
EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL DALIT WOMEN – A MICRO LEVEL STUDY

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Abstract: The present paper discusses the Empowerment of rural Dalit women in our society in particularly a village study in Khammam district of Telangana State. This paper also examines the seriousness of the problems of gender inequality and gender discrimination was recognized at the global level as early as during 1970's and which resulted in the declaration. The main goal of the Indian National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001 is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The main objective of the present study is to understand the status of selected rural Dalit women in the socio-economic and political decision making to achieve the empowerment. Finally, this paper reveals that the position of Poor Dalit Women will lie at the bottom of the socio-economic structures of the society.

Keywords: Dalit, Empowerment, HDR, Patriarchal

Introduction: The concept of women's empowerment is widely popularized at the global level for the past two decades and occupied vital place in the new Millennium World's Agenda. Gender Discrimination was the theme of HDR 1995 which gave a very special illumination, an enlargement of issue of inequality through the gender-lens. HDR' 95 makes some radical, insightful statement on growth and inequality-“For too long, it was assumed that development was a process that lifts all boats, that its benefits trickle down to all income classes- and it was gender- neutral in its impact. Experience teaches otherwise. Wide income disparities and gender gaps stare us in the face in all societies... moving towards gender equality is not a technocratic goal- it is a political process. It requires a new way of thinking in which the stereotyping of women and men gives way to new philosophy that regards all people, irrespective of gender, as essential agents of change”. The Gender Development Index (GDI) has been developed to measure gender inequalities and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) has been introduced to assess women's empowerment. The attainment of women's empowerment is expected to solve all the problems of women (T. Jyothi Rani, 2008).

Empowerment is not a mechanical process of sharing, distribution or redistribution of power. It involves changes in social and economic institutional arrangements, political ideologies, traditional practice and the mind set of marginalized sections. Empowerment is a state of feeling of self-empowerment i.e., taking control of one's own destiny. It is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources- physical, human, intellectual and financial as well as over ideology- beliefs, values and attitudes (Amartya Sen 2000).

Adverting the attention on to domestic work they are compelled to spend more time to fetch water and to collect fuel wood. Along with lack of minimum facilities and other limitations they have to cook food

and serve to the entire family. Purchasing vegetables is a luxury for them. They should perform domestic work with machine speed to go to the fields in time. It is a known fact that in the patriarchal family's domestic work is the sole responsibility of women.

In addition, in majority cases the husbands spend major part of their earnings for liquor. In the drunken stage, they beat their wives on one pretext or the other. The selected women workers did not experience “Peaceful Happy Homes”. They do domestic unpaid work along with paid work in the fields but consuming adequate food is a luxury for them. Contrarily, they are subjected to regular wife beating. Even in these critical conditions, they provide food security to the entire family (Nirmala J. & Dhulasi Birundha, 2002).

In this context, to ascertain the journey of dalit women towards empowerment, it is necessary to examine their role in the decision making of the household as well as in the society. The society also plays a key role in the determination of women's empowerment. These aspects are discussed in this present paper.

Objectives of the study: The main objective of the present study is to understand the status of selected rural dalit women in the socio-economic and political decision making to achieve the empowerment. The study further aims to,

- i) Examine the socio-economic conditions of the selected Rural Dalit Women;
- ii) Understand their active involvement in the participation of household decisions;
- iii) Analyse the participation of women in political decision-making; and
- iv) discuss the idea about the concept of women's empowerment.

Methodology:

The present study entirely depends upon primary source of data. The selected village Chandrupatla belongs to Kallur mandal of Khammam district. It is located 54 kms away from the district headquarters and 4 kms away from the mandal headquarters. The

village is connected to district as well as mandal headquarters with a good road facility. To elicit detailed information as to dalit women's empowerment, a structured questionnaire has been prepared and administered for the selected rural Dalit women. Further, participation and observation methods are also adopted to collect real information about their lives.

Selected Village: The village of Chandrupatla has a gram panchayat. It has 480 families where the Dalits are 160 and other families are 320. It is having one primary, one upper primary and one high school in which education is available from 1st to 10th class.

The village is having post-office facility. However, it is unfortunate to notice that the Primary Health Centre which is identified as an important source of medical facilities especially for rural poor is not there in the village but four male RMP doctors are available. Depending upon the seriousness of the problem, under compulsory conditions, the villagers will go to the govt. hospital in the mandal headquarters. To understand the present status of rural Dalit women 110 respondents have been selected. The details of the proportion of Dalit women to total number of women in the selected village has been shown in Table - 1

Table-1 : Proportion of Dalit women to total Women

Name of the Village	Total number of Women	Total Dalit Women	Selected Dalit Women
Chandrupatla	660	220	110

Source: Village Records

It can be seen from Table-1 that the total number of women are 660 in the selected village of Chandrupatla. Out of them, 220 are the dalit women. Among them 110 dalit respondents have been selected for the present study. Table: 2 that the socio-economic profile of the selected respondents is

presented. This includes the age, education, marital status and occupation particulars of the selected respondents. The information in regard to age particulars of the selected respondents is presented in Table-2

Table - 2 : Socio-Economic Profile of the Selected Respondents

S.No	Particulars	No. of Women	% to total
1	Age (in years)		
	<25	08	07.27
	26-35	35	31.82
	36-45	39	35.45
	Above 45	28	25.45
	Total	110	100.00
2	Education		
	Illiterates	62	56.36
	Primary	22	20.00
	Secondary	12	10.90
	Intermediate	08	07.27
	Degree & Above	06	05.45
	Total	110	100
3	Marital Status		
	Married	98	89.10
	Widowed	10	09.09
	Separated	02	01.81
	Total	110	100.00
4	Occupation		
	Agriculture	02	01.82
	Agri-labour	84	76.36
	Tailoring	01	0.09
	Kiranam	01	0.09
	Govt. Employee	05	04.55
	Private Employee	17	15.46
	Total	110	100.00

Source: Field Study

Note: Figures in Parentheses state percentage to total respondents

Table: 2 indicate that 35.45 per cent of selected women are in the age group of 36-45 years while it is lowest in the age group of below 25 years i.e. 7.27 per cent. As high as 56.36 per cent of the selected respondents are illiterates. Further, 20 per cent of the selected respondents could stop their study at primary stage while 7.27 per cent study up to intermediate level and only 5.45 per cent could get the opportunity to study at the level of Degree and above. This clearly indicates the prevalence of low level of literacy rate among Dalit women, despite so many measures taken up by the government to provide the educational facilities for people in general and women in particular. There is a lot of gap in the women’s education particularly among dalit women in terms of achieving the goal of ‘Education for All’. It can be seen from above Table that 89.10 per cent of the selected respondents are married. The percentage of widowed is 9.09 per cent while the separated is 1.81 per cent. As many as 84 out of 110 selected respondents i.e. 76.36 per cent have been working as agricultural labour. They do all types of agricultural works while 2 respondents i.e. only 1.82 per cent of the selected respondents could possess own land. Therefore, they exclusively depend up on agriculture. The employment in private sector is the main occupation for 17 respondents. It is interesting to note that 5 respondents i.e. 4.55 per cent of the sample are in the Government service. Further, 2 of the selected respondents can be found in the occupations of Tailoring and Kiranam respectively.

It is the agricultural labour which is the primary occupation for 76.36 per cent clearly indicates the predominance of this occupation. Though, Millennium Development Goals categorically direct the governments to create employment in non-agricultural sector to mitigate the intensity of poverty. The achievement in this direction is negligible especially in the case of dalit women as shown by the main occupation of selected respondents.

Decision-Making: Women’s active participation in decision-making is one of the significant aspects of women’s empowerment. Women’s equality in power sharing and active participation in economic and political decision making process at all levels will ensure the achievement of the goal of empowerment. This has been recognized by United Nations Organization. Therefore, UNDP’s Human Development Report calculates Gender Empowerment Measure on the basis of women’s control over economic resources, women’s active participation in economic as well as in political decision-making.

Women’s participation in economic-decision making indicates that -she should participate in the decisions related to family’s expenditure, saving, debt and purchase of assets. One would expect at least she should be in a position to have control over her own earnings. This is also impossible under present family structures. The data in regard to this aspect is shown in Table- 3

Table-3 :Control over Earnings

Name of the village	Yes	No	Total
Chandrupatla	24 (21.82)	86 (78.18)	110 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

It is happy to note from Table- 3 that 24 selected respondents are having control over their income but in reality, 12 out of 24 are either widowed or and separately living. However, they cannot spend their income without permission of the husband. A close observation of the table reveals that 86 selected respondents do not have any right to spend their income either for personal or for family. This clearly indicates that selected dalit women are far away from the goal of women’s empowerment. The household decision-making can be divided into two types - i) The short term decisions viz. daily consumption of food and other related expenditure and the spending

that encompass daily routine. ii) The long term decisions related to children’s education, daughter’s marriage, construction of house, savings, debt, purchase/ sale of assets/ lands and meeting expenditure of major health problems. Women’s active participation in decision-making is noticed in regard to short term decisions of the household since food security is the responsibility of women. However, long term decisions are important from the view point of household. The relevant information of the participation in household decision-making of the selected respondents has been presented in Table- 4.

Table-4 : Participation in Long Term Decisions of the Household

Name of the village	Yes	No	Total
Chandrupatla	73 (66.36)	37 (33.64)	110 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

It can be seen from the Table- 4 that as high as 73 out of 110 selected respondents are participating in household decision making but the final decision is taken by the husband while 37 respondents are not allowed to participate in their household decision making.

Therefore, the participation of women in the household decision-making is formal. Because the final decision will be taken by the husband only Women's participation in political decision-making is another important dimension of empowerment. The implementation of 33 per cent reservation for women in local self governments enables the women to enter into political field at least quantitatively. However, whether favourable conditions are created in socio-

economic and political structures of rural India and rural family culture is a debatable issue.

The women enter into political field are compelled to depend upon their husbands due to lack of education, family responsibilities, ignorance as to political structures. Dependency, whatever might be the reason cannot be a way to attain empowerment. The active participation of women in political decision-making is very important to attain women's empowerment.

The political participation is the constitutional right for women to cast their vote independently. The relevant information about right to vote exercised by selected respondents has been presented in Table-5.

Table-5 : Decision about Right to Vote

Name of the village	Husband decision	Self decision	Joint decision	Total
Chandrupatla	83 (75.45)	12 (10.90)	15 (13.64)	110 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

It can be seen from the Table-5 that 83 out of 110 selected respondents do not have freedom to take independent decision as to vote casting and in the case of 15 it is a joint decision in this regard while 12 respondents who are widowed and separated respondents will naturally take independent decision.

Awareness of women about empowerment is an essential condition without which women's empowerment cannot be attained. Therefore, the knowledge about this concept assumes significance. The relevant data in regard to selected respondents have been shown as Table -6.

Table-6 :Knowledge about the concept of Women's Empowerment

Name of the village	Yes	No	Total
Chandrupatla	15 (13.64)	95 (86.36)	110 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

The Table- 6 reveals that as many as 95 out of 110 selected respondents have no idea about the concept of Women's Empowerment while remaining 15 respondents have an idea where they opine that women's empowerment means no gender discrimination. On the whole, many women do not have any knowledge about the concept of women's empowerment though the Government of India declared 2001 as the year of women's empowerment and issued a strategy paper accordingly.

Conclusion: Thus, the present study reveals that in the selected village the selected respondents do not have decision making not only in the households but

also in the economic and political decision making. However, they have no knowledge of Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act-2005 and they do not have any idea about the concept of Women's Empowerment. Thus, attainment of development and empowerment of women itself will be a big issue owing to the patriarchal structures of the family as well as society. In these conditions one can imagine the position of rural Dalit women who are discriminated against owing to their class, caste, place and gender (Meena Anand, 2005). All these conditions clearly reveal the distance of Dalit women from the goal of women's empowerment.

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