



**Women Empowerment and Livelihood Transformation: A Study of
Purulia Town, West Bengal**

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Abstract: *Women empowerment is a key component of inclusive urban development, particularly in small towns where socio-economic transitions are uneven. The present study examines the level of women empowerment and its relationship with livelihood transformation in Purulia Town, West Bengal. The study is based on primary data collected through a field survey conducted between October and December 2025, covering 100 women respondents selected through stratified random sampling. A composite Women Empowerment Index (WEI) was developed using indicators related to economic status, decision-making power, mobility, social participation and access to services. The findings reveal that a majority of women (49%) fall under the medium level of empowerment, while 28% are categorised as low and only 23% as highly empowered. The study highlights that economic participation remains limited, with a large proportion of women engaged in unpaid domestic work or informal activities. Decision-making power is still largely shared or dominated by male members and mobility restrictions persist for a significant section of respondents. However, women involved in income-generating activities, particularly through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and small businesses, exhibit higher levels of confidence, autonomy and social participation. The study concludes that livelihood transformation plays a crucial role in enhancing women empowerment, but the process remains uneven due to socio-economic constraints and intra-urban disparities. It emphasises the need for targeted interventions focused on skill development, financial inclusion and awareness-raising to promote gender equality and sustainable urban development in small towns like Purulia.*

Keywords: *Women Empowerment; Livelihood Transformation; Women Empowerment Index (WEI); Gender Inequality; Economic Participation; Decision-Making Power; Urban Development*

1. Introduction

Women empowerment has become a key concern in development studies, particularly in countries like India where gender inequality continues to influence social and economic outcomes. Empowerment is a multidimensional concept that includes economic independence,

access to education, participation in decision-making, mobility and control over resources (Kabeer, 1999). In the Indian context, despite policy efforts and constitutional provisions, women often face structural barriers that limit their participation in economic and social spheres (Desai & Thakkar, 2001).

Urbanisation in India has opened new avenues for women's participation in livelihood activities, especially in small towns and emerging urban centres. However, the benefits of urban growth are not evenly distributed. Studies have shown that urban areas exhibit significant intra-urban disparities in access to services, infrastructure and opportunities (Bardhan et al., 2011; Paul, 2012). In Purulia Municipality, such inter-ward disparities in facility distribution and quality of life have already been documented, indicating uneven development within the town. These inequalities directly affect women's access to education, employment and institutional support, thereby influencing their level of empowerment.

From a broader perspective, livelihood transformation plays a crucial role in shaping women empowerment. The shift from unpaid domestic roles to income-generating activities enhances women's bargaining power within households and society (Agarwal, 1997). In recent years, initiatives such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), microfinance and skill development programmes have contributed to improving women's economic participation in India (NABARD, 2019). However, the extent of such transformation varies across regions, particularly in less developed districts like Purulia, where economic opportunities remain limited and social norms continue to influence gender roles.

Existing literature on women empowerment in India largely focuses on rural areas or metropolitan cities, with relatively less attention given to small towns. Studies by Malhotra et al. (2002) and Panda and Agarwal (2005) have examined empowerment in terms of decision-making and economic independence, but neither adequately captures the dynamics of livelihood change in semi-urban contexts. Similarly, research on Purulia has primarily focused on urban infrastructure and regional disparities rather than gender-specific development issues.

This creates a clear research gap. There is limited empirical evidence on how livelihood transformation influences women empowerment in small urban centres like Purulia. Moreover, the relationship between access to urban facilities and women's socio-economic advancement remains underexplored at the micro level.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing women empowerment in relation to livelihood transformation in Purulia Town. It adopts a field-based approach to examine key dimensions, including economic participation, decision-making power, mobility and access to services. The study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how changing livelihood patterns are shaping women's empowerment in a transitional urban setting.

The findings of this research have practical implications for urban planning and policy formulation. By identifying the factors influencing women empowerment, the study can support targeted interventions such as skill development, financial inclusion and improved access to services. It also contributes to achieving broader development goals related to gender

equality and inclusive urban development, aligning with national priorities and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 and SDG 11).

2. Study Area

Purulia Town, the district headquarters of Purulia, is located in the westernmost part of West Bengal. Geographically, it lies between 23°18'30" N to 23°21'00" N latitude and 86°21'00" E to 86°23'30" E longitude, covering an area of approximately 14 sq. km. The town is situated on the eastern fringe of the Chotanagpur Plateau and is characterised by undulating topography, lateritic soils and a dry tropical climate. These physical conditions influence land use, settlement patterns and livelihood activities in the region.

According to the Census of India (2011), Purulia Municipality has a population of 121,067, with 62,351 males and 58,716 females. The town has a literacy rate of 82.09 per cent, which is higher than the state average, although a gender gap persists, with male literacy at 88.40 per cent and female literacy at 75.39 per cent (Census of India, 2011). The demographic composition also reflects social diversity, with Scheduled Castes constituting about 19.38 per cent and Scheduled Tribes about 18.45 per cent of the population.

The economic structure of Purulia Town is largely dominated by the tertiary sector, including small trade, services and informal activities. Of the total population, about 40,560 people are employed, but female participation in the workforce is comparatively low, indicating gender disparity in employment opportunities (Census of India, 2011). A considerable proportion of women remain engaged in unpaid domestic work or low-income informal activities, which limits their financial independence and decision-making power.

Urban infrastructure and access to basic services in Purulia are unevenly distributed across wards. Earlier studies have identified significant inter-ward disparities in access to educational institutions, healthcare facilities, transport and financial services within the municipality. Such spatial inequalities directly affect livelihood opportunities and shape the socio-economic conditions of the residents, particularly women. Areas with better infrastructure and connectivity tend to offer more employment and income-generating opportunities, while peripheral wards lag behind in development.

In recent years, the town has experienced a gradual transformation of its livelihoods, with a shift from traditional occupations towards service-oriented and informal-sector activities. Women are increasingly participating in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), small-scale businesses and other income-generating activities, though their involvement remains constrained by socio-cultural norms, educational levels and access to resources.

Thus, Purulia Town represents a transitional urban space where socio-economic disparities, infrastructural inequalities and emerging livelihood opportunities coexist. These characteristics make it an appropriate setting for examining the relationship between women empowerment and livelihood transformation at the micro level.

3. Data Sources and Methodology

The present study is based on primary data collected through a field survey conducted in Purulia Town during the period October to December, 2025. The study adopts a micro-level empirical approach to examine the relationship between women empowerment and livelihood transformation in a small urban setting.

3.1 Nature and Sources of Data

The study primarily relies on primary data, collected through a structured questionnaire administered to women respondents. The questionnaire covered different dimensions of empowerment, including socio-economic status, livelihood, decision-making power, mobility and access to services.

Secondary data have also been used to support the analysis, particularly for understanding the demographic and socio-economic background of the study area. These data were collected from sources such as the *Census of India (2011)* and relevant published literature.

3.2 Sampling Design

A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to capture spatial and socio-economic variation within the town. Purulia Municipality is divided into several wards and for this study, a few representative wards were selected based on differences in socio-economic conditions and accessibility to urban facilities.

From these selected wards, a total of 100 women respondents (aged 18 years and above) were surveyed. Care was taken to include respondents from different occupational groups, income levels and educational backgrounds to ensure representativeness.

3.3 Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a pre-tested structured questionnaire. The survey included both closed-ended and perception-based questions. In addition, informal interactions and field observations were carried out to understand the socio-cultural context and livelihood conditions of the respondents.

3.4 Variables and Indicators

To assess women empowerment and livelihood transformation, variables were grouped into five major dimensions:

Table 1: Dimensions with the Indicators

Dimension	Indicators
Economic	Occupation, income, bank access, SHG participation
Social	Education, mobility, social participation
Decision-making	Role in household and financial decisions
Health & Awareness	Access to healthcare, awareness of schemes
Livelihood	Change in employment and income status

These variables were selected based on previous studies on empowerment and urban socio-economic conditions (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002).

3.5 Construction of Women Empowerment Index (WEI)

To quantify empowerment, a composite Women Empowerment Index (WEI) was developed. Each variable was assigned a score based on responses:

Yes / Independent = 2 ; Partial / To some extent = 1 ; No / None = 0

The scores were then normalised and aggregated to compute the index using the following formula:

$$WEI = \frac{\sum X_i}{N}$$

Where, X_i = score of each indicator and N = total number of indicators.

3.6 Classification of Empowerment Levels

Based on the computed Women Empowerment Index (WEI) values, the respondents were classified into three categories. Those with WEI scores ranging from 0.00 to 0.33 were considered to have a low level of empowerment. Respondents with scores between 0.34 and 0.66 were categorised as having a medium level of empowerment, indicating partial empowerment. Those scoring between 0.67 and 1.00 were classified as highly empowered, reflecting greater access to resources, higher decision-making capacity and improved socio-economic status.

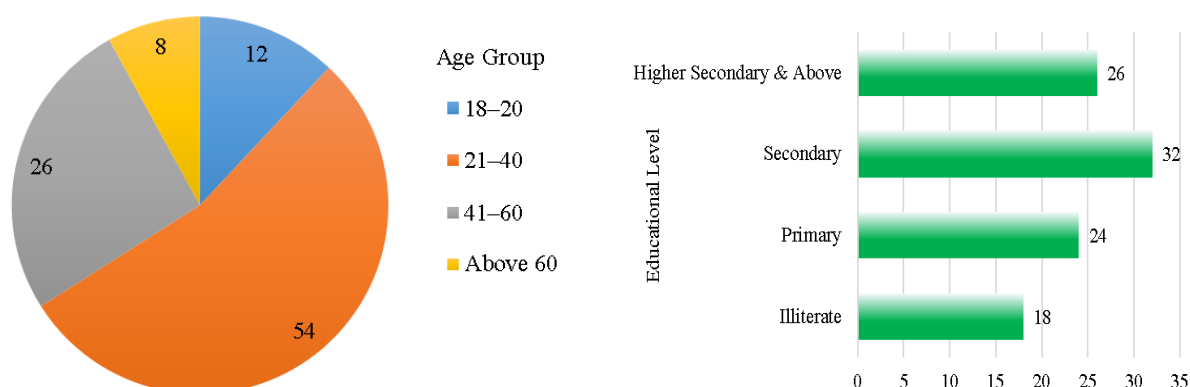
3.7 Analytical Techniques

The collected data were analysed using simple statistical techniques, such as percentages, averages and index computation. Cross-tabulation was used to examine relationships between livelihood variables and empowerment levels.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

The socio-economic characteristics of respondents provide the foundation for understanding the level of women empowerment in Purulia Town. The age structure shows that a majority of respondents belong to the economically active group of 21–40 years, indicating their potential involvement in livelihood activities. In terms of education, although a significant proportion of women have attained secondary education, a considerable section still remains at the primary or below level, reflecting the persistence of educational disparity among women (Census of India, 2011).



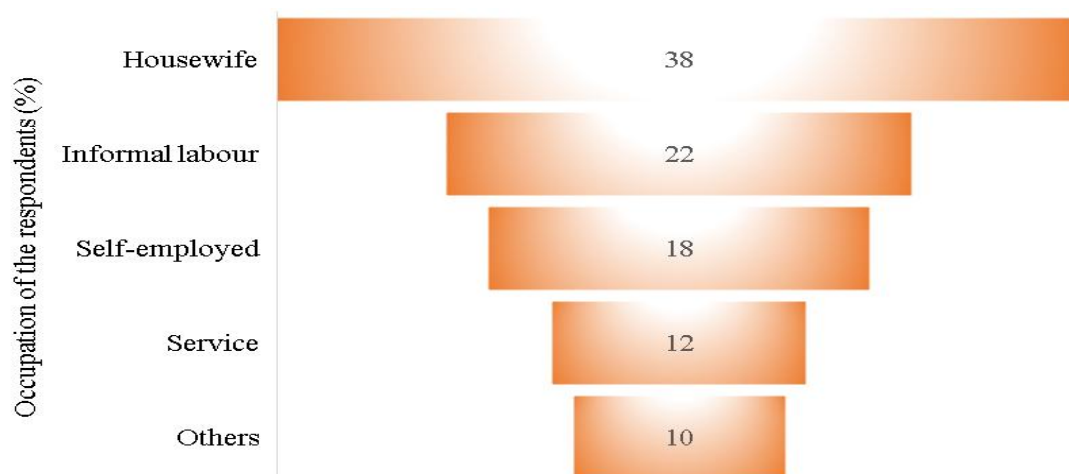


Fig. 1: Socio-economic Profile of Respondents (N = 100)

The occupational structure reveals that a large proportion of women are either engaged in domestic work or informal activities. This limits their economic independence and reflects a low level of formal employment participation.

4.2 Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Status

Economic empowerment is a key dimension of overall empowerment. The study shows that around 42 per cent of women have some form of personal income, while the rest are financially dependent on family members. Participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and small-scale activities such as tailoring, petty trade and home-based work has emerged as an important source of livelihood.

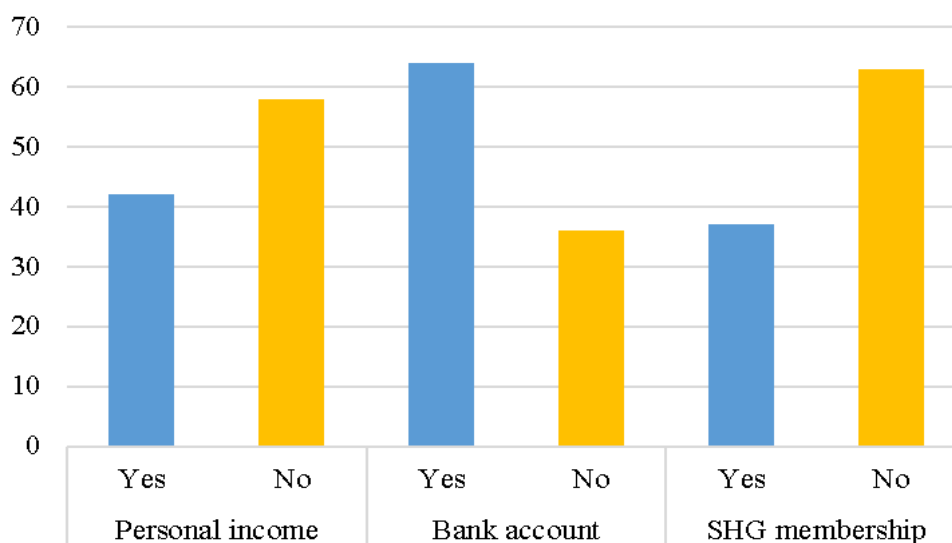


Fig. 2: Economic Status of Respondents (In Percent)

The results indicate moderate progress in financial inclusion, but income-generating opportunities for women remain limited. Similar findings have been reported in studies on women empowerment in India, where access to income and financial services significantly influences empowerment (NABARD, 2019).

4.3 Decision-Making Power

Decision-making ability is an important indicator of empowerment. The study reveals that only a small proportion of women take independent decisions, while most decisions are taken jointly or dominated by male members.

Table 2: Decision-making Pattern

Indicator	Category	Percentage (%)
Household decisions	Self	18
	Joint	46
	Husband/Others	36
Financial decisions	Independent	21
	Partial	39
	None	40

The findings suggest that although women are increasingly involved in decision-making, they still lack complete autonomy. This reflects the continuing influence of patriarchal norms in household structures (Agarwal, 1997).

4.4 Mobility and Social Participation

Mobility is essential for accessing opportunities and services. The study shows that about 48 per cent of women can move independently, while others require permission or face restrictions. Participation in social groups and community activities remains relatively low.

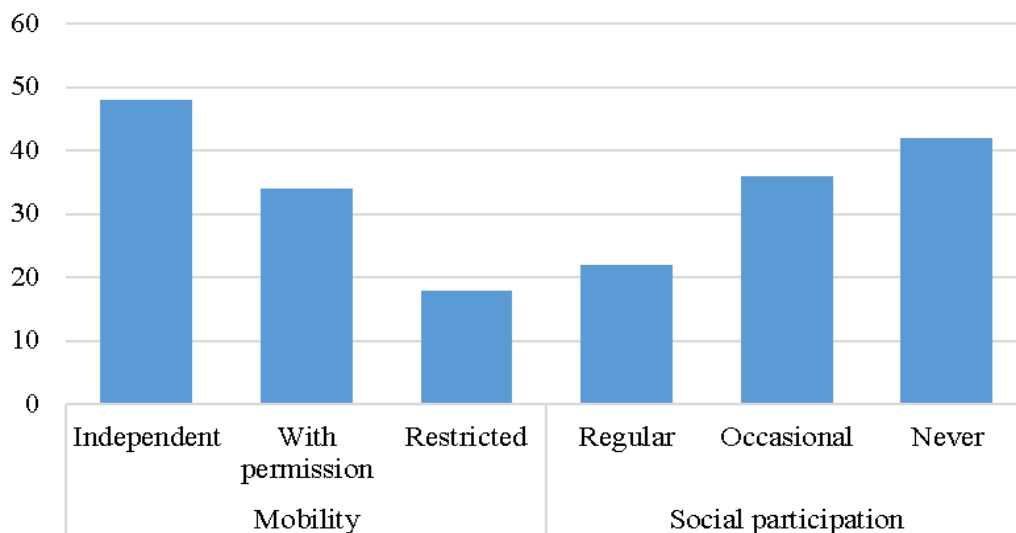


Fig. 3: Mobility and Social Participation (In Percentage)

Limited mobility restricts women’s access to employment, education and health services, thereby affecting their empowerment level.

4.5 Health and Awareness

Access to healthcare and awareness of government schemes are important aspects of empowerment. The results show that while most women have access to healthcare services, awareness of welfare schemes is relatively low.

Table 2: Health and Awareness Status

Indicator	Category	Percentage (%)
Healthcare access	Yes	72
	No	28
Awareness of schemes	Yes	44
	No	56

The gap between service availability and awareness highlights the need for better outreach and information dissemination.

4.6 Women Empowerment Index (WEI)

A composite Women Empowerment Index was calculated to assess overall empowerment levels.

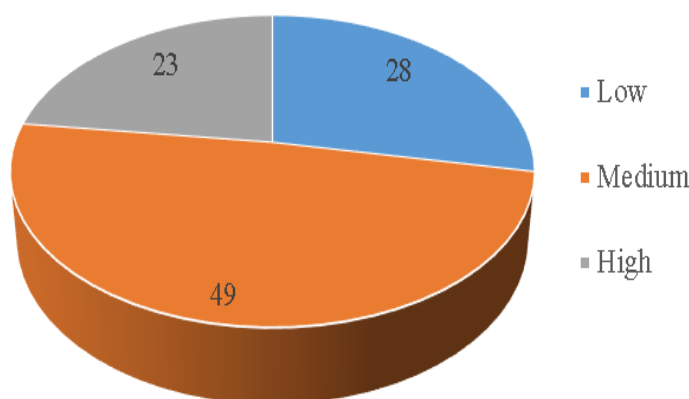


Fig. 4: Level of Women Empowerment (In Percent)

The results indicate that most women fall under the medium category, suggesting partial empowerment. Only a small proportion of women have achieved a high level of empowerment.

4.7 Livelihood Transformation and Empowerment

The analysis shows a positive relationship between livelihood transformation and empowerment. Women engaged in income-generating activities exhibit higher levels of confidence, decision-making ability and social participation compared to those dependent on household income.

The gradual shift towards self-employment, SHG participation and service-related activities indicates a transition in livelihood patterns. However, this transformation is uneven and influenced by education, access to resources and socio-cultural factors.

Overall, the results highlight that women empowerment in Purulia Town is improving, but still constrained by economic dependency, limited decision-making power and social restrictions. Livelihood transformation plays a crucial role in enhancing empowerment, but requires stronger institutional support and inclusive development policies.

5. Implications for Policy and Planning

5.1 Strengthening Economic Opportunities

The study indicates that a large proportion of women in Purulia Town are engaged in informal or unpaid activities. This limits their financial independence and overall empowerment. There is a need to promote skill development, vocational training and small-scale entrepreneurship among women. Programmes related to tailoring, food processing, handicrafts and service-based activities can create sustainable livelihood opportunities. Strengthening Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and linking them with formal financial institutions can further enhance income generation and economic participation (NABARD, 2019).

5.2 Enhancing Financial Inclusion

Although many women possess bank accounts, active financial participation remains limited. Policies should focus on improving financial literacy and access to credit. Easy access to microcredit and small loans can support women in starting or expanding livelihood activities. Digital banking and local financial services should also be strengthened to ensure greater financial autonomy among women.

5.3 Improving Education and Awareness

The findings reveal a gap between literacy and awareness. Many women are not fully aware of government schemes related to health, employment and social security. There is a need for targeted awareness campaigns at the ward level. Local institutions, NGOs and municipal bodies can play an important role in disseminating information and encouraging participation in welfare programmes.

5.4 Promoting Mobility and Social Participation

Limited mobility restricts women's access to employment and public services. Improving safety, transportation and public infrastructure can enhance women's freedom of movement. Creating supportive environments for participation in community activities and local governance can also strengthen social empowerment.

5.5 Reducing Intra-Urban Disparities

Unequal distribution of urban facilities across wards affects livelihood opportunities and quality of life. Previous studies have shown significant disparities in access to services within Purulia Municipality. Balanced development of infrastructure such as education, healthcare, transport and financial services is necessary to ensure inclusive growth and equal opportunities for women.

5.6 Need for Integrated Policy Approach

Women empowerment is a multidimensional issue that requires a coordinated policy approach. Economic initiatives must be supported by improvements in education, healthcare and social awareness. Local governance institutions should adopt gender-sensitive planning and ensure effective implementation of development programmes.

Overall, these policy measures can contribute to enhancing women empowerment and promoting sustainable livelihood transformation in Purulia Town.

6. Conclusion

The present study highlights that women empowerment in Purulia Town is evolving, but remains uneven and constrained by multiple socio-economic factors. While some progress has been observed in terms of education, financial inclusion and participation in livelihood activities, a large proportion of women still face limitations in economic independence and decision-making power. The dominance of informal employment, low-income levels and restricted mobility continues to affect their overall empowerment status.

The analysis clearly shows that livelihood transformation plays a significant role in enhancing women empowerment. Women engaged in income-generating activities demonstrate higher confidence, greater participation in household decisions and improved social interaction. However, this transformation is gradual and influenced by education, access to resources and institutional support. The presence of intra-urban disparities in infrastructure and services further intensifies these differences across town sections.

From a policy perspective, the study emphasises the need for integrated and inclusive strategies that focus on skill development, financial inclusion, awareness-raising and balanced urban development. Strengthening local institutions and promoting women-centric programmes can help in improving both livelihood opportunities and empowerment outcomes. Such efforts are essential for achieving broader goals of gender equality and sustainable urban development.

However, the study has certain limitations. The analysis is based on a limited sample size within selected wards of Purulia Town, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences across the entire municipality. The study relies primarily on cross-sectional data collected over a short period and therefore does not reflect seasonal or long-term changes in livelihood patterns. In addition, the assessment of empowerment is based on selected indicators and other dimensions such as psychological empowerment or intra-household dynamics could not be explored in detail. Future research may adopt a larger sample, a longitudinal design and more comprehensive indicators to provide a deeper understanding of women's empowerment in similar urban contexts.

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