

Familial and Economic Empowerment of Tribal Women in Rural West Bengal, India

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Abstract

This study sheds light on the empowerment dynamics of tribal women, highlighting the complexities they face in balancing education, economic involvement, and familial responsibilities. Despite participating actively in household decision-making, tribal women experience significant disparities in economic empowerment, often constrained by patriarchal norms and limited access to resources. The findings reveal a weak positive correlation between education and familial empowerment, and a negative correlation between education and economic empowerment, indicating that higher educational attainment does not always translate into greater economic independence. Moreover, cultural influences continue to shape reproductive decisions and restrict women's involvement in community-level decision-making processes. While progress has been made in improving access to financial resources, many tribal women still depend on family income, limiting their economic autonomy. To address these challenges, there is a pressing need for targeted interventions focused on skill-based education, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy to empower tribal women. Additionally, fostering societal change through community awareness programs is essential to challenge traditional gender roles and promote inclusive development, ensuring that tribal women can fully participate in both economic and social spheres.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Empowerment, Education, Decision-making, Jungle Mahal

1. Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals underscore gender equality and women's empowerment as pivotal for combating poverty, hunger, and achieving sustainable development. Empowerment spans multiple dimensions including social, educational, economic, political, familial, and psychological that enhancing women's self-worth, decision-making capacity, and influence within society. Despite their respected roles in tribal communities, women face significant challenges, including low literacy rates, poverty, and systemic discrimination, which hinder their progress. Education emerges as a critical driver of empowerment, equipping women with the skills and autonomy needed for improved decision-making and enhanced economic participation. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have further contributed to advancing tribal women's roles in economic activities, fostering social awareness and leadership. However, barriers such as rural isolation, traditional biases, and limited access to resources continue to restrict their opportunities. This study focuses on the familial and economic empowerment of tribal women in the Jungle Mahal region of West Bengal, examining how education, societal norms, and economic participation influence their status.

2. Review of literature

Women's empowerment is a pivotal focus of global development, recognized as essential for addressing poverty and promoting sustainable growth (Malhotra, 2002). Empowerment spans multiple dimensions, including social, educational, economic, political, familial, and psychological aspects, which collectively enhance agency and foster equitable societal structures (EIGE, 2016). Familial empowerment involves autonomy in marriage, decision-making, and freedom from domestic violence (Malhotra et al., 2002), while economic empowerment, as outlined by UN Women (2018), encompasses equal access to resources, market participation, and financial independence. Education plays a critical role in this process, equipping women with confidence and tools to navigate and overcome societal challenges (Agrawal and Salve, 2013).

Tribal women, however, face unique barriers, including low literacy levels, poverty, and rural isolation, which intensify their marginalization (Binhja, 2020). Although education is linked to enhanced decision-making and economic status (Sen and Roy, 2021), some studies highlight a lack of direct correlation (Jayaweera, 1997). Other factors, such as media exposure, household education levels, and reduced fear of violence, also contribute to empowerment outcomes (Chaudhry et al., 2012). Participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has shown promise in fostering economic empowerment and leadership skills (Lakhotia, 2021).

Despite these advancements, significant gaps remain. Existing research often neglects the intersectionality of tribal identity, gender, and systemic challenges such as nutritional deficiencies and inadequate infrastructure (Rathore, 2012; Das, 2012). Furthermore, the role of digital literacy and access to information and communication technology (ICT) in empowerment remains underexplored in tribal contexts. This study identifies the need for holistic strategies, integrating education, economic initiatives, and systemic reforms to address the layered challenges faced by tribal women. Closing these gaps is critical to achieving meaningful and sustainable empowerment (Shetty and Hans, 2015).

3. Methodology

Selection of the study area

This study was conducted in 2024 across three tribal-dominated villages—Kuturia, Bhadutala, and Barua—located within the Salbani sub-division of Paschim Midnapore district, in the Jungle Mahals region of West Bengal, India. Kuturia village is situated at coordinates 22°28'34.68" N and 87°19'31.08" E, Bhadutala at 22°29'9.77" N and 87°19'30.75" E, and Barua at 23°56'26.09" N and 88°14'2.19" E (Fig. 1).

Data collection

Purposive sampling was employed to include all married tribal women, resulting in a sample size of 47 women. The quantitative study utilized a descriptive survey method, with data collected through self-prepared questionnaires inspired by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015. These questionnaires were specifically designed to assess tribal women's empowerment, covering various dimensions such as economic status, decision-making, and familial roles.

Data analysis

The data collected were analyzed using MS Excel and SPSS software. Statistical tests like the Mann-Whitney Test and Kruskal-Wallis Test were used to compare groups and assess differences between variables. A Regression Model was employed to explore relationships between variables and predict outcomes, especially for non-parametric data analysis.

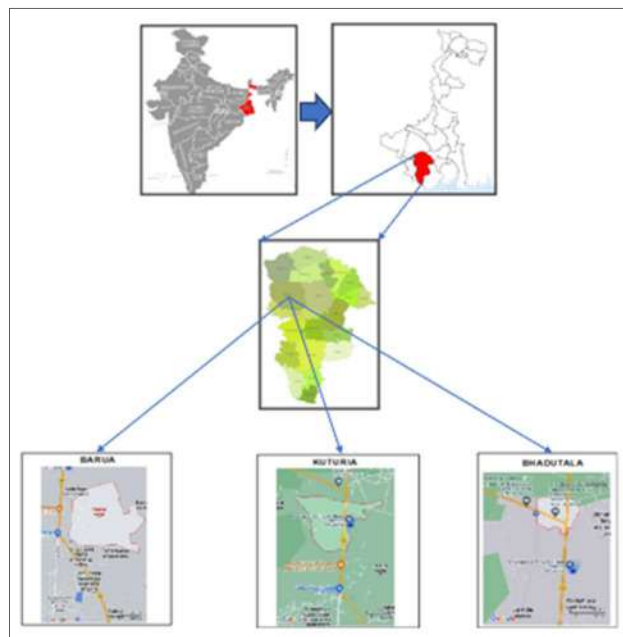


Figure 1: Location Map of the Study Area.

4. Results

This study examines married tribal women in Jungle Mahal, primarily from the Lodha, Bhumij, and Santhal communities. Most respondents are young to middle-aged housewives, while their husbands work as wage laborers in the unorganized sector. Low education levels and income highlight the pervasive poverty in their daily lives (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Sample Respondents

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Valid Percent (%)	Cumulative Percent (%)
Ethnicity	Santhal	8	17.0	17.0
	Lodha	29	61.7	78.7
	Bhumij	10	21.3	100.0
Wife Occupation	Homemaker	19	40.4	40.4
	Agricultural Laborer	16	34.0	74.5
	Farmer	2	4.3	78.7
	Daily Laborer	7	14.9	93.6
	Mason Helper	3	6.4	100.0
Wife Age	20-30	20	42.6	42.6
	30-40	17	36.2	78.7
	40-50	10	21.3	100.0
Husband Occupation	Not Working	1	1.5	1.5
	Daily Laborer	9	13.8	15.3
	Agricultural Laborer	6	9.2	24.5
	Mason Helper	21	32.3	56.8
	Farmer	2	3.1	59.9
	Driver	2	3.1	63.0
	Carpenter	1	1.5	64.5
	Shop Worker	1	1.5	66.0
	Business	3	4.6	70.6
	Forest Worker	1	1.5	100.0
Language	Santhali	23	48.9	48.9
	Bengali	20	42.6	91.5
	Olchiki	4	8.5	100.0
Wife Income	Homemaker	20	42.6	42.6
	<5,000	12	25.5	68.1
	5,000-7,000	8	17.0	85.1
	>7,000	7	14.9	100.0
Husband Income (INR)	<5,000	12	26.1	26.1
	5,000-9,000	30	65.2	91.3
	>9,000	4	8.7	100.0
Husband Education	Illiterate	11	23.4	23.4
	Primary	17	36.2	59.6
	Upper Primary	9	19.1	78.7
	Secondary	2	4.3	83.0
	Dropout	1	2.1	85.1
	Literate	7	14.9	100.0
Wife Education	Illiterate	25	53.2	53.2
	Primary	7	14.9	68.1
	Upper Primary	9	19.1	87.2
	Secondary	3	6.4	93.6
	Literate	3	6.4	100.0

Figure 2 illustrates the overall familial empowerment status of tribal women in the study area, taking into account various aspects. When it comes to decisions such as visiting relatives, the majority of respondents (66%) make joint decisions with their spouses, while only 9% make individual decisions. Traditional customs heavily influence decision-making, with all respondents having undergone social marriages rather than legal registry marriages, prioritizing social unions over legal ones. Regarding spouse selection, only 28% of women have the autonomy to choose their partners, while the remaining 72% are subject to patriarchal norms dictating their marriage age and partner selection. Additionally, 34% of women can decide their marriage age, while 66% have arranged marriages. Those who choose their partners opt for love marriages, although inter-caste marriages are typically prohibited. In cases where decisions are made, the father or other male elders in the family typically hold decision-making authority. Women's empowerment in sexual and reproductive decision-making is crucial for their health outcomes. Among the respondents, a significant proportion (64%) report making health-related decisions jointly with their spouses, indicating a degree of shared decision-making. However, only 11% have the autonomy to make individual decisions regarding their health issues, while in 19% of cases, husbands assume the role of decision-makers. Regarding intimate relations, approximately half (51%) of the respondents have the freedom to make decisions independently. However, the low contraceptive usage rate (28%) suggests a gap between decision-making autonomy and contraceptive practice, with many women resorting to sterilization due to limited access to contraception. In terms of childbearing decisions, while 55% of women participate in the decision-making process, 45% are excluded, with decisions being made by their husbands and mothers-in-law. Despite this, 19% of respondents express the ability to opt for abortion, indicating some level of reproductive autonomy.

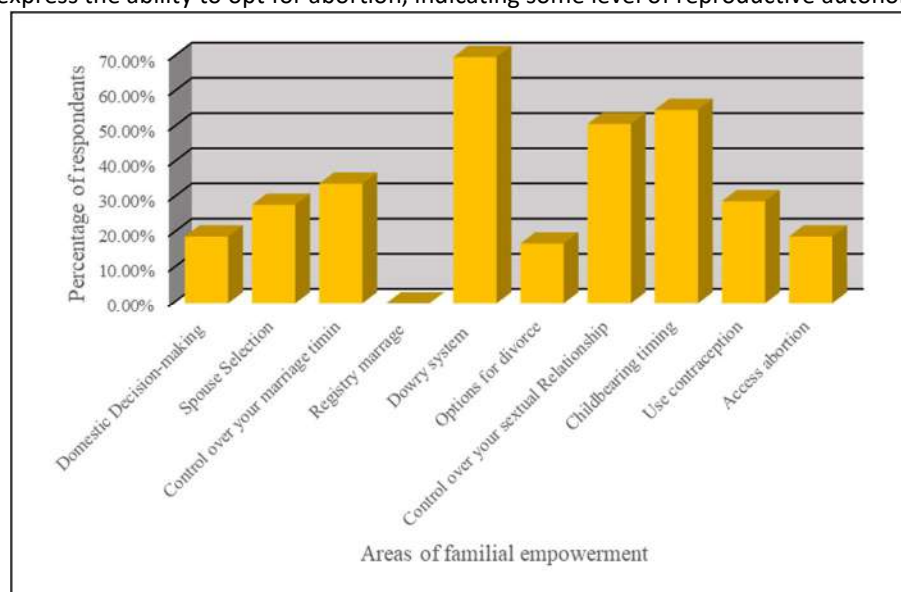


Figure 2: Familial Empowerment Status of the Sample Respondents.

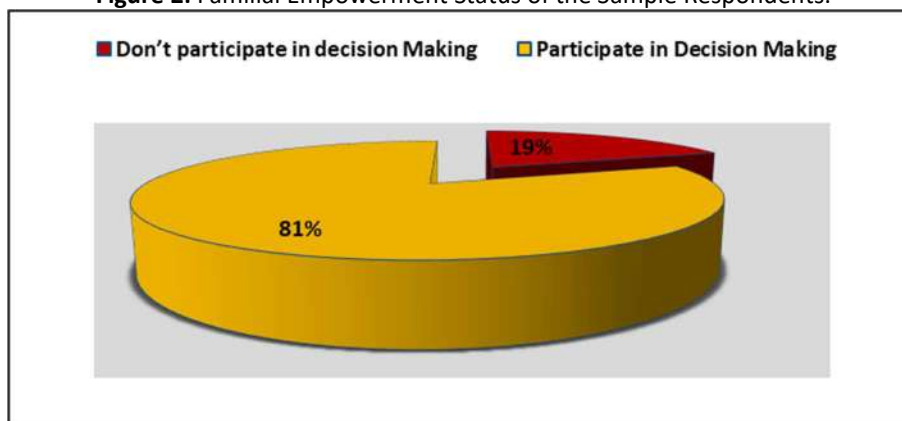


Figure 3: Domestic Decision-Making Power of the Sample Respondents.

Figure 3 illustrates the involvement of women in decision-making processes among the sample respondents. Out of the total 47 women surveyed, 38 actively participate in decision-making across various domains such as marketing and health-related matters. Conversely, the remaining 9 women do not partake in decision-making, as their husbands assume decision-making authority in these cases, denying them the opportunity to contribute. According to the respondents, barriers such as low educational qualifications, adherence to traditional customs, and lack of income impede their participation in decision-making. However, many women are able to make partial or complete decisions with their husbands' permission and engage in discussions with them regarding these matters.

Figure 4 visually represents various aspects of domestic violence experienced by women in the study area, providing insights into its prevalence and underlying factors. While approximately 80% of women report not experiencing domestic violence, the fact that 13% do not protest if abused suggests a normalization of violence, highlighting the challenges faced in achieving gender equality. Furthermore, alcohol consumption by husbands emerges as a significant factor influencing domestic violence, with cultural practices contributing to this behavior. However, it is noteworthy that 22% of husbands refrain from alcohol consumption due to health concerns, indicating a potential avenue for addressing domestic violence.

Figure 5 indicates that husbands generally earn more than their wives in the study area. Approximately 70% of husbands earn more than 6000 rupees per month, whereas only 14% of the respondents earn the same amount. The majority of the respondents' earnings fall within the range of Rs. 3000.00 to Rs. 6000.00 per month. This disparity in earnings between husbands and wives underscores the prevailing gender-based economic inequality within the community.

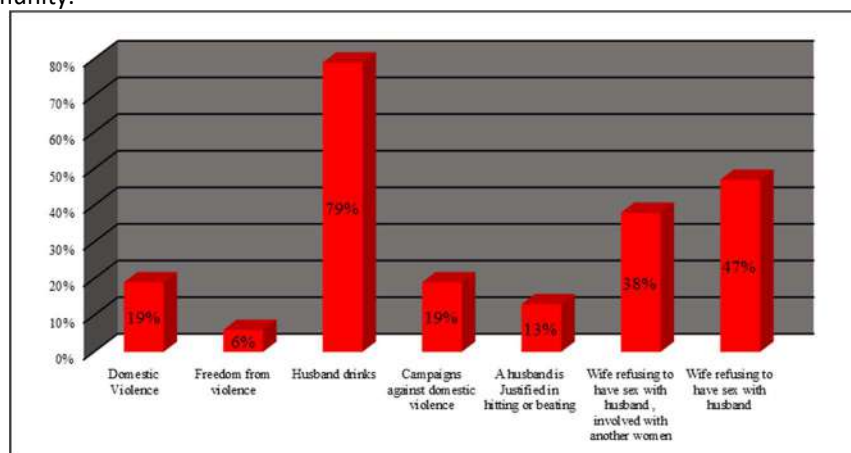


Figure 4: Status Over Domestic Violence of the Sample Respondents

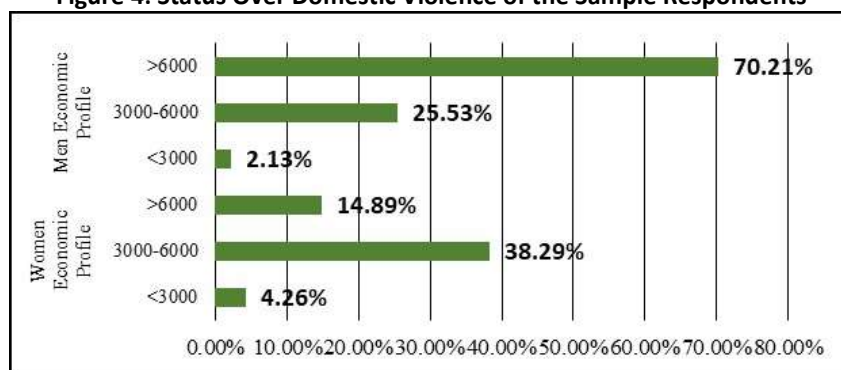


Figure 5: Economic Profile of the Sample Respondents

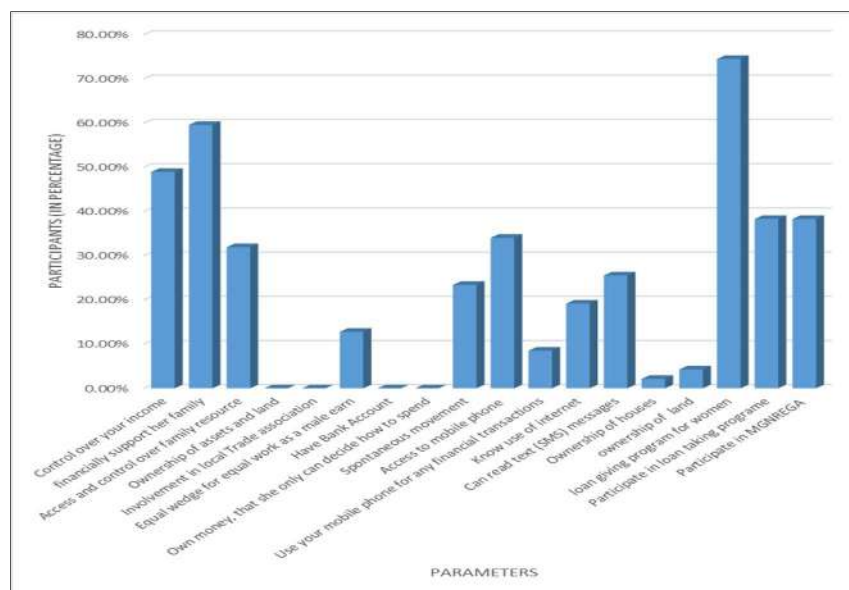


Figure 6: Economic Empowerment of the Sample Respondents

Figure 6 provides an overview of the economic empowerment status of tribal women in the study area, considering various aspects. Among the working respondents, 60% financially support their families, yet only 13% make individual decisions regarding household purchases, with 65% making joint decisions after discussion. The majority of women work as agricultural laborers, construction workers, or housemaids, rather than engaging in local trade associations or businesses. While 12% of women earn equivalent to their husbands, 88% earn less. Despite this, 88% of women have their own bank accounts, although 79% do not have separate money for personal use, as they contribute their earnings to the family. Only 34% of women use mobile phones, primarily for financial transactions, while 19% use the internet. However, lack of access to phones and education limits internet usage and reading ability. Additionally, only 2% of women own homes, with the majority not having property in their own name. Nevertheless, 74% participate in loan programs, and 38% have taken loans from various organizations such as Bandhan Bank and Self-Help Groups. Furthermore, 38% have participated in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) program.

The statistical summary presented in Table 2, reveals complex relationships between education, economic empowerment, and familial empowerment among tribal women. A moderate positive correlation exists between education and familial empowerment, indicating that higher educational attainment is associated with increased involvement in family decisions. However, a strong negative correlation between education and economic empowerment suggests that while education provides opportunities for women, societal and traditional norms limit their economic roles despite higher educational levels. Additionally, higher husband's income is linked to decreased familial and economic empowerment for women, further highlighting the challenges faced in achieving balanced empowerment. The regression analysis shows that education, husband's income, and other factors collectively explain a significant portion of the variance in economic empowerment, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of empowerment within tribal communities.

Table 2: Summary of Statistical Analysis on Education, Income, and Empowerment Among Tribal Women in the Study Area

Variable	Statistic	Value	Significance
Familial Empowerment	Spearman's Rho	0.413**	p = 0.004
Economic Empowerment	Spearman's Rho	-0.437**	p = 0.002
Relationship between Education	R	0.653	-
Regression Model (R ²)	R ²	0.426	-

Husband's Income and Empowerment	Spearman's Rho	-0.356*	p = 0.015
Wife's Education and Economic Empowerment	Coefficient	-0.980	p = 0.020
Husband's Income and Empowerment	Coefficient	-0.775	p = 0.054

Note: * and ** indicate statistical significance at 0.05 and 0.01 levels, respectively.

5. Discussion

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the challenges and dynamics influencing the empowerment of tribal women in the surveyed area. A major concern is the persistently low literacy rate among tribal women, reflecting systemic barriers to education and the broader challenges marginalized communities face in accessing educational opportunities (Lal, 2016; Das, 2012). Despite educational limitations, many tribal women demonstrate agency within their households, actively participating in decision-making processes. However, their empowerment is often restricted by patriarchal norms and entrenched gender roles, where male authority dominates both familial and community-level decisions (Das, 2012; Gupta, 2022). In particular, fertility-related decisions, such as marriage timing and childbearing, are largely controlled by male family members, including husbands and mothers-in-law, leaving women with limited autonomy. These findings align with prevalent practices in the community, such as arranged marriages and restricted inter-caste marriage choices (Mitra, 2008; Kalita, 2020). While women exhibit some level of empowerment within the household, societal norms and cultural traditions significantly constrain their broader decision-making and reproductive autonomy.

Economic empowerment remains a critical area of concern for tribal women, who face significant challenges in achieving financial autonomy. A large proportion of women are engaged as agricultural laborers, construction workers, or housemaids, yet their earnings are consistently lower than those of their male counterparts. This income disparity is compounded by the societal expectation for women to share their earnings with their families, further limiting their financial independence. Among ethnic groups, Santhals exhibit relatively higher levels of economic empowerment due to their active involvement in diverse forms of work. In contrast, Bhumij women, despite their higher education levels, show less participation in manual labor, reflecting aspirations for alternative employment opportunities. However, traditional norms often hinder these aspirations, perpetuating male dominance in economic decision-making (Das and Tarai, 2011). Moreover, limited access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) further widens the economic inequality gap. Many tribal women struggle with reading digital messages or navigating online platforms, exacerbating their exclusion from emerging economic opportunities. This underscores the need for skill-based and practical education tailored to their unique contexts.

The study highlights the pervasive impact of patriarchal norms on tribal women's autonomy, particularly in healthcare decision-making, where joint spousal decisions often overshadow individual agency. Domestic violence, frequently linked to husbands' alcohol consumption, remains a significant concern, despite widespread community disapproval (Xaxa, 2004; Rose et al., 2015). These findings underscore the need for holistic interventions, integrating education, financial inclusion, and awareness campaigns. Education equips women with the knowledge and confidence to challenge societal barriers, while income-generating opportunities enhance economic independence, reducing vulnerability to violence and dependency. Awareness campaigns can shift societal attitudes, combating the normalization of harmful practices and fostering gender equality. Addressing these interconnected challenges through a multidimensional approach is essential for empowering tribal women, enabling their active participation in decision-making processes, and achieving sustainable progress across educational, economic, and social dimensions.

6. Conclusion

The study highlights that tribal women face significant challenges in both education and economic empowerment, influenced by patriarchal norms and cultural practices. Despite active participation in household decision-making, societal constraints limit their autonomy, particularly in financial and community-level decisions. Education plays a vital role in improving empowerment, with literate women showing higher familial and economic agency. However, even among educated women, societal and economic barriers persist, restricting their full participation. Access to technology and skill development can further enhance their economic independence, fostering greater empowerment and integration into mainstream society. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines education, economic opportunities, and the promotion of gender equality.

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