

Assessing the Impact of Self-Help Groups on Socio-Economic Empowerment and Income-Generating Activities of Scheduled Caste Women: Determinants and Outcomes

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Abstract

This research paper explores the socio-economic empowerment of Scheduled Caste (SC) women in India through their participation in self-help groups (SHGs). It aims to identify the factors that contribute to their empowerment and assess the impact of SHGs on improving their socio-economic status. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative case studies to offer a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Key findings reveal that SHGs significantly contribute to the empowerment of SC women by providing access to credit, fostering financial independence, and enhancing social status through collective action. Factors like education, social support, and government policies emerged as critical determinants of empowerment. The study concludes that while SHGs play a pivotal role in empowering SC women, their efficacy is markedly influenced by external socio-economic factors. These insights are crucial for policymakers and social workers to design more effective empowerment programs for marginalized communities.

Keywords: *Socio-Economic Empowerment, Scheduled Caste Women, Self-Help Groups, Financial Independence and Collective Action.*

I. Introduction

The socio-economic empowerment of women, particularly those belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SC) in India, presents a critical area of study in the quest for equitable development and social justice. SC women often face compounded disadvantages due to their position at the intersection of caste and gender hierarchies, leading to marginalization in multiple spheres of life. Their socio-economic status is characterized by lower income levels, limited access to education and employment opportunities, and a higher incidence of discrimination and social exclusion. In this context, self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as a significant instrument for socio-economic upliftment. These groups not only provide financial services to their members but also serve as platforms for social empowerment and collective action.

The problem addressed in this research is the effectiveness of SHGs in the socio-economic empowerment of SC women. Despite the proliferation of SHGs and their recognized role in empowering women, there remains a need to critically evaluate their impact, especially among SC women who face unique challenges. The relevance of this study is underscored by ongoing efforts to achieve gender equality and social inclusion, as outlined in various national and international developmental agendas.

The primary objectives of this research are to examine the role of SHGs in enhancing the socio-economic status of SC women and to identify the factors that determine the success of these groups in achieving women's empowerment. The research questions guiding this study include: How do SHGs contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of SC women? What factors influence the effectiveness of SHGs in empowering SC women?

The methodology adopted for this research is a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative insights. The quantitative component involves the analysis of data on income levels, savings patterns, and access to credit among SC women in SHGs. The qualitative aspect includes case studies and interviews, providing deeper insights into the experiences of SC women in these groups. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of SHGs on the socio-economic empowerment of SC women, encompassing both statistical trends and personal narratives.

II. Review of Literature

1. **Determinants of participation in self-help-groups (SHG) and its impact on women empowerment (2016):** This study investigates the impact of a microfinance program through self-help groups (SHG) in two distinct agro-ecological regions of Odisha, India. Utilizing primary data from 300 households, it explores individual, household, and environmental factors influencing SHG-bank linkage program participation. The methodology includes stratified random sampling, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. A probit binary model assesses participation determinants, while empowerment is measured using a composite index across autonomy, economic empowerment, and gender relations. The analysis incorporates ordinary least square regression and propensity score matching. Findings indicate that while microfinance positively affects women's empowerment, the program overlooks the poorest. This study's methodology raises questions about generalizability, suggesting further research. Practical implications highlight microfinance's role in enhancing women's status, especially in underdeveloped areas. Promoting SHG-bank linkages, particularly among marginalized communities, can significantly improve women's social status through empowerment.

2. **Women Empowerment through Self Help Groups (2015):** Women, often termed as the unsung heroines of rural society, work tirelessly from dawn to dusk yet have historically been overlooked in empowerment initiatives. A significant number of these women lack assets crucial for their empowerment, economic independence, self-employment, and entrepreneurial development. Empowerment, a global issue gaining traction in recent decades, is about enabling women to fully realize their identity and power across all life aspects. Entrepreneurship, a dynamic wealth-creating process, is integral to this empowerment. The institutionalization of economic empowerment among women is effectively achieved through Self Help Groups (SHGs), which focus on creating employment opportunities and providing training for income generation. SHGs have become the world's largest Micro-Finance (MF) program, playing a pivotal role in poverty alleviation and empowerment. This study focuses on ten SHGs formed in the villages of Lohiyani and Rerwan in the Jalandhar District, supported by an NGO. Each SHG consisted of 10 to 12 women, most of whom were illiterate or had education up to the metric level. Encouraged to undergo training and start their own enterprises, these groups received financial support from regional rural banks, cooperative banks, and commercial banks. The present study aims to analyze the formation, functioning, and impact of SHGs on the socio-economic status of women. It also examines the relationship between the success of SHGs and their access to government schemes and support from institutions like banks and NGOs. This comprehensive analysis aims to provide insights into the effectiveness of SHGs in empowering rural women, enhancing their socio-economic status, and fostering sustainable development.

3. **Role of Self Help Groups in Socio-Economic Empowerment of Women: A Review of Studies (2014):** In India, where a third of the world's poor reside, microfinance has emerged as a potential tool for poverty alleviation, especially among disadvantaged groups like women, small farmers, and the landless. Ranked fourth globally in financial exclusion, India's response includes a 1992 NABARD-initiated scheme, inspired by Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, to organize the poor into SHGs and link them with banks. Focused on women, these SHGs, supported by banks, NGOs, and local governance bodies, receive NABARD's concessional refinance. While not uniformly spread across the country, SHGs have become a significant movement for social empowerment, particularly for rural women. This paper aims to examine the varied impacts of SHGs on women's socio-economic empowerment, as evidenced in various studies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings of this research are anchored in the concepts of socio-economic empowerment and their relevance to Scheduled Caste (SC) women and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Socio-economic empowerment is understood as the process through which individuals and communities gain the skills and resources necessary to participate fully in economic and social life, especially those historically marginalized. This encompasses not only access to economic resources but also the ability to influence community practices and decisions.

For SC women, empowerment theories are particularly pertinent due to their intersectional position at the crossroads of caste and gender discrimination. The framework of empowerment used here is multi-dimensional, involving economic, social, psychological, and political aspects. Economic empowerment refers to the process of improving the economic status of individuals through opportunities such as employment and access to financial resources. Social empowerment involves enhancing one's position within the societal hierarchy, which for SC women means overcoming caste and gender-based barriers.

SHGs serve as a practical model within this theoretical framework. They are viewed as instruments for collective action, providing a platform for marginalized individuals, especially women, to collaboratively work

towards economic and social betterment. Theories of collective action and social capital are relevant here, as they explain how group dynamics within SHGs can lead to greater empowerment outcomes.

Key concepts used in this research include:

1. **Empowerment:** The process of gaining freedom and power to make decisions and act independently.
2. **Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** Small voluntary associations of people, typically from similar socio-economic backgrounds, who come together for the purpose of solving their common problems through mutual help.
3. **Social Capital:** The networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.
4. **Intersectionality:** The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives and concepts, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how SHGs can facilitate the socio-economic empowerment of SC women.

Methodology

The methodology of this research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research designs. This combination allows for a comprehensive exploration of the socio-economic empowerment of Scheduled Caste (SC) women through Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

Data Collection Methods:

- **Quantitative Data:** This will be gathered through structured surveys designed to capture statistical data on key variables such as income levels, savings, loan repayment rates, and participation in SHGs among SC women.
- **Qualitative Data:** In-depth interviews and case studies will be conducted to gain deeper insights into the personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by SC women in SHGs. Focus groups with SHG members will also be included to understand the collective dynamics and impacts of these groups.
- **Data Analysis:** Quantitative data will be analyzed using statistical software to identify patterns and correlations between SHG participation and socio-economic variables. Techniques like regression analysis and comparative statistics will be employed. Qualitative data analysis will involve thematic analysis to extract key themes and narratives from interviews and focus groups. This will provide contextual understanding and qualitative depth to the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent will be obtained from all participants.
- Privacy and confidentiality of participants will be maintained, ensuring that data is anonymized.
- Sensitivity to the cultural and social context of the SC women will be a priority.
- Limitations:
 - The study may face limitations in terms of the representativeness of the sample. Given the diversity within SC communities, findings might not be generalizable to all SC women.
 - There could be challenges in quantifying empowerment, as it is a multi-dimensional and subjective concept.
 - Response bias in surveys and interviews may also affect the validity of the data.
- In sum, this methodology aims to provide a balanced view of the role and impact of SHGs in the socio-economic empowerment of SC women, acknowledging both the quantitative outcomes and the qualitative experiences of the participants.

Results/Findings

Table No: 1

Nature of Income Generating Activities after Joining Self-Help Groups

			Nature of Income Generating Activities after Joining Self-Help Groups							
				Agarbatti, Candle production, etc	Animal Husbandry, Fishing, Poultry, etc.	Home Food Products, Hotels bakery etc.	Knitting, Stitching, Weaving, etc.	Knitting, Stitching, Weaving, etc.	Rural Artistic Works, handicrafts ,etc	Total
Districts, Mandals, Villages	Kamareddy, Kamareddy, Uggirawai	Count of Total	0	2	31	2	7	2	6	50
		% of Total	0.0%	1.0%	15.5%	1.0%	3.5%	1.0%	3.0%	25.0%

	Medak, Veldurthi, Mangalparthi	Count % of Total	1 .5%	4 2.0%	31 15.5%	9 4.5%	2 1.0%	0 0.0%	3 1.5%	50 25.0%
	Nirmal, Dasturabad, Bhuthkur	Count % of Total	0 0.0%	4 2.0%	32 16.0%	4 2.0%	3 1.5%	3 1.5%	4 2.0%	50 25.0%
	Nizamabad, Armur, Macharla	Count % of Total	0 0.0%	4 2.0%	36 18.0%	3 1.5%	3 1.5%	0 0.0%	4 2.0%	50 25.0%
Total		Count % of Total	1 .5%	14 7.0%	130 65.0%	18 9.0%	15 7.5%	5 2.5%	17 8.5%	200 100.0%

Source: primary data

The table presents a detailed overview of the diverse income-generating activities undertaken by Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in four distinct districts: Kamareddy, Medak, Nirmal, and Nizamabad. Each district contributes equally, representing 25% of the 200 activities analyzed.

A significant majority of the activities, 65%, are centered around "Home Food Products, Hotels bakery etc.," indicating a strong market preference for homemade food products and related hospitality services. Nizamabad leads in this category with 18%, followed closely by Nirmal (16%), and Kamareddy and Medak each at 15.5%. This trend suggests a widespread demand for food-related enterprises in these regions.

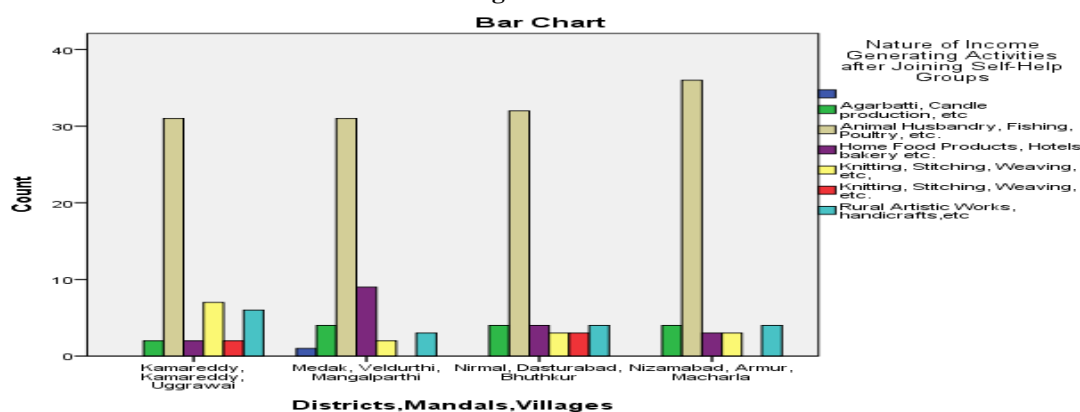
"Knitting, Stitching, Weaving, etc." constitute the second most common activity, accounting for 9% of the total. Medak stands out in this sector, contributing 4.5%, which is more than double the activity seen in the other districts, indicating a potential regional specialization or demand for textile products.

Interestingly, "Rural Artistic Works, handicrafts, etc." represent 8.5% of activities, with Kamareddy being the most active in this area at 3%. Similarly, "Animal Husbandry, Fishing, Poultry, etc." comprise 7% of the total, with equal participation from Medak and Nirmal (2% each), suggesting these districts may have the necessary resources or skills for such ventures.

In contrast, activities like "Agarbatti, Candle production, etc." are relatively rare, making up only 0.5% of the activities, primarily in Medak. Other sectors such as "Knitting, Stitching, Weaving, etc." and "Rural Artistic Works, handicrafts, etc." also show less prevalence, representing 7.5% and 2.5% of the activities, respectively, possibly indicating limited market demand or a lack of widespread skills in these areas.

Overall, this analysis offers a comprehensive view of the economic activities prevalent among SHGs in these districts. The strong focus on food-related enterprises reflects a common market trend, while the unique economic specializations of each district showcase the adaptability and entrepreneurial spirit of the SHG members.

Figure No: 1



Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	21.276 ^a	18	.266
Likelihood Ratio	21.866	18	.238
N of Valid Cases	200		

A Pearson chi-square test was performed, yielding a test statistic of 21.276 with 18 degrees of freedom. The resulting p-value was 0.266. Given that this p-value exceeds the standard significance threshold of 0.05, the data does not provide sufficient grounds to reject the null hypothesis. Consequently, this test indicates no significant relationship between the variables under examination.

III. Conclusion

The research on "Assessing the Impact of Self-Help Groups on Socio-Economic Empowerment and Income-Generating Activities of Scheduled Caste (SC) Women: Determinants and Outcomes" provides critical insights into the transformative role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in the lives of SC women. The study highlights that SHGs not only facilitate economic advancement through income-generating activities but also contribute significantly to the socio-economic empowerment of these women. Key findings indicate that participation in SHGs leads to increased access to financial resources, improved skills for income generation, and enhanced social status within the community. The determinants of successful empowerment through SHGs include the level of group cohesion, access to credit, training and capacity-building initiatives, and supportive policies and infrastructure. However, the study also acknowledges the challenges faced in uniformly spreading the benefits of SHGs across different regions and communities. The varying degrees of success point towards the need for tailored approaches that consider local socio-economic conditions and cultural contexts. The outcomes of this research underscore the importance of SHGs as a tool for empowering SC women, suggesting that strategic support and scaling up of these groups can lead to more substantial and widespread benefits. Moreover, it calls for ongoing research and policy attention to address the gaps and optimize the potential of SHGs as a vehicle for socio-economic change and gender equality. In conclusion, this research substantiates the role of SHGs in not just economically uplifting SC women but also in fostering a sense of empowerment and agency, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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