

Women empowerment through participation in household decision making process: A study of out migrant households in Kultali Block, South 24 Parganas

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Abstract

There is no contradicting the truth that status of women in India has made a considerable progress since independence. In spite of the several positive changes women of India still have to struggle against many social tribulations and remain to be a subject to social inequality. Nevertheless, it is a general scenario that women usually carry out the decisions made by men within the society. Empowerment is a complex concept, which varies along with cultures, persons, sexes, occupations and position in life. Women Empowerment mostly measures as how the women are enjoying their social-political-judicial rights and their economic stabilities within or outside the family. Decision making at household level may be considered as one of the possible ways towards attaining empowerment for women which has a considerable impact in shaping her own life along with life of her wards. Migration in search of better livelihood is a universal phenomenon within the human society and migrant population mainly comprises male members of the households. In the households of out-migrants, roles of women have been redefined not only within the households but at the same time they have bound to take part in the other activities which were originally attributed to men. Apart from carrying out the changing responsibilities they often have to take part in the decision-making processes to deal the situation. The decision making covers a wide range of issues right from children's education, family health, participation in socio-economic activities and may others. Apart from mounting pressure of such responsibilities they often forced to work also. In this paper an attempt has been to analyze the involvement of women in household decision making process in Out-migrant households of two selected villages of Kultali block of West Bengal. The result clearly indicates that women are taking higher responsibilities and greater empowerment in absence of male members.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Participation, Decision-Making, Social Mapping

Introduction:

Decision-making at household level is a complex phenomenon that varies according to the nature of household activities and ethnicity and gender. Women in Power and Decision-making was identified as one of twelve critical areas of concern in its Beijing Platform for Action (BPA, 1995). Women's empowerment is a multidimensional concept which changes over time. Studies of women's empowerment are context specific, commonly it reliant on some dimensions, these are economic, familial, political, social and legal. Women's empowerment has been defined as the expansion of choices for women and an increase in the women's ability to exercise choices (UNDP Human Development Report, 1995) also indicated that migration of existing members of family may increase participation of women work within the household, which is unpaid. Professor Sen A. (1999) has explained development as the expansion of real freedom that the citizens enjoy to pursue the objectives, they have the meaningful development includes gender equality in enjoying freedom in addition to less poverty or better access to basic amenities and opportunities. The study of Khan, et al. (2006) also explained empowerment as a process for establishing control over resources and for acquiring ability and opportunity to decision making process and its implementation. Lokshin (2010), in his study conducted in Nepal has been revealed that the receipt of remittances is positively associated with increased decision-making on the agriculture, group membership, and holding a financial account. From the opposite of the picture in Senegal there is no evidence that male out-migration leads to women's empowerment spouses of international migrants are worse off in several domains of empowerment, including decision-making on productive activities and agricultural income, and access to information. There are other definitions of women empowerment, which have been refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize women and other disadvantaged sectors in a given context. Women Empowerment and participation is measured in terms of collective awareness building, capacity building and skills deployment, participatory roles, greater economic control, decision making power and action-oriented life towards greater gender equality Karl (1995). Women empowerment is possible when women become self-dependent and they participate actively

in decision-making processes. Empowered women are able to be self-assertive, self-disciplined, decisive, innovative, group-oriented players, and desire to improve their living conditions Suguna (2001). They are trying to use the best available opportunities for their families according to their income. Empowerment Strategies are varied and refer to those strategies which enable women to realize their full potentials. A like the above-mentioned literary works of Schuler and Hashemi (1994); Balk, (1997), Rowlands (1997), Hindin, (2000), Kumar and Paul (2007) expressed that women's role in decision making process is an important factor and needs to be considered for woman empowerment.

Migration means the movement of people from one place to another, within the country or geographical region (Pandey, 1993). Common reasons behind migrations are marriage or forced migration due to any environmental-political issues or migration for work, in search of better livelihood opportunities. Labour migration is a common, male from who have responded to high income opportunity and have gone to work out side, leaving their families behind, here called as out-migrant. Out-migrants send a significant proportion of their earnings to their families; such remittances constitute a very important element in household economy. Migration of male members of the household not only affects the out-migrants themselves but also their family members, especially women and their roles. Especially spouses of the out-migrant households suddenly have to cope up with multidimensional activities in the absence of male members. Each of them adopted different strategies to come across this condition. The other line of research emphasizes financial hardships and increased responsibilities for women as most of them are not instantly get financial as well as social supports from the out-migrant male members as well as the other family members. Further, the assumption of responsibilities outside the home may in some instances increase the work burden of women. Haas and Van Rooij's (2010) study in Morocco also argues that the increase in tasks and responsibilities does not translate into changed gender roles, but rather into a new role that is perceived as a burden. Other studies also noted that frequently remittances from the out-migrants are not enough and women who get left behind have to assume the role of sole breadwinner in addition to added familial and domestic responsibilities (Jetley 1987). Women Empowerment is defined as a process that women are able to transform their self-perceptions equivalent to alchemy of obviously transforming gender roles.

Objectives of the Study:

Against the backdrop this paper seeks to analyzed, the role and responsibilities of women members of the out-migrant households of the study area and their participations in household decision-making process after out-migration of the male members of the households.

Methodology:

The study is based on primary data of out-migrants' households of two villages Kultali block, South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. Two villages of this block, named as Purba Gurguria and Bhubaneswari Char were randomly chosen by simple random sampling method. Total 109 nos. households with out-migrants members have been identified through using PRA tool of social mapping in two villages having total 1442 no's of households. On the time of survey, no female out-migrants have been identified. One female member from each out-migrant's rural families has been interviewed with a structured interview schedule.

Result & Discussion:

Kultali block of South 24 Parganas district is an integral part of Sundarbans area and being the part of the largest delta Sundarbans is famous for its marine and estuarine fish resources. Major traditional income generating activities for the population of the area comprises of fishery more specifically marine fishery alongside wage-labour, agriculture, honey collection from the forest and seed shrimp collection of the studied area.

The livelihood of these area has been entirely depended on forest and estuaries. In recent years the livelihood activities often become at stake as they are facing challenges recurrent natural calamities, loss of embankments, soil erosion. The area still faces hindrances in terms of transport and communications which restricts them for commuting in search of alternative activities in nearby areas. According to Census 2011, Kultali-I Block had a total population of 2,29,053 with 45% of Scheduled Caste & 2% of Scheduled Tribe population. Agricultural activities, fishery has been identified as traditional occupation of the surveyed area. Families of the selected households also dependent on forest produce (Honey, Woods collection etc.) for their livelihood. Natural calamity, low demand of labour in agriculture and fishery has been identified as push factor of short-term out-migration. Especially during lean period of agriculture, a large portion of young male has been out-migrated in search of work. Apart from routine household activities women are closely associated with the agricultural activities, collecting fish from river streams.

As per Socio Economic Caste Census 2011, 6.43% households in Kultali block had been headed by female, as per this study 12.8 % out-migrants families have been headed by women. According to Census 2011 literacy rate of Purba Gurguria & Bhubaneswari Char village was 71.0% & 53.5% and female literacy rate was 62.3% & 45.9% respectively. In pursuant literacy rate of Purba Gurguria is better than Bhubaneswari Char, 96.3% children between 6-14 years enrolled in schools on the time of survey. The study also revealed that, most of the dropout from schooling have been occurred in between age of 14 to 16. According to thirty nine percent responders after cyclone 'Aila' ratio of short-term out-migration rise has been rapidly. Most of agricultural field despoiled, demand of labour in local market has fallen suddenly as a huge amount of land became unsuitable for cultivation form that time. It has been found in the study that from the two selected villages 141 persons from 109 out-migrants households have been migrated as short-term out-migrants. Proportion of out-migration is high among young boys; 57.6% out-migrants having aged between 18-34 years. Out-migrants usually worked average of one hundred twenty man-days to one hundred eighty man-days in a year in their destination place mainly at Delhi, Kerala & Maharashtra. They income generally between Rs. 250 to Rs.

450 per day, it varies nature of work and duration of work and physical condition of the out-migrants. Out-migrants are sending their remittance through bank accounts or cash, when they returned. 96% households having a bank account and in 93.6% households' women having bank account. Interview has been conducted with women of the out-migrants households to identify their importance in the household's decision.

Table 1. Frequency of discussion of important issues with the women by the out-migrant before out-migration: regarding household stuffs

	Decision on Out-Migration	Utilization of Credit	Purchasing & selling of Assets	Children Education	Marriage of Child
Always	22 (20.1%)	35 (32.4%)	12 (10.8%)	34 (31.2%)	33 (30.3%)
Sometimes	23 (21.5%)	16 (14.6%)	30 (27.5%)	48 (44.0%)	51 (46.8%)
Decision communicated	64 (58.4%)	58 (53.0%)	67 (61.7%)	27 (24.8%)	25 (22.9%)
Total	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)

(Source: Field Survey conducted, 2016-18)

As stated earlier that out-migration has been seen as a part of livelihood options, the above table indicated that most of the (58.4%) out-migrant has not communicated their decision with the woman of the family before taking final decision. Decision on purchasing or selling of agricultural land or other important assets also has been taken by the male members solely before out-migration. Whereas, decision on children has been taken with the concern of the spouses. But, gender relations and hierarchies within the family affect the women because they have been subordination to male authority plays itself out.

Table 2. Stages of discussion of important issues with the women by the out-migrant before out-migration: regarding household stuffs

	Purchasing & selling of Assets	Household Consumption	Joining Labour Force	Children Education	Marriage of Child	Whom to vote
Primary stage	56 (51.8%)	28 (25.4%)	65 (59.7%)	66 (60.9%)	97 (88.9%)	56 (51.5%)
During	38 (34.9%)	81 (74.6%)	34 (31.5%)	43 (39.1%)	12 (11.1%)	37 (33.7%)
At the End	14 (12.8%)	0	10 (8.8%)	0	0	16 (14.8%)
Total	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)

(Source: Field Survey conducted, 2016-18)

Role is a key concept in sociology, women still bounded to the household activities and it has been observed in this study. Before out-migration of male earner women are playing their role in household's affairs only. In the above mention table, it has been observed that in most of the time women have consulted with the male at the primary stage. Matters like home consumptions, children education has been discussed by the women at decision in processing stage. Political participation has been defined in various ways. Political participation means not only exercising the right to vote, but also power sharing, majority of women casted their vote are casted their vote after consultation with the male members of the family.

Table 3. After out-migration: Important issues discussed with the women by the out-migrant (in %)

	Utilization of Credit	Purchasing and selling of Assets	Agricultural Activities	Children Education	Marriage of Child	Household Consumption
Primary stage	39 (35.8%)	36 (33.1%)	5 (4.6%)	59(54.1%)	61(55.7%)	69 (63.3%)
During	42 (38.6%)	47 (43.1%)	49 (46.7%)	31(28.4%)	32(29.4%)	24 (22.0%)
At the End	28 (25.7%)	26 (23.8%)	55(50.2%)	19 (17.4%)	16 (14.7%)	16(14.7%)
Total	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)

(Source: Field Survey conducted, 2016-18)

Most of the women of the studied out-migrant household unanimously expressed that they have started receiving importance within the households only after the outmigration of male members and in most cases their opinion is valued in the absence of the earning male members. Generally, it has been observed during the study that end of rainy season is the peak period of out-migration and out-migrant returned back to native place before starting of agricultural season, agriculture still dominated by the male member of the households. It has been observed that dependency on women on household regular activities in a progressive way. It has been observed that in absence women have been consulted by the out-migrants in primary stage of decision making, what is good to do. Though in majority of the cases out-migrant guided women over telephone, and women just executing the direction received from their male counterpart. However, majority of the women expressed excitement over the issue that, in reality, through participation in decision making process within and out-side households they attain more importance as well as they can become more prospective out their surroundings.

Table 4. After Out-Migration: Participation of women in household decision making (in %)

	Children Education	Utilization of Credit	Purchasing and sale of Assets	Children Marriage	Households Consumptions	Whom to Vote
Decrease	10(9.2%)	16(14.7%)	15(14.1%)	10(9.0%)	3(2.7%)	0
No Change	31(28.4%)	51(46.8%)	56(51.0%)	55(50.2%)	12(11.0%)	62(56.9%)
Improve	68(62.4%)	42(38.3%)	38(34.9%)	44(40.8%)	94(86.3%)	47 (43.1%)
Total	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)	109(100%)

(Source: Field Survey conducted, 2016-18)

It has been seen that out-migration is likely to bring about significant changes in the source area. In the absence of male, it is the women who have taken up the responsibilities of managing the households and take important economic decisions. According to the women in most of the factors, their role and participation increased. Their opinion also being considered with importance. According to thirty eight percent responders, their role in economic activities like decision on credit utilizations, purchasing assets has improved quite well. According them economic freedom has played a vital role in their life ensuring equal openings in the society and thereby enjoy and benefit from their other rights.

Conclusion:

In orthodox rural Indian society, women are largely confined to domestic and unpaid households' duties even when they participate in income generating activities. During the study it is quite evident that role of women of out-migrant households in household decision making process is gaining importance gradually however the role is yet to attain a substantial space in majority of the households. It is natural that age and literacy status of woman, along with other socio-economic factors are also considerably affecting in the participation of women in decision making process. Hence, overall analysis on pattern of decision making clearly shows there are two-part. Male out-migrants rely on their self-decisions likes occupations and source of income. But decisions on children marriage, decisions regarding purchase-sale and self-consumptions of household substances, have been taken jointly in majority of households. Decision on agricultural, male is not engaging female at all. The Study also indicated that female of the surveyed families cast their vote willingly. Participation of women in decision-making was important for strengthening democracy and achieving the goals of sustainable development. Women empowerment is power for women through which they enjoy their real capacity, policy intervention is required. Somewhat, a more comprehensive strategy must be sought that could raise women's gender consciousness, enable them to access community resources and provide support for challenging traditional norms which cause gender inequalities. Moreover, enhancing their access to and control over resources and enabling them to establish and understand their privileges are also essential means to empower them to be more autonomous in decision making.

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