



Assessment of Women Empowerment in the Rural Areas of East Singhbhum, Jharkhand

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***Abstract:** Women empowerment is an important aspect of rural development, especially in states like Jharkhand where social and economic conditions continue to influence gender roles. The present study assesses the level of women empowerment in the rural areas of East Singhbhum district based on primary data collected during January and February 2026. A total of 140 women respondents were surveyed using a structured questionnaire covering different dimensions such as livelihood, decision-making, mobility and awareness. A composite Women Empowerment Index (WEI) was used to measure the overall level of empowerment. The findings show that a large proportion of women fall under the medium level of empowerment, while a significant section still remains in the low category. Economic participation is limited, with many women engaged in low-paid or irregular work. Although participation in Self-Help Groups has improved financial awareness and confidence, income levels remain low. Decision-making power is still largely shared or influenced by male members and independent decision-making is limited. Mobility restrictions and low participation in social activities also affect empowerment levels. The study further highlights that women engaged in income-generating activities exhibit higher levels of confidence, awareness and participation in household decision-making. This indicates a strong link between livelihood and empowerment. However, factors such as education, social norms and access to information continue to shape the extent of empowerment. The study suggests that improving livelihood opportunities, strengthening Self-Help Groups and increasing awareness can play a key role in enhancing women empowerment in rural areas.*

***Keywords:** Women Empowerment; Rural Development; East Singhbhum; Livelihood; Decision-Making; Self-Help Groups; Women Empowerment Index; Jharkhand*

1. Introduction

Women empowerment has become an important focus in development studies, especially in a country like India, where gender inequality still shapes everyday life. Empowerment is not limited to earning income. It includes education, the ability to make decisions, freedom to move

outside the home and awareness about rights and opportunities. In rural areas, these aspects are closely connected with social norms, economic condition and access to basic services.

In India, different programmes have been introduced to improve the status of women. Self-Help Groups (SHGs), microfinance initiatives and rural employment schemes have helped many women to participate in income-generating activities. Studies have shown that SHGs not only improve income but also increase confidence and participation in household decisions (NABARD, 2019; Deininger & Liu, 2013). Evidence from the National Family Health Survey also suggests that there has been some improvement in women's education and health, but gaps remain in terms of autonomy and control over resources (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS], 2021).

Jharkhand presents a unique situation in this context. The state has a large tribal population and a strong dependence on agriculture and forest-based livelihoods. In districts like East Singhbhum, rural women are often involved in household work, agriculture and informal activities. However, their role in decision-making and access to resources is still limited. Social customs, low levels of education and poverty continue to restrict their participation in economic and social life. Studies in Jharkhand have pointed out that women, particularly in tribal areas, face multiple disadvantages related to livelihood, education and institutional access (Sharma, 2015; Singh & Kiran, 2018).

At the same time, gradual changes are visible. The spread of SHGs, government welfare schemes and local development programmes has started to influence women's lives. Many women are now involved in savings groups, small businesses and community activities. This has improved their confidence and social position to some extent. However, this progress is uneven. Some women are able to take advantage of these opportunities, while others remain excluded due to a lack of awareness, resources, or social support.

Several studies have examined women empowerment in rural India, focusing on aspects such as income, education and health. For example, Panda and Agarwal (2005) highlighted the importance of economic independence in improving women's status, while Kabeer (1999) emphasised the role of resources, agency and achievements in understanding empowerment. However, many of these studies are either broad in scale or limited to specific indicators. There is still a lack of micro-level studies that examine multiple dimensions of empowerment together in rural settings, particularly in Jharkhand.

This creates a gap in understanding how different factors, such as livelihood, mobility, decision-making and awareness, interact at the local level. In the case of East Singhbhum, very few field-based studies have explored women empowerment in a comprehensive manner. Without such a detailed understanding, policy interventions may fail to address the real issues faced by rural women.

Therefore, the present study aims to assess the level of women empowerment in the rural areas of East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand. It focuses on key dimensions such as economic participation, decision-making power, mobility and access to services. The study also seeks to understand how livelihood activities influence women's empowerment in the rural context.

2. Study Area

East Singhbhum is one of the important districts of Jharkhand, located in the state's south-eastern part. It shares its boundaries with West Singhbhum in the west, Saraikela-Kharsawan in the north and West Bengal in the east. Geographically, the district lies within the Chotanagpur Plateau region and is characterised by undulating terrain, forested uplands and river valleys. The Subarnarekha and Kharkai rivers are the major river systems that support agriculture and local livelihoods in the region (Government of Jharkhand, 2020).

According to the Census of India (2011), East Singhbhum has a diverse population with a significant proportion of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes. A large part of the population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture, forest resources and informal work for livelihood. The literacy rate in the district is relatively higher compared to some other districts of Jharkhand, yet a gender gap persists, with female literacy lower than male literacy (Census of India, 2011).

The rural economy of East Singhbhum is largely agrarian, supported by seasonal cultivation, small-scale farming and forest-based activities. In many villages, women actively participate in agricultural work, the collection of minor forest produce and household-based economic activities. However, their contribution often remains unrecognised and control over income and resources is limited. Studies have shown that in tribal-dominated regions, women play a significant role in livelihood activities but have limited access to formal employment and decision-making structures (Sharma, 2015; Singh & Kiran, 2018).

Despite the presence of industrial centres like Jamshedpur in the district, the benefits of industrial development are not evenly distributed across rural areas. Many villages continue to face challenges, including limited access to healthcare, education and financial services. Infrastructure gaps and low levels of awareness further limit women's participation in development processes.

In recent years, government initiatives such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), rural employment schemes and livelihood programmes have started influencing rural households. These initiatives have created opportunities for women to engage in income-generating activities and improve their socio-economic status. However, the level of participation and benefits varies across villages depending on factors such as education, social background and access to resources (NABARD, 2019).

Thus, East Singhbhum represents a typical rural setting where traditional livelihood practices coexist with emerging development opportunities. The district provides a suitable context for examining the level of women empowerment and its linkage with livelihood and socio-economic conditions at the grassroots level.

3. Data and Methodology

The present study is based on primary data collected from rural areas of East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand. A field survey was conducted during January and February 2026 to

understand different dimensions of women empowerment at the village level. The study follows a micro-level approach, focusing on the lived experiences of women in rural settings.

3.1 Data Sources and Sampling

The study mainly relies on primary data, collected through a structured questionnaire and personal interviews. The questionnaire was designed to capture information related to socio-economic conditions, livelihood activities, decision-making roles, mobility and awareness levels. In addition, field observations and informal discussions were used to better understand local conditions.

Secondary data have been used to support the analysis of the study area and to provide background information. These were collected from sources such as the *Census of India (2011)*, district statistical reports and relevant academic studies.

A multi-stage sampling method was adopted for the study. At first, a few villages were selected from different parts of the district to capture variation in socio-economic conditions. From each selected village, households were chosen randomly.

A total of 140 women respondents were surveyed. All respondents were aged 18 or older. Care was taken to include women from different age groups, educational backgrounds and occupational categories. This helped to ensure that the sample reflects the diversity of rural society in the district.

3.2 Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, which helped obtain reliable, detailed responses. Since many respondents were not comfortable with formal survey methods, the questions were asked in a simple, conversational manner. Local language was used wherever required to make respondents feel comfortable.

The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. In some cases, follow-up questions were asked to clarify responses. This approach helped to capture both quantitative and qualitative aspects of women empowerment.

3.3 Construction of Women Empowerment Index (WEI)

A composite Women Empowerment Index (WEI) was developed to measure the overall level of empowerment. Each response was assigned a score based on its level of empowerment. For example, higher scores were given to responses indicating independence or active participation, while lower scores were assigned to limited or no participation.

The total score for each respondent was calculated by adding all indicator scores and then converting it into a standardised value. This helped compare the levels of empowerment across respondents.

Based on the WEI values, respondents were grouped into three categories: low, medium and high empowerment. This classification provided a clear understanding of the distribution of empowerment levels among rural women in the study area.

3.4 Methods of Analysis

The collected data were analysed using simple statistical methods such as percentage, average and index calculation. Cross-analysis was also carried out to examine the relationship between livelihood and empowerment.

This methodological approach helps to present a clear and realistic picture of women empowerment in the rural areas of East Singhbhum district.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Background Characteristics of the Respondents

The basic profile of the respondents shows that a large share of women belongs to the economically active age group. Around 52 percent of the respondents fall within the age group of 21–40 years, followed by 30 percent in the 41–60 age group. Only a small proportion is below 20 or above 60. This indicates that most respondents are actively involved in household and livelihood activities.

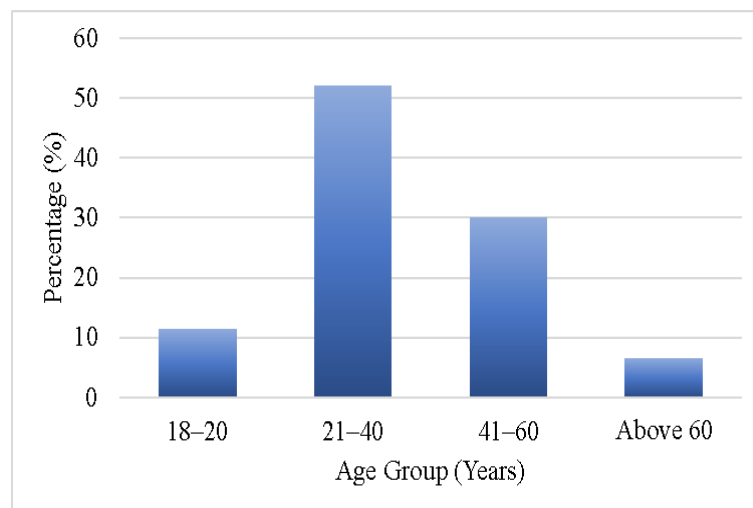


Fig. 1: Age-wise Distribution of Respondents (N = 140)

In terms of education, about 22 percent of the women are illiterate, while 28 percent have primary education. Around 30 percent have completed secondary level and only 20 percent have education beyond that. This shows that although literacy has improved, higher education among rural women is still limited. Similar trends have been observed in rural Jharkhand where gender gaps in education continue to exist (IIPS, 2021).

Table 1. Educational Status of Respondents

| Education Level | Number of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Illiterate | 31 | 22.1 |
| Primary | 39 | 27.9 |
| Secondary | 42 | 30.0 |
| Higher Secondary & Above | 28 | 20.0 |
| Total | 140 | 100.0 |

Most of the respondents belong to nuclear families and household size varies between 4 and 6 members. The occupational pattern shows that about 40 percent of women are engaged mainly in household work, while others are involved in agriculture, daily labour, or small-scale activities.

4.2 Livelihood Status and Economic Participation

Livelihood analysis shows that around 46 percent of women are involved in some form of income-generating activity. These include agricultural work, wage labour, small businesses and SHG-based activities. The remaining women depend mainly on household income.

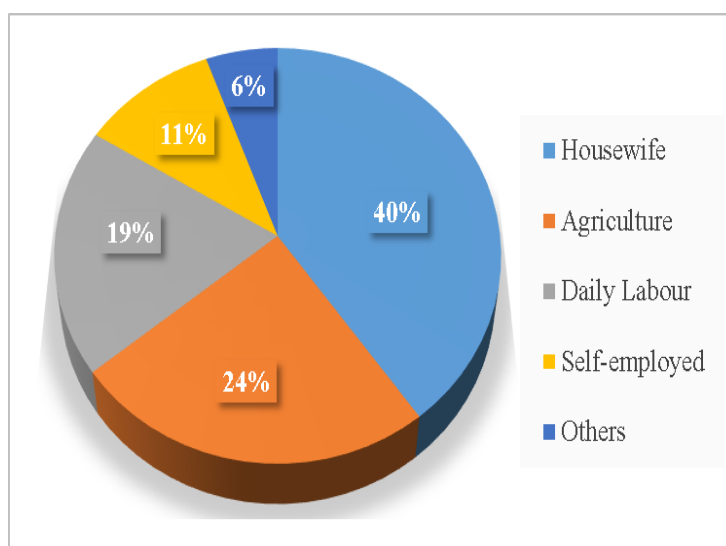


Fig. 2: Occupational Pattern of Respondents

About 62 percent of respondents have access to a bank account, but regular use is limited. Participation in Self-Help Groups is reported by 38 percent of women. Those involved in SHGs show better savings habits and financial awareness. Studies have also highlighted the positive role of SHGs in improving women’s economic condition and confidence (NABARD, 2019).

Table 2. Participation in Income-Generating Activities

| Participation Status | Number of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 64 | 45.7 |
| No | 76 | 54.3 |
| Total | 140 | 100.0 |

However, income levels remain low and many women earn irregular wages. This limits their financial independence and ability to contribute significantly to household expenses.

4.3 Role in Household and Financial Decisions

Decision-making power among women shows a mixed pattern. About 20 percent of respondents reported making decisions independently in household matters. A larger share, around 48 percent, reported joint decision-making with family members, while 32 percent indicated that decisions are mainly taken by male members.

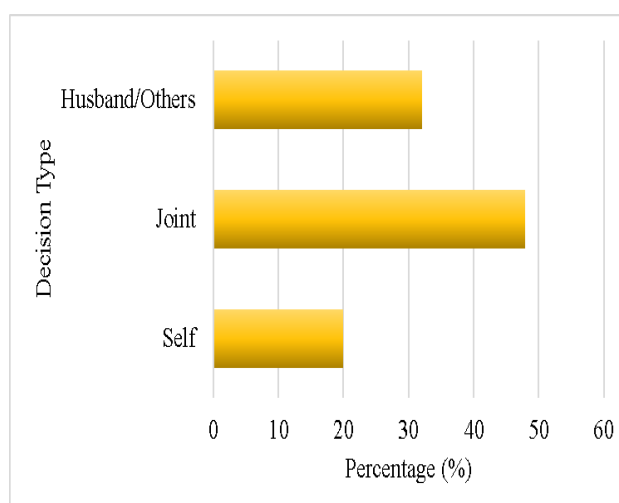


Fig. 3: Decision-Making Pattern in the Household

In financial matters, only 24 percent of women have independent control over income, while others either share control or have limited involvement. This indicates that although women are gradually participating in decision-making, full autonomy remains limited. This finding supports earlier studies that highlight the continued dominance of patriarchal norms in rural India (Panda & Agarwal, 2005).

4.4 Freedom of Movement and Social Engagement

Mobility is an important indicator of empowerment. The study shows that about 44 percent of women can move independently to nearby places such as markets or health centres. Around 36 percent require permission, while 20 percent face restrictions on movement.

Table 3. Mobility Status of Respondents

| Mobility Level | Number of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Independent | 62 | 44.3 |
| With Permission | 50 | 35.7 |
| Restricted | 28 | 20.0 |
| Total | 140 | 100.0 |

Participation in social activities is also limited. Only 25 percent of respondents reported regular participation in community meetings or group activities, while others participate occasionally or not at all. Limited mobility and social exposure reduce opportunities for awareness and empowerment.

4.5 Access to Health Services and Awareness Level

Access to healthcare is relatively better, with around 70 percent of respondents reporting that they can access nearby health facilities when needed. However, awareness of government schemes is relatively low. Only 42 percent of women are aware of schemes related to health, livelihood, or welfare.

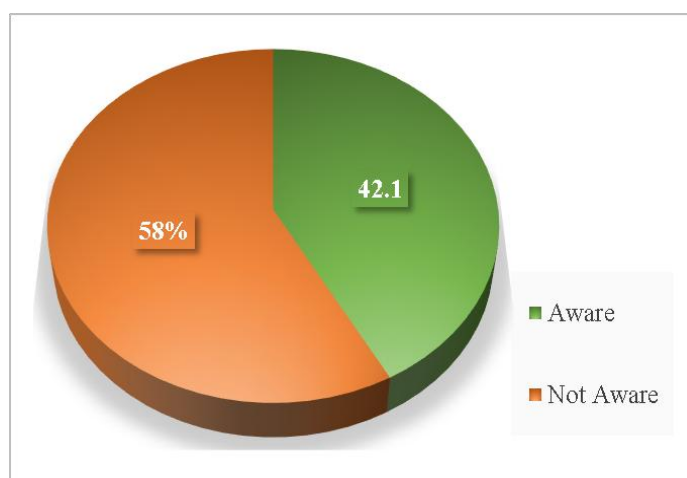


Fig. 4: Awareness of Government Schemes among the respondents (In Percent)

Sanitation practices have improved, with most households using basic sanitation facilities. However, awareness about nutrition, reproductive health and welfare programmes still needs improvement. Findings from NFHS reports also show similar gaps in awareness among rural women (IIPS, 2021).

4.6 Composite Level of Empowerment (WEI Analysis)

The Women Empowerment Index shows that 31 percent of respondents fall under the low empowerment category. Around 47 percent are in the medium category, while only 22 percent are highly empowered.

Table 4. Women Empowerment Index (WEI) Classification

| WEI Category | Number of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Low | 43 | 30.7 |
| Medium | 66 | 47.1 |
| High | 31 | 22.1 |
| Total | 140 | 100.0 |

This distribution indicates that although some progress has been made, a large proportion of women are still moderately empowered. Full empowerment is limited to a smaller group of women with greater access to education, income and social participation.

4.7 Link between Livelihood and Empowerment

A clear relationship is observed between livelihood participation and empowerment. Women engaged in income-generating activities show higher levels of confidence, better decision-making and greater mobility than those who are not working.

Participation in SHGs and small-scale economic activities positively impacts empowerment. Women involved in such activities are more aware of schemes, more active in social groups and more involved in household decisions.

Overall, the results suggest that livelihood opportunities play a key role in improving women empowerment in rural areas. However, factors such as education, social norms and access to resources continue to influence the extent of empowerment.

5. Challenges

5.1 Limited Economic Opportunities

One of the major problems observed in the study area is the lack of stable income opportunities for women. Although some women are involved in agricultural work, daily labor, or small activities, these sources are often irregular and low-paying. A large number of women remain dependent on family income, which limits their financial independence and overall empowerment.

5.2 Low Level of Education and Awareness

Education plays an important role in empowerment, but a significant proportion of women in the study area have only primary or secondary education. Higher education is still limited. Along with this, awareness about government schemes, rights and opportunities remains low. This reduces their ability to take advantage of available programmes. Similar patterns have been reported in rural India, where lack of awareness continues to be a major barrier (IIPS, 2021).

5.3 Restricted Decision-Making Power

The study shows that many women still have limited control over household and financial decisions. In most cases, decisions are taken jointly or dominated by male members.

Independent decision-making is relatively low, which reflects the continued influence of traditional and patriarchal social structures (Panda & Agarwal, 2005).

5.4 Mobility Constraints

Mobility is another important issue. A significant number of women require permission to move outside the home and some face restrictions altogether. This limits their access to markets, healthcare and social participation. Reduced mobility also affects their chances of engaging in economic activities and gaining exposure to new opportunities.

5.5 Weak Participation in Social and Institutional Activities

Participation in community groups and local institutions is relatively low among women. Although Self-Help Groups are available, not all women participate in them. Limited participation reduces their exposure to information, training and collective support systems, which are important for empowerment.

5.6 Inadequate Access to Information and Services

Even where services such as healthcare and welfare schemes are available, many women are not fully aware of them. This gap between availability and utilisation affects their overall well-being. Lack of proper communication and outreach at the village level is one of the key reasons behind this issue.

5.7 Social and Cultural Barriers

Traditional norms and social practices continue to influence women's roles in rural areas. Expectations related to household responsibilities and gender roles often limit their participation in economic and social activities. These cultural factors act as a barrier to achieving full empowerment.

Overall, these problems show that women empowerment in rural East Singhbhum is influenced by multiple factors. Addressing these challenges requires combined efforts focusing on economic, social and institutional improvements.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Strengthening Livelihood Opportunities

There is a clear need to improve income-generating opportunities for women in rural areas. Training programmes related to agriculture, livestock, handicrafts and small businesses can help women earn a stable income. Local markets and support for small enterprises should also be developed to enable women to sell their products more easily. When women have regular income, their role in the household and society improves.

6.2 Promotion of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

Self-Help Groups should be strengthened and expanded to include more women. These groups provide financial support, savings opportunities and a platform for sharing ideas. Training in financial management and linking SHGs with banks and markets can further improve their

effectiveness. Studies in India have shown that SHGs play a strong role in improving women's confidence and decision-making ability (NABARD, 2019).

6.3 Improving Education and Awareness

Efforts should be made to improve both formal and informal education among women. Adult education programmes and awareness campaigns can help women understand their rights and available government schemes. Information should be provided in simple language and through local platforms such as village meetings and community workers.

6.4 Enhancing Decision-Making Capacity

Women should be encouraged to participate in household and community decision-making. Awareness programmes and group activities can help build confidence and leadership skills. Support from family members and local institutions is also important in improving women's role in decision-making processes.

6.5 Improving Mobility and Access

Improving infrastructure, such as roads, transport and safety measures, can help increase women's mobility. When women can move freely, they can access markets, health services and social networks more easily. This also increases their chances of participating in economic activities.

6.6 Strengthening Health and Welfare Services

Healthcare services should be made more accessible and information about them should be widely shared. Awareness about nutrition, maternal health and sanitation needs to be improved. Local health workers can play an important role in spreading information and supporting women at the village level.

6.7 Encouraging Participation in Community Activities

Women's participation in local groups, village meetings and development programmes should be encouraged. This will help them gain confidence, share experiences and become more aware of social and economic opportunities. Active participation also helps in building collective strength among women.

Overall, these recommendations highlight that women empowerment requires a combined effort. Economic support, education, awareness and social change must work together to improve the condition of women in rural East Singhbhum.

7. Conclusion

The study highlights that women empowerment in the rural areas of East Singhbhum is gradually improving, but the progress remains uneven. A large number of women are still dependent on family income and have limited control over resources. Participation in decision-making is increasing, but full independence is yet to be achieved. Mobility and social participation are also restricted for many women, which affects their access to opportunities and services.

The findings clearly show that livelihood plays an important role in empowerment. Women engaged in income-generating activities, especially through Self-Help Groups and small-scale work, show greater confidence, awareness and participation in household decision-making. At the same time, factors such as education, social norms and access to information continue to influence the level of empowerment.

Overall, the study suggests that women empowerment in rural areas is a gradual process influenced by both economic and social conditions. Improving livelihood opportunities, strengthening local institutions and increasing awareness can help enhance the status of women. A balanced approach that addresses both economic and social aspects is necessary for achieving sustainable development in the region.

However, the study has certain limitations. The analysis is based on data collected from a limited number of villages and respondents, which may not fully represent the district as a whole. The study focuses mainly on selected indicators of empowerment and other aspects, such as psychological or political empowerment, could not be examined in detail. In addition, the data were collected over a short period, which may not reflect seasonal or long-term changes in livelihood and social conditions. Future studies can expand the sample size, include more detailed indicators and adopt a longer time frame to provide a deeper understanding of women empowerment in rural Jharkhand.

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