among Respondents

Type of Activity	Percentage (%)
Agricultural Labour	58.0
Wage Labour (Non-agricultural)	24.5
Self-Employment/SHG Activity	12.5
No Income-Generating Activity	5.0

The majority of women are engaged in agricultural and informal wage labour, characterized by low wages, seasonal instability, and absence of social security. Participation in self-employment remains limited, indicating inadequate access to skill training, credit facilities, and market linkages.

Table 6: Control over Income and Assets

Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)
Contributes to Household Income	46.0	54.0
Has Control over Own Earnings	28.5	71.5
Ownership of Land/Assets	18.0	82.0

Although nearly half of the women contribute economically, control over income and assets remains disproportionately low. Economic participation does not automatically lead to empowerment unless accompanied by ownership rights and decision-making authority. This reinforces the structural nature of gender inequality in rural households.

Objective 4: To examine women's participation in household decision-making

Decision-making autonomy was assessed across areas such as finance, education of children, healthcare, and social mobility.

Table 7: Women's Role in Household Decision-Making

Area of Decision	Women Decide (%)	Joint Decision (%)	Others Decide (%)
Household Expenditure	22.5	31.0	46.5
Children's Education	28.0	35.5	36.5
Healthcare Decisions	35.0	30.0	35.0
Social Mobility	18.0	27.5	54.5

Women's independent decision-making power remains limited, particularly in financial and mobility-related matters. Joint decision-making is more prevalent in health and education, suggesting gradual shifts toward shared responsibilities. However, traditional authority structures continue to dominate crucial household decisions.

Objective 5: To analyze access to health services and freedom of mobility

Health empowerment and mobility were analyzed to understand women's autonomy beyond household boundaries.

Table 8: Health Access and Mobility Indicators

Indicator	Yes (%)	No (%)
Access to Primary Health Centre	61.0	39.0
Regular Health Check-ups	48.5	51.5
Freedom to Visit Health Facility Alone	34.0	66.0
Freedom to Travel Outside Village	29.0	71.0

While physical access to health facilities exists for a majority, autonomous utilization remains restricted. Dependence on male accompaniment and social approval limits women's health-seeking behavior and mobility. Cultural norms continue to regulate women's movement in rural Darjeeling.

Objective 6: To assess institutional participation and support mechanisms

Institutional participation was measured through involvement in SHGs, Panchayat activities, and government programs.

Table 9: Participation in Institutions and Welfare Programs

Institutional Involvement	Membership (%)	Active Participation (%)
Self-Help Groups (SHGs)	54.0	38.0
Panchayat Meetings	22.0	15.0
Government Welfare Schemes	30.5	—

SHGs play a significant role in expanding women's social networks and financial inclusion. However, active participation is lower than membership, indicating symbolic rather than substantive involvement. Participation in Panchayat governance remains minimal, reflecting structural and cultural barriers to political empowerment.

Overall Major Findings

Based on the interpretation of data across objectives, the following major findings emerge:

- Educational empowerment has improved, but its impact on economic and social empowerment remains partial.
- Economic empowerment is constrained by informal employment, low asset ownership, and limited control over earnings.
- Decision-making autonomy remains weak, particularly in financial and mobility-related matters.
- Caste and income disparities significantly affect empowerment levels, with SC/ST and low-income women facing multiple disadvantages.
- Health access exists, but autonomy in utilization is limited, restricting women's well-being.
- Institutional mechanisms like SHGs have positive potential, but require capacity building for meaningful empowerment.
- Empowerment in rural Darjeeling remains uneven and fragmented, necessitating integrated policy interventions.

VI. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Strengthen Vocational and Skill Training: Align education with market-oriented vocational training to improve employment prospects.
- Enhance Financial Inclusion: Facilitate women's access to credit, savings, and asset ownership, especially land and microenterprises.
- Promote Gender-Sensitive Awareness Campaigns: Target socio-cultural norms through community dialogues to improve women's autonomy in household decisions.
- Capacity Building for SHGs: Move beyond membership to strengthen leadership, collective action, and linkages with market chains.
- Inclusive Governance: Encourage women's participation in Panchayats and local decision-making bodies with incentives and leadership programs.

VII. CONCLUSION

The present study offers a comprehensive district-level understanding of women empowerment in the rural areas of Darjeeling, West Bengal. The findings reveal that although notable progress has been achieved in educational attainment and awareness among rural women, empowerment remains uneven and limited in practice. Educational advancement has not sufficiently translated into economic independence, decision-making authority, or social mobility. Most women continue to be engaged in informal and low-income economic activities, with limited control over

productive resources and household finances. Decision-making autonomy within households remains constrained by entrenched patriarchal norms, particularly in matters related to expenditure, mobility, and social participation. While basic healthcare facilities are accessible to a majority of women, their independent utilization is often restricted by familial dependence and social expectations. Institutional platforms such as Self-Help Groups have contributed positively to social networking and financial inclusion; however, women's active participation and leadership roles within these institutions remain limited. The study further highlights that caste and income disparities significantly influence empowerment outcomes, with women from marginalized and low-income groups experiencing greater disadvantages. Overall, the findings suggest that women empowerment in rural Darjeeling requires holistic and sustained interventions. Policies must focus on strengthening economic opportunities, enhancing asset ownership, expanding institutional participation, and addressing deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers to ensure inclusive and sustainable empowerment of rural women.

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