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Self-Help Group & Women Empowerment in Rural Areas: A Case Study in Raha Development Block, Nagaon, Assam

Deep Kalita¹

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Kampur College

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, SHGs have emerged as a popular platform where a group of women come together to make regular monetary contributions. As an important micro-finance system, SHGs promote overall empowerment of women by providing them with economic opportunities, social support, skills, and knowledge necessary to assert their rights, improve their well-being, and participate more actively in society.

For the study, the Raha Development Block of Nagaon district is being selected. The study is based on both primary and secondary data sources. It is found that in the last few years, with the help of SHGs, a poor section of women has benefited. Thus, these groups play an important role in shaping the lives of women. Though they benefited a lot from it yet they sometimes face problems continuing it. If attention is being paid to these fields, then it can surely contribute towards women's empowerment among the backwards section of society.

1. Introduction

The word “Empowerment” is used by different experts as well as organisations in different contexts. In a very simple meaning, the term empowerment refers to the enhancement of capacity in different fields. So, empowerment denotes the access to productive resources to earn their livelihood and enjoy the goods and services they need, thereby developing their social status.

¹Email Address: kalitadeep1970@gmail.com (D. Kalita)



Women empowerment simply refers to the a) widening their decision-making capacity, b) access to productive resources as well as financial activities, c) learn new skill for self-development, d) develop their capacity and positive thinking for social change, e) participate in community-based work for the welfare of society and f) influence the society with their strong and positive personality and thereby contributing towards the nation building process. A self-help group (SHG) is a voluntary association of individuals, typically women or men from similar economic backgrounds, who come together to address common issues, improve their living conditions, and support each other through mutual savings, credit activities, and collective action. Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded by Ela Bhatt in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in 1972, aimed to organise women workers for full employment and self-reliance. It laid the foundation for the SHG movement in India by focusing on collective strength, financial independence and social empowerment for marginalised women. SHG movement in India took a turning point after 1992, when the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) realised its potential and started promoting it. Various community-driven activities are undertaken by the government under the initiative of SHGs. The Government of India(GoI) introduced the “*Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarajgar Yojana*” in 1999 to promote self-employment in rural areas through the formation and skilling of such groups. This evolved into the National Rural Livelihood Mission in 2011. The SHGs are a microfinance project covering mainly a large number of women in the society. So, it is assumed that it can play a vital role in empowering women because it helps women from economically weaker sections to access productive resources.

Thus, they play a vital role in giving credit access to the poor, which plays a critical role in poverty alleviation in our country. SHGs help women to develop their self-confidence, self-esteem and decision-making capacity in different spheres. They also play an instrumental role in increasing awareness among women regarding different issues and encouraging them to participate in community-based activities. Through these groups, women are now getting opportunities to earn and invest the profit for a better future. The socio-economic set-up can be developed through this platform. Not only does it the socio-economic empowerment, but it also contributes towards the political empowerment of women because it is a type of community participation. They help women know their right to vote and even motivate them to take part in the local governance and community development process. Indian society is still prevalent with various types of social evils like dowry, child marriage, caste system, domestic violence, alcoholism, etc. SHGs can play a crucial role in eliminating these evils by creating awareness, promoting girl child education, conducting campaigns and meetings with the families to bring about social change. Besides all these, SHGs play a vital role in sensitising more women to form SHGs and in making them aware of their importance. SHGs have a positive impact on financial inclusion. The members from different groups

having bank accounts, credit availability and repayment of credit had increased after the SHGs. Thus, it contributes towards the elimination of gender discrimination as well as poverty from our society. But they also face some problems in continuing their functions. So, appropriate action can be taken for the removal of these.

Different scholars have already done their research work in this field in different parts of India. Adhikary and Bagli (2010) have done extensive work regarding Self-Help Groups and financial inclusion in the Bankura district of West Bengal, where they have revealed that participation in SHG accelerates the financial inclusion measured by the access to formal credit and reduces the extent of financial exclusion measured by frequency of informal borrowing for the rural people. Jagannatha (2018) has studied the impact of financial inclusion on Self-Help Groups in Karnataka to identify the role of Self-Help Groups in promoting savings of members in rural areas and also highlight the importance of the SHG Bank Linkage program to achieve financial inclusion.

Bortamuly and Khuhly (2013), have conducted a study in Sonitpur district of Assam, where they highlighted the perceived problems of SHGs in resource mobilisation through various activities, and basically, they have focused on the problems related to land, labour and fund mobilisation. Das and Boruah (2013) also examined the impact of Micro Finance and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on the socio-economic development of underprivileged individuals in the Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts of Assam. The results indicate that participation in SHGs has not only enhanced the economic conditions of women members but also improved their overall standard of living. By engaging in various income-generating activities independently, these women have become more financially self-reliant. The study also reveals that SHGs play a vital role in promoting socio-economic progress and have increased awareness among members about the importance of savings and access to credit through rural financial institutions. Islam and Brahmachary (2023) have done studies on collective activities undertaken by group members of SHGs and the socio-economic empowerment of women due to it.

2. Objectives of the Study

The basic objectives of the study are:

- i. To analyse the positive impact of SHGs on women's empowerment.
- ii. To identify the common problems faced by the members of SHGs.

3. Methodology

The Raha Development Block is taken as a study unit. On the basis of the analysis of the collected data, the study has been conducted. The data are collected by visiting the groups and interacting with the group

members. Besides, some other data are collected with the help of various published books, journals, and articles, etc.

This study is mainly descriptive, yet some simple statistical methods are also used to represent data.

4. Study Area

The Nagaon district is situated on the south bank flood plains of the mighty Brahmaputra in the middle portion of Assam. Nagaon district has two town committees, i.e., Raha and Kampur. Raha is one of the important township areas, which is located just 21 km from the Nagaon district headquarters in the west direction. Raha is a small town in Nagaon district of Assam, situated between 26° 26' 59" N Latitude to 90° 51' 59" E Longitude. The physiography of the area is almost plain, with some hillocks formed by the fertile alluvial deposit of the river *Kopili* and its tributaries, and *Kolong*. Raha has an average elevation of 102 m. Monsoon climate prevails in this area with distinct four seasons. Soil is old alluvial, yet red and sandy-loamy soil is also found in some areas. Population density is high, with almost even distribution. The area is mainly composed of the Hindu population (basically SC & ST population) and a significant proportion of Muslims.

5. Results and Analysis

SHGs also play a vital role in giving credit access to the marginalised section of society. The socio-economic profiles of the respondents are analysed under the following heads:

5.1. Age group of the respondent

It is found that most of the women are young and fall within the criteria of 25-45 years age group. The age group is represented with the help of the Table 5.1-

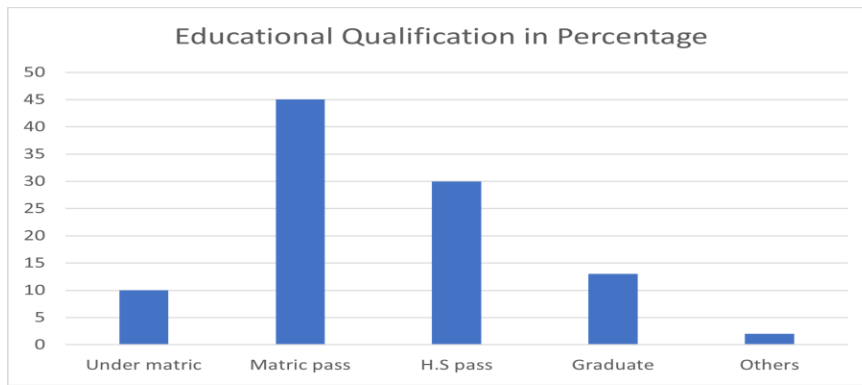
Table 5.1 Age Group of the Respondents

Age Group	Percentage
Less than 25 years	20
25-45 years	70
Above 45 years	10

5.2. Educational qualification

The educational qualifications of women are diverse. Most of the women have an educational qualification of matriculation. The following Figure 5.2 shows the educational qualifications of women:

Figure 5.2 Educational Qualification (in percentage)



5.3. Social Reasons for Joining SHGs

SHGs help women to become independent and give access to credit as well as financial services. So, it may play a crucial role in poverty alleviation in our society. In the study, it is revealed that most of the women join the group to support their families, as shown in Figure 5.3

Figure 5.3 Reason for joining SHGs



5.4. Tendency of Investment

The group members are empowered in all aspects through the platform offered by SHGs. They are getting loans and credits from it. After fulfilling their basic requirements, they also invested money in their better future. The following Table 5.4 shows the response of women regarding investments:

Table 5.4 Response of the Women regarding Investment

If they are doing an investment	In Percentage
Yes	85%
No	15%

6. Findings and Discussion

SHGs help the empowerment of women in society, giving them access to various opportunities and the decision-making process. Through this woman gets financial assurance and benefits from the banks as well as from various government schemes. This helps to raise the voice of women for themselves and others. Women are mainly from the same socio-economic background. So, one type of social integration is also formed among them. Various social ills can be removed with the help of these groups. SHG disapproves of the gender bias and promotes gender equality. With the help of this platform, women have easy access to various government schemes. So, ultimately, it leads to the proper implementation and improvement of the efficiency of various government schemes. Women find an opportunity to earn their livelihood to support their families. Most of the groups are trained, which also widens their range of choice of action. Mainly, these groups are engaged in the production of various textile, food and handicraft products. They sell their products mostly in the local market. Besides, they also attend trade fairs and expos occasionally to sell their products. It gives women open access to various banking facilities. They also invest money for their future planning in various ways. This also has a positive impact on the health and nutrition condition of the women. These SHGs ultimately improve the overall status of women in society. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have played a significant role in empowering women in rural Assam, creating a positive impact on their social, economic, and personal lives.

6.1. The Positive Impacts of SHGs towards Women's Empowerment

Economic Independence

- a. Access to Microfinance: SHGs provide women with access to microloans, enabling them to start small businesses or invest in income-generating activities like agriculture, handloom, and livestock rearing.
- b. Income Generation: By participating in SHG activities, women contribute to household income, reducing financial dependence on male family members.
- c. Skill Development: Training programs associated with SHGs help women acquire skills in areas like weaving, handicrafts, and organic farming.

Social Empowerment

- a. Increased Social Interaction: Regular group meetings foster a sense of community and improve women's social skills and confidence.
- b. Awareness Building: SHGs often engage in awareness campaigns on issues like health, education, and legal rights, helping women make informed decisions.
- c. Breaking Social Barriers: Participation in SHGs challenges traditional gender norms and increases women's visibility and participation in public life.

Improved Decision-Making

- a. Household Decision-Making: Economic contributions by women through SHG activities lead to greater respect and involvement in family decisions.
- b. Community Leadership: Women in SHGs often take on leadership roles, becoming active participants in village-level governance and development projects.

Educational Benefits

- a. Focus on Children's Education: Additional income from SHG activities is often invested in children's education, especially for girls.
- b. Self-Learning Opportunities: Literacy and numeracy training through SHGs enhances women's ability to manage finances and access resources.

Health and Well-Being

- a. Improved Access to Healthcare: SHGs organise health camps and workshops, increasing awareness about maternal and child health.
- b. Sanitation and Hygiene: Many SHGs promote hygiene and sanitation projects, improving overall health conditions in rural areas.

Political Participation

- a. Grassroots Mobilisation: SHGs encourage women to participate in local self-governance, such as Panchayati Raj Institutions, thereby giving them a voice in decision-making processes.
- b. Advocacy: SHGs often unite to demand better infrastructure, rights, and services from authorities, amplifying women's collective voice.

Resilience and Crisis Management

- a. Support Networks: SHGs act as informal safety nets during crises, such as natural disasters, by providing emotional and financial support.
- b. Sustainable Livelihoods: Through collective efforts, SHGs promote sustainable practices, ensuring long-term benefits for their members.

6.2. Common Problems Faced by The Members of SHGs

Self-Help Group (SHG) members in rural areas often face several common challenges that can hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of the groups. There exist some problems in continuing the smooth functioning of the groups, such as patriarchal mindset of people, lack of proper training among the members, lack of skilled labour force, lack of stability among the groups, weak financial management, etc. The groups also face losses during the lockdown period due to COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the major problems are highlighted below:

- a. Lack of Financial Literacy: Many SHG members struggle with understanding savings, credit, interest rates, and bookkeeping, leading to poor financial management.
- b. Limited Access to Credit: Despite being formed to improve access to microcredit, many SHGs still face difficulties in getting loans from banks due to a lack of collateral or trust from financial institutions.
- c. Inadequate Training and Capacity Building: Members often lack proper training in entrepreneurship, group dynamics, or leadership skills.
- d. Poor Market Linkages: Even when SHGs engage in income-generating activities, they often struggle to find markets for their products or receive fair prices.
- e. Gender and Social Barriers: Women, who form the majority of SHG members, may face restrictions from family or society that limit their participation or decision-making power.
- f. Internal Conflicts: Differences among members, lack of trust, or poor leadership can lead to group dysfunction or disintegration.
- g. Monitoring and Evaluation Gaps: Many SHGs lack systematic monitoring, which makes it hard to track progress or identify issues early.
- h. Dependency on External Support: Some SHGs rely heavily on NGOs or government support, making them vulnerable when that support is withdrawn.

7. Conclusion

The study reveals that SHGs are contributing significantly to the empowerment of women in many aspects. The financial stability and social status of the respondents increased considerably after SHGs. It gives them easy access to microfinance and various government activities. The rise of entrepreneurship will definitely affect the employment rates, per capita income, and social security in the area. Women's empowerment is not a one-time event but a continuous and evolving process that requires sustained effort, support, and opportunities for growth across all areas of life. So, the proper and smooth functioning of SHGs will definitely contribute towards women's empowerment. After joining the SHG, the women are not only able to earn a livelihood but also can uplift their status in different spheres. It plays an important role in removing gender discrimination by giving emphasis on women's participation. Furthermore, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can serve as effective platforms for enhancing women's health by increasing their knowledge and awareness of health issues, improving access to healthcare services and providing financial security during health emergencies. Therefore, creating a supportive environment is the prime requirement for the smooth growth and development of SHG's for continuing the process of women empowerment.

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