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Political Participation of Scheduled Caste Women Through SHGS In West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh

Krishana Murty Nelapudi ^{1*}, N. Nirmala Mani ²

¹Research Scholar

¹Associate Professor

1 and 2: Department of Economics, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Ongole Campus, Prakasam district, A.P

*Corresponding author: Krishana Murty Nelapudi

Abstract

The concept of women empowerment is the outcome of several important critiques and debates generated by the women's movement throughout the world, particularly by the third world feminists. Empowerment of women means the materialization of the relocation of power challenging the patriarchal ideology which justifies the male dominance. 'Becoming powerful' is the literal meaning of the term empowerment. Empowerment can be achieved through transformation of the structures or institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination. Empowerment is a process that enables women to gain access to and control of available political, social and economic resources as well as the required information. It is also defined as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances and control both resource and ideology that governs their lives. Women's participation in the village based formal or non-formal organizations has made significant changes in their social status and position in the family. It permits them to participate in rural development for their own upliftment. It also gives them an opportunity to work in groups for common interest, associate with the on-going development programmes, articulate their needs and assume leadership in the national development process. In order to ascertain the political awareness and involvement of the members of the SHG in political affairs, the respondents were asked certain questions to assess their political awareness which had an influence in exercising their political right.

Key words: Political Empowerment, Self Help Groups, Scheduled Caste, Backwardness

Introduction

The process of political participation is considered to be the most important milestone of a democratic political system. Women are considered an extremely pivotal point in the process of change in rural areas. Establishment of village level council has provided opportunities to women to participate in the decision making process. Their participation in these bodies was encouraged by co-opting them as a special category and their participation in village based institution proves to be the most effective instrument in bringing about a change in their way of life in terms of economic well-being. As these organization were formed democratically, the rural women tended to get community welfare affairs and participate in developmental process by assuming leadership roles. Women's participation in the village based formal or non-formal organizations has made significant changes in their social status and position in the family. It permits them to participate in rural development for their own upliftment. It also gives them an opportunity to work in groups for common interest, associate with the on-going development programmes, articulate their needs and assume leadership in the national development process.

The political parties of India talk about laying emphasis on the increasing participation of women in decision making process for having a respectable position both in the government and society, but in reality that is not so. However, because of certain efforts of the government to enhance the status and position of women, the political participation of women is seen increasing though at a slow pace. The involvement of women in public life has been increasing since the passing of the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment. The new constitutional provision provides 33 percent reservation of seats in panchayati raj institution for women. This is certainly a big step towards the enhancement of political participation of women.

The SHGs are becoming very popular among the rural women. They have not only increased in number but also functioning successfully in many areas. There are a large number of SHGs in the states which are working successfully and earned huge profits out of their activities. It is an undeniable fact that many poor families both in urban and rural areas are getting sustainable financial help through participation in SHGs and thereby playing a remarkable part in the field of empowerment of women. The SHGs enables women to come out of their conventional household and they work in a common place which also changes their social relation in general. This enables the women members of the SHGs to be politically aware.

The millennium goals identified that political representation of women is one of the chief indicators of gender equality and women empowerment. Women political empowerment can be possible only through women's greater participation in community affairs and local government. Legal barriers to women's participation are relatively scarce. Women generally spend their most of time in household work which is not yet acknowledged as productive activity. These primary engagements in domestic spheres results in lack of time to participation in the politics. In other words, women's participation rate in the politics is low due to their paucity of time.

In order to ascertain the political awareness and involvement of the members of the SHG in political affairs, the respondents were asked certain questions to access their political awareness which had an influence in exercising their political right. As this chapter attempts to gauge the level of political awareness and political participation of the schedule caste respondents numbering 240 from the four mandals of west Godavari district, a number of variables were selected.

Objective of the Study

1. To study the Self-help groups and political empowerment of scheduled caste women

Methodology of the Study:

The reason inter alliances is of primary importance for the selection of the present study with a purpose to examine the role of SHGs towards the economic and political development of scheduled caste women. In the above discussion, it has been observed that owing to the patriarchal structures women tends to suffer in many folds. But, it is important to acknowledge at the same time that women themselves does not belong to a single category but are influenced by various inter- sections like caste, class, region, religion etc. In view of this, the scheduled caste women happen to suffer from multiple hierarchies of patriarchy. As a result, this study tried to analyze the political and economic empowerment of scheduled caste women through self-help groups.

For this purpose, scheduled caste woman SHGs working under two revenue divisions like Bhimavaram and Narasapuram in West Godavari District is selected for the sample study. Four mandals selected from Out of these two revenue divisions, From each mandal 3 villages selected, altogether 12 villages are selected by considering the number of women SHGs belonging to SC. There are 1,288 SHGs in the Bhimavaram revenue divisions of which

176 are formed by the scheduled caste women. The number of SHGs working in the Narasapuram revenue divisions is 1702 of which 217 are belonged to the scheduled caste women. 20 samples selected from each village, altogether 240 samples.

The historical, analytical and explorative methodology has been used in the study. Historical method helped to find out the origin and development of SHGs as an approach to women's political and economic empowerment. The analytical method helped to analyze critically the facts and figures as an outcome of the field investigation with the objective of the study. The explorative method helped to make a pilot study of the area selected for the research so as to enable the researcher to formulate the questionnaire and the sample design used in the study. Besides these methods, both secondary and primary sources were consulted in order to collect the qualitative and quantitative data.

The questionnaire formulated for the purpose was composed of closed ended questions provided with different response categories. Moreover, keeping in view the respondents cognitive receipt ability as most of them were uneducated, focused interviews were conducted with a schedule and a tape recorder. For that purpose purposive sampling procedure was used in order to select those respondents who could answer the desired questions. But in general the selection of respondents sample was done randomly selected from the register maintained by the mandal of the given areas. The respondents consisted of representative sample of schedule caste SHG members and the president or secretary of the SHGs, bank officials, State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD) official, NGOs operating in that area. Purposive sampling methods were used to conduct interviews with the bank-official, SIRD official, BDOs and NGOs.

Besides, the primary data relating to the various aspects of the study were collected from the files, minutes of the meetings and other relevant records and documents from the offices of the DRDA, West Godavari, Office of the Directorate of Panchayat and Rural Development, Government of Andhra Pradesh, minutes and other relevant papers of the SHGs under study. Documents, literature published on the selected areas in the newspapers in form of articles, books and journals, newspapers, other publications both national and internationals, details of government schemes and project reports relevant to the research area were consulted as secondary sources.

The data collected through questionnaire have been classified and tabulated into many tables for analysis purpose. Simple statistical tools like averages, percentages etc., have been used to analyze the data.

Analysis of the study

On the basis of the responses the analysis of political empowerment of schedule caste women is given below:

Level of Political Awareness and Interest in Politics

It is very important to know how far the respondents have an interest in politics. Accordingly they were asked to indicate their interest in the political affairs. An effort was made to assess the political interest of the respondents on the basis of their answers. Table .1 shows the respondents opinion regarding the political awareness and interest in politics.

Table.1. Distribution of Respondent's Interest in Politics

Interest in politics	Total
Yes	99(41.25%)
No	141(58.75%)
Total	240(100%)

Source: Field survey

From the above table, it is found that a very less percent of women is interested in politics. The majority of the respondents 58.75 percent expressed that they had no interest in politics. Mostly people get interested in politics only during election times, and lesser number of people takes occasional interest apart from elections. In our sample only 41.25 percent of the respondents displayed interest in politics. It may be expected that younger people would have a higher degree of interest in politics. But the researcher has found no uniform pattern of relationship between age and interest in politics. Most of the respondents do not show their interest in politics because they thought that it is a dirty politics and no politicians indulge in clean politics at all.

Political Participation of the Respondents

As active political participation does not mean only voting but includes a number of activities like taking part in election campaign, contesting election, having political discussions etc. The respondents were asked a number of questions related to all these aspects of political participation. First of all, the respondents were asked to name themselves the type of activity in which they participated. Table No.2 shows their responses:

Table .2: Distribution of Respondent's by the Type of Political Activity

Types of Political Participation	No of Respondents
Voting	213 (80.8%)
Campaigning	78 (30.25%)
Contesting election	17 (0.70%)
No participation	27 (1.12%)

Source-Field survey

From the above table, it is found that 80.8 percent women cast their vote in election whereas 30.25 percent women are found participating in election campaigning. Only 0.70 percent women out of the 240 sample respondents are found participating in election. Moreover 1.12 percent women showed no interest in politics. They do not participate in any of the political activity. They are totally neutral regarding political participation. It is found from the study that sample respondents are very unwilling to participate in any of the activities of the political system. The sample respondents viewed that they are aware about the political system only due to association with SHGs.

Knowledge about Member of Parliament (MP) and Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the Area:

The sample respondents were asked very simple questions to test the political awareness of the members. For example, they were asked the names of the candidates in previous Lok Sabha polls, the name of the MP and MLA of their area and their respective party affiliation. The responses are given in the following table-.3.

Table .3: Knowledge about MP and MLA

Indicators	Respondents opinion	
Do you know your present MP and to which Political Party he belonged to?	Yes	135(56.25%)
	No	105 (43.75%)
Do you know your present MLA and to which Political Party he belonged to?	Yes	238 (99.1%)
	No	2(0.08%)

Source-Field survey

It has been observed from the above table that only 56.25 percent of the respondents were informed about MP, while only 43.75 percent respondents did not have any knowledge about this. On the other hand, in case of information about MLA's, majority of the respondents, 99.1 percent are aware about MLA of their constituency. Only 0.08 percent of the

respondents did not know the name of their local MLA. Thus, it is clear that more respondents knew about the MLA of their area than the MP. The reasons for this are the electorates are more directly concerned with the MLA than with MP in terms of development benefits and political patronage. The area of a MLA's constituency is smaller than that of an MP's constituency. The campaigning tends to be concentrated and consequently more intensive in the former than in the latter which in turn accounts for greater knowledge about MLAs than the MPs.

Awareness about the Activities of the Political Party after Joining SHGs

To know the impact of SHGs on the political empowerment of women, the sample respondents are asked whether they are aware about the activities of any political party after joining SHGs. Generally women hesitate to take active part in politics and the sample respondents are not willing to participate in any of the activities of the political parties. The sample respondents are found to be aware about the political system after joining SHGs. The following table shows the distribution of the sample respondents about the awareness of the activities of the political parties.

Table No.: .4. Awareness about the Activities of the Political Parties

Indicators	No of Respondents	
Awareness about the activities of the political parties	Yes	184 (76.6%)
	No	56 (23.3%)
	Total	240(100%)

Source: Field survey

The table shows that 76.6 percent of the respondents were aware of the activities of the political parties after joining SHGs, while the rest 23.3 percent of the respondents found that they do not understand the complexities of the political system.

Knowledge about Panchayati Raj Institution:

Another question put to the member of the SHG is about the knowledge of panchayati raj institutions and the service provided by it. The response of the members is shown in table.5.

Table No.: .5. Knowledge about the Working of the PRIs

Indicators	Opinion of Respondents		Total
	Yes	No	
Knowledge regarding the panchayati raj institution	Yes	202(84.1%)	240 (100%)
	No	38(15.8%)	
Awareness regarding the activities of PRI	Yes	195(81.2%)	240(100%)
	No	45(18.7%)	

Source-Field survey

The above table indicates that a large majority of the respondents are aware about the PRI and its activities. They know about their ward members. It can be said that comparatively majority of the respondents developed contacts with political leaders after joining SHGs in order to gain benefit from the government.

Knowledge of Service Provided by Panchayati Raj Institution

The services provided by the PRIs are an important indicator of the involvement of respondents in panchayati raj system. The table .6 shows the opinion of the respondents regarding the knowledge of services provided by the PRIs.

Table .6: Knowledge of Services Provided by the PRIs

Indicators	Opinion of the Respondents
Primary education	225 (93.75%)
Midday meal scheme	228 (95%)
Health services	235(97.91%)
Water supply / sanitation	229(95.41%)
Vaccination	221(92.01 %)
Housing	232(96.66%)

Source-Field survey

On analysing the data, it is found that water supply, sanitation, medical facilities, vaccination, housing, electricity etc are the issues which generally attract the women SHG members. 93.75 percent could realize about the importance of educating the girl, 97.91 percent women have realized the importance of health and family welfare after involvement in self-help group. The women are aware about the government sponsored programmes relating to their health and family like maternity, childcare, nourishment, educating girls, registration of birth, death and marriage, family planning measures like two child small family, reduce infant and maternal mortality, birth & control practices etc. They tried to convince other member of family regarding these aspects. Moreover, 95 percent women are aware about the provision of the schools for providing mid-day meal. 92.01 percent are aware about the vaccination process of the government. Some of the members also participated in the pulse-polio immunization camp held in their villages organised by NRHM. The lady related to the camps informed about the increase in the number of patients, immunization of new born babies and the childbirth in the hospital.

96.66 percent respondents are aware about the government scheme of Indira Awas Yojana and became the beneficiary of the scheme. The women respondents generally try to focus the problem dealing with water supply, educational issues, agricultural farm, medical facilities etc. and they express their opinion on these subjects.

Participation in Gram-Sabha Meetings & PRIs Policy Formulation Matters

By participating in Gram-Sabha and PRIs policy formulation, women are able to take part in the decision-making bodies. Respondents are asked whether they are participating Gram-Sabha meetings regularly after joining SHGs or not. Distribution of the respondents whether they are participating in Gram-Sabha & PRIs policy formulation is shown in Table .7.

Table .7: Participation in the Gram Sabha & PRIs Policy Formulation

Indicators	Opinion of Respondents		Total
Do you participate in Gram Sabha meetings & PRIs policy formulation?	Yes	212(88.3%)	240(100%)
	No	28(11.6%)	

Source: Field survey

It is observed that nearly 88.3 percent of the sample respondents participate in the Gram Sabha meetings and PRIs policy formulation matters only after joining SHGs. The study finds that they are raising various questions in the Gram Sabha meeting about the development of the village and are pleading the officials to attend to the problems of the village. Only about 11.6 percent of the respondents reported that they are not attending the gram sabha meetings. Across the strata, it is observed that largest proportions of the sample respondents are attending the gram sabha meetings, while little percentage of the respondents are not attending the meeting due to their personal problems. Therefore, it can be concluded that participation of women in gram sabha and PRIs policy formulation matters has increased after joining SHGs indicating their involvement in the decision making bodies at the local self-government and thus they were politically empowered.

Perception towards the Participation of Women in Active Politics

The active participation of women in politics is one of the chief indicators for successful working of democracy as well as political empowerment of women. To know the opinion of the respondents regarding the active participation of women in politics, they were asked a question whether they support the participation of women in politics or not. The response of the respondents is displayed in table .8.

Table .8. Perception towards the Participation of Women in Active Politics

Indicators	Opinion of Respondents		Total
Do you think women should participate in politics?	Yes	225(93.75%)	240 (100%)
	No	15(6.25%)	

Source: Field survey

The above table reveals that a large majority of respondents that is 93.75 percent supported the active participation of women in politics whereas only 6.25 percent responded negatively. Thus, it is observed that a large section of respondents considers the participation of women in active politics and it is a good sign for the development of the society. It has been increasingly realized that unless empowered politically, the socio-economic status of women cannot be improved.

Interest in Contesting Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) Elections

The most active political participation is the contesting elections beyond voting, attending political meetings, participating in election campaigns or becoming members of some political parties. Table No. 9 shows the responses of the respondents.

Table .9: Interest in Contesting Panchayati Raj Institutions Elections

Indicators	Opinion of respondents		Total
Are you interested in contesting in PRI election	Yes	175(72.91%)	240 (100%)

Source: Field survey

When the respondents were asked the question about the interest of contesting panchayati raj institutions, it was found that only 72.91 percent respondents showed interest in contesting election. The remaining 27.08 percent have no interest in contesting election because they opined that politics is the game of money and muscle power. The people who have money they can only contest the election. Moreover, they do not know the complex realities of politics and sometime they see the interference and dominance of the high caste elites.

Decision Making Power in Social, Financial and Family Matters

Both men and women play an important role in decision making within the household. But generally women always play subordinate role because men are the only bread earner of the family. They solely depend upon men for children's education, religious functions, household expenditure etc. This situation has been changed when women have taken part in the earning process through self-help groups. The respondents are asked a question whether they felt empowered in social, financial and family matters after joining SHGs. Distribution of the respondents whether they felt empowered after joining SHGs is presented in Table -10.

Table 10: Decision Making Power in Social, Financial and Family Matters

Indicators	Opinion of respondents		Total
	Yes	No	
Do you have a say in your family Economic matters?	Yes	227 (94.58%)	240 (100%)
	No	13 (5.41%)	
Do you decide over your family savings, Investment and expenditure?	Yes	227 (94.58%)	240 (100%)
	No	13 (5.41%)	
Is your decision accounted in social matters like community functions, others	Yes	227 (94.58%)	240 (100%)
	No	13 (5.41%)	

Source-Field survey

It is evident from the table that about 94 percent of the sample respondents felt that they have achieved better status and felt empowered socially, financially and family matters after joining SHGs. The membership in SHGs encompasses importance to women in the family decisions. These women took decisions through mutual understanding with husband. As against this, only around 5.41 percent of the respondents reported that their status and decision making powers are not increased even after associating with SHGs.

Social Awareness after Joining SHGs

To attain social empowerment all women should have the social equality, which includes equality in treatment, in respect, in opportunity, in recognition and above all equality of status. It basically entails a change in perception, attitudes and values. Empowering women socially contributes to social development. The women of the sample gaon panchayats are also become socially aware after joining SHG. They experienced importance of health, sanitation, education etc. Table -11 below depicts the social awareness of the respondents after joining SHGs.

Table No:11: Social Awareness of the Respondents

Indicator	Opinion of Respondents		Total
Social awareness of the respondents after joining SHG (aware about the social evils like dowry, alcoholism, domestic violence, sexual abuse & infanticide)	Yes	205(85.41%)	240 (100%)
	No	35 (14.58%)	

Source: Field survey

From the above table, it seems that 85.41 percent respondents have a very bright picture about the awareness of the women. These members aware about various social evils like dowry, alcoholism, domestic violence, sexual abuse & infanticide. They know that all these social evils harm the rights of the women and these are crimes which is punishable. They develop self-esteem by which they recognize their inherent potential for the development of self and the household in turn, and the self-confidence by which they believe their potentiality to perform.

Involvement in Social and Community Organization

After involvement in self-help groups, women respondents come into contact with many social and community level organization. These organizations are Namghar, Scheduled Caste organization, educational institution, non-governmental organization and women organization. Therefore, they are now in confidence in decisions making on different grounds even outside their family. The table 12 shows the involvement of the women in this social and community organization.

Table 12: Participation in Social and Community Organization.

Indicators	Opinion of respondents
Religious institution	240 (100%)
Scheduled caste organization	191 (79.58%)
Non-governmental organization	76 (31.66%)
Women organization	96 (40%)
Governmental schemes	145 (60.41%)

Source-Field survey

Through field investigation, it is found that the sample respondents participated in different social and community organization. About 100 percent sample respondents participated in various socio-religious institutions like marriage, meetings, religious functions and participated in Namghar. 79.58 percent women participated in scheduled caste organization. There is a scheduled caste development board which focuses on all round development of the scheduled caste people. Only 31.66 percent women respondents are aware about the non-governmental organization. The concept of NGO is not so prominent in the village areas. So a very least people know about the functions of NGOs. 60.41 percent women respondents are participated in development programmes like SSA, NRHM etc after involvement in self-help groups. It indicates the growing awareness, voices to address their concerns leading towards empowerment of women both within and outside the family.

So, the present study has attempted to find out the impact of self-help groups on the political empowerment of the sample respondents. After assessing political empowerment of women through some indicators, it is found that self-help group has extensively helped women to empower themselves politically. Women have found the way of self-earning without depending on others by taking part in income generating activities. The study has shown that before joining self-help group, the respondents have lack of self-confidence, but after getting membership in self-help group they engage themselves in some employment generating activities like poultry and piggery farming, weaving, traditional food making and so on which increase their confidence. So, it can be said that monthly income, food expenditure and non- food expenditure have been increased to some extent after joining SHGs. The women members now become able to spend their earnings on their personal needs as well as contribute in their family's expenditure. It indicates women's increasing economic liberty through group activities. Moreover, women's economic empowerment helps them to develop politically. It builds their confidence in decision making related to political issues and convince others to their points of views. It has been evident with the present study that formation and management of the SHGs by the rural scheduled caste women has given them the opportunity to access to different extension organizations and various political institutions. Besides this, SHG approach had provided the rural women a common platform to gain and share their knowledge and experiences on issues related to political and economic matters and in this way motivate the women members to raise their voice both within the group and outside the group. The study has also revealed that the attributes like education, family educational status, mass media exposure and reasons for

joining self-help group have influenced women's political empowerment in a positive direction whereas age of the SHGs has negative implication on political empowerment of the women SHG members. So, in view of the findings of the present study, it is worth mentioning that SHG approach can be an effective instrument towards accomplishing women's political empowerment in rural areas of our country. Hence, any policy framework towards political empowerment of rural women through strengthening of self-help group approach should follow the ground reality of the existing SHGs and thereby take care of the needs, interests and priorities of the women SHG members.

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