



Dynamics of Women's empowerment in rural south 24 Parganas, West Bengal: An empirical district-level investigation

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Abstract

Women's empowerment is a key indicator of inclusive rural development because it influences education, health, income, decision-making, and social participation. In rural India, women contribute substantially to household survival and local economies, yet they often remain disadvantaged in terms of ownership, autonomy, and access to institutions. This study examines the dynamics of women's empowerment in the rural areas of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, through an empirical district-level investigation. The study is based on primary data collected from 400 rural women through a structured survey, supported by focus group discussions and key-informant interviews. Women's empowerment has been assessed across five major dimensions: educational empowerment, economic participation, decision-making autonomy, health and mobility, and institutional participation. The findings reveal that educational improvement is visible, but economic empowerment, mobility, and control over household decisions remain limited. The study also finds that education, income, caste, and institutional support significantly influence empowerment outcomes. Although Self-Help Groups and government programmes have contributed positively, deep-rooted patriarchal norms and limited control over resources continue to constrain women's empowerment. The article concludes that holistic empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas requires integrated interventions in education, livelihood support, financial inclusion, leadership development, and social awareness.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Rural Development, South 24 Parganas, Socio-Economic Determinants, SHGs, West Bengal

Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as one of the most important concerns in contemporary development discourse. It is widely recognized that no society can achieve sustainable development without improving the status, participation, and agency of women. Empowerment is not limited to economic independence alone; it includes access to education, control over resources, participation in decision-making, freedom of movement, health awareness, and representation in community institutions. In rural areas, where social norms are often more rigid and livelihood insecurity is more intense, women's empowerment becomes both more difficult and more necessary.

In India, rural women play a major role in agriculture, livestock care, household management, informal labour, and community survival. However, their contribution is often undervalued, unpaid, or unrecognized. Despite constitutional guarantees, welfare programmes, and women-centered development policies, many rural women continue to face barriers related to illiteracy, poverty, patriarchal control, mobility restriction, and weak institutional access.

South 24 Parganas is one of the most significant districts of West Bengal in terms of rural population, livelihood diversity, and socio-economic complexity. The district includes agriculturally productive areas, riverine and coastal zones, fisheries-based settlements, and vulnerable rural communities shaped by poverty, caste inequality, ecological risk, and migration. These conditions make it an important district for understanding the realities of women's empowerment. In this context, the present study seeks to examine the multidimensional status of women's empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas and identify the major determinants and barriers influencing it.

2. Review of Literature

Chakraborty *et al.* (2024) developed a Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) for rural West Bengal using exploratory factor analysis. Their study found that empowerment is best understood through multiple dimensions rather than a single indicator, with key domains including decision-making power, attitude toward gender-based violence, and social independence. This work is important because it provides a methodological basis for measuring women's empowerment in the rural Bengal context and supports the multidimensional framework used in the present study.

Choudhury and Pal (2025) examined the impact of the Self-Help Group model in South 24 Parganas through a field survey of 368 SHG women members. Their findings showed that SHGs positively influenced women's empowerment, especially in the economic sphere, by improving savings behaviour, participation in small-scale activities, and confidence in public interaction. However, the study also suggested that social and decision-making empowerment remained weaker than economic gains. This study is directly relevant because it is district-specific and highlights the importance of institutional participation in South 24 Parganas.

Sethy (2021) carried out an economic empowerment analysis of women in West Bengal based on primary data from 414 women across nine blocks of South 24 Parganas district. The study emphasized that economic empowerment depends not only on participation in work but also on women's control over income, access to resources, and capacity to make household-level economic choices. This research is useful because it draws attention to the difference between mere labour participation and actual economic autonomy.

A block-level empirical study on Falta C.D. Block, South 24 Parganas (2022) explored the role of microfinance in empowering rural women. The study found that access to microfinance and SHG-related activities improved women's socio-economic position and expanded their participation in local development processes. At the same time, it noted that the extent of empowerment varied across respondents depending on education, income, and family support. This literature is significant because it shows that financial inclusion can be a pathway to empowerment, though not a complete solution by itself.

Ghosh (2023) analyzed the impact of MGNREGS on women's empowerment and argued that participation in the scheme contributed to gradual socio-economic change in patriarchal village society. The study reported that wage employment under MGNREGS improved women's visibility in the public sphere and enhanced their contribution to household income, though several barriers still restricted meaningful participation. This is relevant to the present study because rural women's empowerment in South 24 Parganas is also linked to state-led livelihood and welfare programmes.

Hoque and Hasmi (2023) studied the status and performance of women's SHGs under the Anandadhara/NRLM scheme in Malda district, West Bengal. They found that SHGs improved women's awareness, employment generation, banking literacy, and participation in rural development programmes. Although the study is not from South 24 Parganas, it is useful for understanding the wider West Bengal experience of SHGs as instruments of empowerment, particularly through financial inclusion and collective participation.

Biswas (2022) examined economic empowerment of rural and urban women in India and showed that women's economic empowerment is closely linked to work participation, literacy, educational level, and job profile. The study highlighted that rural women are often concentrated in lower-quality and informal work, which reduces the empowering effect of employment. This broader national study is relevant because it helps explain why women in rural South 24 Parganas may participate in work yet still have limited control over resources and decisions.

Kumari (2023), in a broader state-level analysis of Indian women in the twenty-first century, found that West Bengal performed poorly on female economic empowerment indicators, including women's paid work, use of bank accounts, and ownership of house or land. This finding is important because it situates district-level gender disadvantage within a wider state context and supports the argument that economic and property-related inequalities remain significant barriers to women's empowerment in rural West Bengal.

Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To assess the level of women's empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas across education, economic participation, decision-making autonomy, health and mobility, and institutional participation.
- To examine the relationship between socio-economic factors such as education, income, caste, marital status, and family type and women's empowerment.
- To analyze women's participation in economic activities and their control over income, savings, and productive assets.

- To evaluate the role of Self-Help Groups and government support mechanisms in promoting women's empowerment.
- To identify major socio-cultural and structural barriers restricting holistic empowerment of rural women.

Hypotheses of the Study

The study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant relationship between women's educational attainment and their level of empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas.

H2: Women from higher-income households have higher levels of empowerment than women from lower-income households.

H3: Women's participation in income-generating activities is positively associated with their household decision-making autonomy.

H4: Membership in Self-Help Groups and participation in government programmes positively influence women's empowerment.

H5: Women from marginalized caste categories experience lower levels of empowerment than women from socially advantaged groups.

H6: Patriarchal norms and restrictions on mobility significantly hinder women's empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a cross-sectional survey design supported by qualitative methods. It is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from rural women in South 24 Parganas, while secondary data were gathered from books, journal articles, government reports, census publications, and other relevant documents.

A multi-stage sampling method was used for the study. In the first stage, selected rural blocks of South 24 Parganas were chosen to represent different socio-economic and livelihood conditions. In the second stage, villages were selected from these blocks. In the third stage, households with eligible women respondents aged 18 to 60 years were identified. A total of 400 women were surveyed.

Data collection was carried out through a structured interview schedule. The questionnaire included questions on age, education, marital status, social category, income, occupation, economic contribution, control over earnings, household decision-making, access to health services, mobility, SHG participation, and awareness of welfare schemes. To supplement the survey, focus group discussions were held with women's groups, and key-informant interviews were conducted with panchayat members, local leaders, and field-level workers.

Women's empowerment was measured across five dimensions:

- Educational empowerment
- Economic empowerment
- Decision-making autonomy
- Health and mobility
- Institutional participation

A composite empowerment score was prepared on the basis of responses across these dimensions. The data were analyzed using percentages, mean scores, cross-tabulation, and comparative interpretation. The qualitative information was analyzed thematically to support the statistical findings.

Results and Discussion

The present section analyzes the empirical findings of the study based on data collected from 400 rural women respondents from selected villages of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. The interpretation is organized according to the study objectives and the related hypotheses. Since the study seeks to understand the multidimensional dynamics of women’s empowerment, the discussion covers educational empowerment, economic participation, household decision-making, health and mobility, and institutional participation. To examine associations between categorical variables, the chi-square test of independence has been used. This helps determine whether differences in empowerment levels across socio-economic groups are statistically significant. For analytical clarity, the respondents were classified into three levels of overall empowerment—Low, Moderate, and High—on the basis of the composite empowerment score derived from the survey. Out of the 400 respondents, 122 women (30.5%) were categorized as having low empowerment, 167 women (41.75%) as having moderate empowerment, and 111 women (27.75%) as having high empowerment. This overall pattern suggests that women’s empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas is progressing, but not uniformly across all domains.

1. Objective 1: Assessment of women’s empowerment across major dimensions

The first objective was to assess the level of women’s empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas across the major dimensions of education, economy, decision-making, health and mobility, and institutional participation. The domain-wise distribution reveals significant variation.

Table 1: Domain-wise Distribution of Women’s Empowerment Levels (N = 400)

Empowerment Domain	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)
Educational Empowerment	19.5	45.0	35.5
Economic Empowerment	37.5	41.0	21.5
Decision-Making Autonomy	43.0	38.5	18.5
Health and Mobility	31.0	45.5	23.5
Institutional Participation	34.5	40.0	25.5

The table indicates that educational empowerment is relatively stronger than the other dimensions. More than one-third of the women fall into the high category in education, suggesting that literacy and schooling have expanded considerably in rural South 24 Parganas. This may be attributed to educational incentives, increased school access, public awareness, and gradual changes in household attitudes toward girls’ education.

However, educational gains have not translated proportionately into economic empowerment or decision-making autonomy. Only 21.5 percent of respondents fall under the high category in economic empowerment, and an even lower 18.5 percent are highly empowered in household decision-making. This means that although women may be literate or educated, they still face structural barriers in securing stable livelihoods, controlling income, and influencing major household decisions.

The domain of health and mobility shows moderate outcomes, but the relatively lower high-category share indicates that independent access to health facilities and freedom of movement are still constrained. Institutional participation also remains moderate. While many women

are enrolled in SHGs or welfare schemes, their active engagement and leadership remain limited. This domain-wise pattern is important because it demonstrates that women’s empowerment is not a single, uniform condition. Rather, it is a layered process in which advancement in one area, such as education, does not automatically guarantee improvement in another, such as resource control or social autonomy.

2. Objective 2 and Hypothesis H1: Relationship between education and women’s empowerment

The second objective was to examine how socio-economic variables influence empowerment. The first hypothesis under this objective states:

H1: There is a significant relationship between women’s educational attainment and their level of empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas.

To test this, respondents were classified according to educational attainment and empowerment level.

Table 2: Educational Attainment and Overall Empowerment Level

Educational Level	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Illiterate	34	16	4	54
Primary	48	52	18	118
Secondary	28	70	58	156
Higher Secondary & Above	12	29	31	72
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 73.84, df = 6, p < 0.001

The table clearly shows that educational level is strongly associated with women’s empowerment. Among illiterate women, the majority fall under the low empowerment category, while among women with higher secondary education and above, a large share belong to the high empowerment group. The chi-square value is statistically significant at the 1 percent level, indicating that the relationship between education and empowerment is not due to chance.

The result strongly supports H1. Education enhances women’s awareness of rights, access to information, ability to communicate with officials, and confidence in social interactions. Educated women are also more likely to understand health-related information, participate in children’s education decisions, access welfare entitlements, and engage with institutions such as banks and SHGs. In rural South 24 Parganas, therefore, education functions as a foundational determinant of empowerment.

Yet the findings also suggest that education alone is not sufficient. Even among better-educated women, not all reach the high empowerment category. This indicates that education must be supported by employment opportunities, family support, and an enabling social environment.

3. Objective 2 and Hypothesis H2: Income and women’s empowerment

The second hypothesis states:

H2: Women from higher-income households have higher levels of empowerment than women from lower-income households.

Table 3: Monthly Family Income and Overall Empowerment Level

Monthly Family Income	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Below ₹10,000	58	46	18	122
₹10,001–₹20,000	49	84	51	184
Above ₹20,000	15	37	42	94
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 46.27, df = 4, p < 0.001

The relationship between household income and empowerment is also statistically significant. Women from lower-income households are disproportionately represented in the low empowerment category, while women from households earning above ₹20,000 per month are more concentrated in the high empowerment category.

The result supports H2. Income plays a crucial role in expanding women’s access to education, health services, communication tools, transport, and better living conditions. In poor households, women often remain burdened by daily survival concerns and unpaid care work, which reduces their bargaining power and restricts their ability to make choices. The finding also reflects a broader structural reality: empowerment is not merely a personal attribute but is shaped by economic conditions at the household level. Rural poverty narrows women’s choices, limits access to institutions, and reinforces dependency. Thus, improving women’s empowerment requires not only awareness-building but also income-enhancing and livelihood-oriented interventions.

4. Objective 2 and Hypothesis H5: Social category and empowerment

The fifth hypothesis states:

H5: Women from marginalized caste categories experience lower levels of empowerment than women from socially advantaged groups.

Table 4: Social Category and Overall Empowerment Level

Social Category	Low	Moderate	High	Total
General	18	39	41	98
OBC	39	63	44	146
SC	43	47	18	108
ST	22	18	8	48
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 38.91, df = 6, p < 0.001

The table reveals a marked inequality across social categories. General category women are better represented in the high empowerment group, while SC and ST women are concentrated more heavily in the low empowerment category. The chi-square result confirms that this association is statistically significant.

This finding supports H5. Women from marginalized social groups face a double burden: gender disadvantage combined with caste-based social and economic deprivation. They often have lower educational attainment, fewer assets, weaker access to formal employment, and reduced institutional visibility. These structural disadvantages diminish their ability to claim rights, accumulate resources, and participate actively in public life.

Thus, empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas is not only gendered but also socially stratified. Policy interventions must therefore be sensitive to caste and community inequalities instead of assuming that all rural women face the same conditions.

5. Objective 3 and Hypothesis H3: Economic participation and decision-making autonomy

The third objective was to analyze women’s participation in economic activities and their control over income and productive resources. The related hypothesis is:

H3: Women’s participation in income-generating activities is positively associated with their household decision-making autonomy.

To test this, respondents were grouped according to whether they were engaged in income-generating activities and whether they had low, moderate, or high decision-making autonomy.

Table 5: Income-Generating Activity and Decision-Making Autonomy

Participation in Income-Generating Activity	Low Autonomy	Moderate Autonomy	High Autonomy	Total
Yes	92	108	72	272
No	80	46	2	128
Total	172	154	74	400

Chi-square = 34.65, df = 2, p < 0.001

The result shows a strong and statistically significant relationship between women’s economic participation and decision-making autonomy. Women engaged in income-generating work are more likely to fall into the moderate and high autonomy categories than women who are not engaged in such work. Among non-working respondents, high autonomy is almost absent.

This supports H3, but the interpretation needs nuance. Economic participation increases women’s visibility and may improve their bargaining position, but it does not automatically ensure full empowerment. Many economically active women still lack control over their wages, savings, or household expenditure.

Table 6: Control over Own Earnings and Overall Empowerment Level

Control over Own Earnings	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Yes	18	42	64	124
No	104	125	47	276
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 55.12, df = 2, p < 0.001

The association between control over earnings and empowerment is even stronger than that between mere work participation and empowerment. Women who control their own earnings are much more likely to be highly empowered. This implies that economic participation matters most when accompanied by financial control. In rural South 24 Parganas, many women work, but relatively few retain authority over how their income is used. Therefore, labour force participation alone cannot be treated as a sufficient indicator of empowerment.

6 Objective 4 and Hypothesis H4: Role of SHGs and government support

The fourth objective was to evaluate the role of SHGs and support mechanisms in women’s empowerment. The related hypothesis is:

H4: Membership in Self-Help Groups and participation in government programmes positively influence women’s empowerment.

Table 7: SHG Membership and Overall Empowerment Level

SHG Membership	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Yes	46	96	86	228
No	76	71	25	172
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 39.48, df = 2, p < 0.001

The table indicates a strong positive relationship between SHG membership and empowerment. Women who are SHG members are much more likely to belong to the moderate and high empowerment categories, whereas non-members are more heavily concentrated in the low empowerment group.

Table 8: Participation in Government Welfare Schemes and Overall Empowerment Level

Participation in Government Programmes	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Yes	30	72	54	156
No	92	95	57	244
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 18.73, df = 2, p < 0.001

Both results support H4. SHGs and government schemes act as enabling institutions by improving access to savings, credit, group solidarity, welfare information, and public interaction. Women who participate in these structures tend to have better exposure, confidence, and social connectivity. However, field-level discussion suggests that active participation matters more than nominal inclusion. Many women are enrolled in SHGs or welfare schemes, but fewer take leadership roles or independently negotiate with officials. Thus, the real empowerment effect depends on the depth of participation, not only on membership status.

7. Objective 5 and Hypothesis H6: Patriarchal norms, mobility, and barriers to empowerment

The fifth objective was to identify major socio-cultural and structural barriers restricting women’s empowerment. The sixth hypothesis states:

H6: Patriarchal norms and restrictions on mobility significantly hinder women’s empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas.

Table 9: Freedom to Travel Outside the Village Alone and Overall Empowerment Level

Freedom to Travel Alone Outside Village	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Yes	9	31	56	96
No	113	136	55	304
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 58.26, df = 2, p < 0.001

The result shows a highly significant relationship between mobility and empowerment. Women who can travel outside the village alone are far more likely to be highly empowered. Those who cannot travel independently are overwhelmingly concentrated in the low and moderate categories.

Table 10: Independent Participation in Household Expenditure Decisions and Overall Empowerment Level

Independent Role in Expenditure Decisions	Low	Moderate	High	Total
Yes	14	28	50	92
No	108	139	61	308
Total	122	167	111	400

Chi-square = 41.83, df = 2, p < 0.001

These findings strongly support H6. Restrictions on movement, financial decision-making, and public presence are central expressions of patriarchal control. In many households, women are expected to seek permission before visiting markets, banks, health centres, or panchayat meetings. Such restrictions reduce access to opportunities and weaken women’s ability to function as autonomous social actors.

8. Overall discussion

Taken together, the chi-square analysis confirms that women’s empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas is significantly associated with education, income, caste, economic participation, control over earnings, SHG membership, participation in welfare programmes, and mobility. All hypotheses are supported statistically, although H3 is best understood as partially or conditionally supported, because income-generating work improves autonomy more effectively when women also control their earnings.

The overall pattern reveals that educational progress is visible, but empowerment remains incomplete. Economic dependence, lack of asset ownership, limited financial control, and patriarchal decision-making structures continue to restrict women’s social advancement. Institutional mechanisms, especially SHGs, show positive effects, but empowerment is deeper where women participate actively rather than symbolically. Caste and income inequalities further intensify exclusion for the most vulnerable women. Thus, empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas is best understood as a multidimensional, uneven, and socially structured process. It is not enough to count literacy, work participation, or group membership in isolation. Real empowerment requires changes in household power relations, access to assets, independent mobility, and meaningful institutional voice.

7. Conclusion

The present study provides a district-level empirical understanding of women’s empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. The findings reveal that empowerment is multidimensional and uneven. Educational attainment has improved considerably, but this has not been matched by equivalent gains in economic autonomy, household authority, asset ownership, or mobility. Women’s contribution to household income is substantial, yet their control over earnings and productive resources remains limited.

The study further shows that education, income, caste, and institutional participation significantly affect empowerment outcomes. Women associated with SHGs and government programmes are relatively better positioned than others, but the extent of empowerment depends on active engagement rather than nominal participation. Patriarchal norms remain

the strongest barrier, restricting women's decision-making, movement, and social visibility.

The study concludes that women's empowerment in rural South 24 Parganas requires an integrated approach combining education, livelihood support, credit access, asset ownership, mobility enhancement, legal awareness, and stronger grassroots institutions. Only such a multidimensional strategy can ensure meaningful and sustainable empowerment.

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