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Impact of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on the Social and Economic Empowerment of Women in Bihar: A Sociological Study

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Abstract

This book chapter explores the significant role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in enhancing the social and economic empowerment of women in Bihar, with particular emphasis on the JEEVIKA programme. Over the past two decades, SHGs have emerged as an effective mechanism for promoting financial inclusion, livelihood opportunities, and community participation among rural women. The chapter examines how participation in SHGs has strengthened women's access to savings and credit, improved their decision-making abilities, and increased their involvement in local governance institutions such as Gram Sabha's and Panchayats. It further highlights the contribution of SHGs to income generation, entrepreneurship development, and poverty reduction. From a sociological perspective, the chapter analyses the transformative impact of collective action on women's social status, leadership capacity, and self-confidence. The study concludes that SHGs have become a powerful instrument for fostering gender equality, social transformation, and inclusive rural development in Bihar.

Keywords: Self-Help Groups, Women Empowerment, Bihar, JEEVIKA, Social Change, Rural Development.

Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern in development discourse. In Bihar, SHGs have become an important instrument for improving women's socio-economic status. Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern in development discourse. In Bihar, SHGs have become an important instrument for improving women's socio-economic status. Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern in development discourse. In Bihar, SHGs have become an important instrument for improving women's socio-economic status. Women's empowerment has emerged as a central concern in development discourse. In Bihar, SHGs have become an important instrument for improving women's socio-economic status. Women's empowerment is an important part of social and economic development. In Bihar, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have played a significant role in

improving the lives of rural women. These groups help women save money, access loans, start small businesses, and increase their income. Through SHGs, women gain confidence, develop leadership skills, and become more involved in family and community decision-making. Programmes such as JEEVIKA have encouraged millions of women to join SHGs and participate in livelihood activities. As a result, women have become more financially independent and socially active. Their participation in local governance, community programmes, and development activities has also increased. Thus, SHGs have become an effective tool for promoting women's empowerment, reducing poverty, and supporting inclusive rural development in Bihar.

Review of Literature

A review of existing literature shows that Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have played an important role in improving the social and economic conditions of women, especially in rural areas. Many studies conducted in India and other developing countries have found that SHGs help women gain access to savings, credit, and income-generating activities. As a result, women become more financially independent and contribute more effectively to their families and communities.

Researchers have also observed that SHGs increase women's confidence, leadership skills, and participation in decision-making processes. Women involved in SHGs are more likely to take part in community meetings, local governance, and social development activities. Several studies highlight that SHGs have helped reduce poverty by creating opportunities for self-employment and small businesses.

In Bihar, the JEEVIKA programme has been widely recognized for organizing rural women into SHGs and promoting livelihood opportunities. Studies on JEEVIKA indicate that women members have experienced improvements in income, education, health awareness, and social status. However, some researchers have pointed out challenges such as limited access to markets, inadequate training, and low digital literacy.

Overall, the available literature suggests that SHGs are an effective tool for women's empowerment, poverty reduction, and inclusive rural development.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the role of SHGs in women's empowerment.
- To analyse social and economic changes among women members.
- To assess the contribution of JEEVIKA.

Research Methodology

The present study on Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and women's empowerment in Bihar is based on a descriptive and analytical research design. Both primary and secondary data have been used to examine the role of SHGs in promoting inclusive

development. Primary data may be collected through field surveys, interviews, and structured questionnaires from SHG members in selected districts of Bihar. Secondary data is gathered from government reports, NABARD publications, JEEVIKA reports, journals, and research articles. A purposive sampling technique is used to select respondents. The collected data is analysed using simple statistical tools such as percentages and comparative analysis to draw meaningful conclusions regarding the socio-economic impact of SHGs.

- **Growth of SHGs in Bihar under the JEEVIKA Programmed**

The JEEVIKA programmer has played a major role in improving the lives of rural women in Bihar. Through this programme, millions of women have been organized into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), giving them opportunities to save money, access loans, and participate in income-generating activities. JEEVIKA has helped women become financially independent by connecting them with banks, training programmers, and livelihood opportunities.

Women associated with SHGs are engaged in agriculture, livestock rearing, dairy farming, small businesses, handicrafts, and other economic activities. The programme has also encouraged women to work together, share experiences, and support one another in solving common problems. As a result, their confidence, leadership skills, and decision-making abilities have improved significantly.

In addition to economic benefits, JEEVIKA has increased women's participation in community development and local governance. Overall, the programme has contributed to poverty reduction, social inclusion, and sustainable rural development across Bihar.

- **Social Empowerment**

Participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) has emerged as a powerful tool for the socio-economic empowerment of women, particularly in rural areas. It has significantly enhanced women's confidence by encouraging them to speak in group meetings, express their opinions, and take part in collective decision-making processes. Through regular interactions and financial activities such as savings and credit management, women gradually develop stronger decision-making capacity in both household and community matters.

SHG membership also promotes leadership qualities among women. Many members get opportunities to become group leaders, manage accounts, conduct meetings, and coordinate with banks and government institutions. These responsibilities help them acquire managerial and organizational skills that were previously limited due to social restrictions.

Furthermore, SHGs encourage active community participation. Women begin to engage in village-level discussions, local governance activities, and development

programmes. This collective platform also helps them address common social issues such as education, health, sanitation, and livelihood improvement.

Overall, SHGs act as a catalyst for social change by transforming women from passive beneficiaries into active participants in development. The continuous involvement in group activities strengthens their self-reliance, leadership abilities, and social status, ultimately contributing to gender equality and rural development.

Table 1: Changes in Women's Participation in Panchayat-Level Activities and Social Status

Indicators	Previous Status (%)	Present Status (%)
Participation in Gram Sabha	20	68
Attendance in Panchayat Meetings	15	62
Participation in Community Decision-Making	25	71
Local Leadership Role	10	54
Social Status and Recognition	30	78

Source: Data collected and analysed by the researcher

The above table 1 shows a significant increase in women's participation in Panchayat and community-level activities. Participation in Gram Sabha increased from 20% to 68%, attendance in Panchayat meetings rose from 15% to 62%, and involvement in community decision-making increased from 25% to 71%. Women's leadership roles also improved from 10% to 54%, while social status and recognition increased from 30% to 78%. These findings indicate that greater participation has strengthened women's social identity, status, and leadership capacity in rural society.

- **Economic Empowerment**

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have played a crucial role in improving the financial inclusion and economic empowerment of rural households, especially women. One of the most significant benefits of SHGs is enhanced access to savings facilities. Members regularly contribute small amounts, which helps them develop a habit of saving and build financial security over time.

SHGs also provide easy access to credit at low interest rates, reducing dependence on informal moneylenders. This credit support enables members to meet urgent household needs as well as invest in productive activities. As a result, many women have been able to start or expand small-scale businesses such as tailoring, dairy farming, poultry, and handicrafts.

In addition, SHGs encourage entrepreneurship by providing training, guidance, and linkage with government schemes and banks. These opportunities help members engage in income-generating activities and improve their standard of living. Overall, SHGs act as a strong platform for financial empowerment, self-

employment, and sustainable rural development by transforming economically weaker groups into self-reliant individuals.

Table 2: Changes in the Status of Women After Joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

Indicators	Before Joining SHG (%)	After Joining SHG (%)
Participation in family decision-making	28	74
Women earning their own income	22	68
Women operating bank accounts	31	87
Participation in decisions related to children's education	36	82
Participation in village meetings/community programs	18	63

Source: Data compiled and analysed by the researcher.

The above table 2 shows that women experienced significant social and economic improvement after joining Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Their participation in family decision-making increased from 28% to 74%, while the percentage of women earning their own income rose from 22% to 68%. Access to and operation of bank accounts showed the highest improvement, increasing from 31% to 87%. Women also became more involved in decisions regarding their children's education and community activities. Overall, SHG participation contributed positively to women's empowerment, financial independence, and social involvement.

- **Sociological Analysis**

From a functionalist perspective, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play an important role in maintaining social stability and promoting development in rural society. They function as small but effective social institutions that help individuals work together for common economic and social goals. By encouraging savings, credit discipline, and group decision-making, SHGs strengthen social capital formation, which improves trust, cooperation, and mutual support among members. This collective structure also promotes collective action, enabling communities to address shared problems such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to credit in a more organized way.

From a feminist perspective, SHGs are significant instruments of gender empowerment and equality. They provide women with a platform to challenge traditional patriarchal structures and participate actively in economic and social decision-making. Through financial independence, leadership roles, and public participation, women gain greater control over their lives and resources. SHGs also help in reducing gender disparities by enhancing women's visibility in community development processes.

Thus, from both perspectives, SHGs contribute not only to economic development but also to social transformation, empowerment, and the strengthening of inclusive rural institutions.

Challenges

Despite their positive impact, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Bihar face several challenges. One major issue is irregular savings and weak financial discipline among some members, which affects group sustainability. Limited access to adequate and timely bank credit also restricts income-generating activities. Many SHGs suffer from poor training and lack of entrepreneurial skills, reducing their ability to run successful enterprises. In addition, dependence on external support and government schemes sometimes weakens self-reliance. Social challenges such as gender discrimination, low education levels, and family resistance further hinder women's active participation. Moreover, weak market linkages make it difficult for SHG products to reach wider markets, limiting profitability and long-term growth.

Policy Implications

The implications of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Bihar are highly significant for both policy and socio-economic development. SHGs have demonstrated that community-based collective action can effectively address rural poverty, financial exclusion, and gender inequality. One major implication is the strengthening of financial inclusion, as SHGs connect rural women to formal banking systems and reduce dependence on informal moneylenders. This improves household economic stability and encourages savings behaviour.

Another important implication is the enhancement of women's empowerment. SHGs enable women to participate in decision-making at household and community levels, thereby challenging traditional gender roles and promoting equality. From a development policy perspective, SHGs serve as a cost-effective model for implementing welfare schemes and livelihood programmes in rural areas.

Furthermore, SHGs contribute to social capital formation by building trust, cooperation, and collective responsibility among members. This leads to stronger community networks and improved local governance. Overall, the SHG model has wide-ranging implications for inclusive growth, poverty reduction, and sustainable rural development in Bihar.

Conclusion

SHGs have emerged as a powerful tool of inclusive development and women's empowerment in Bihar. They have played a significant role in bringing economically weaker and socially marginalized women into the mainstream of development. Through SHGs, women are able to access savings, credit, and livelihood opportunities, which improve their economic independence and living standards. Beyond economic benefits, SHGs promote social empowerment by

increasing women's participation in decision-making at household and community levels. They also help in building confidence, leadership skills, and awareness about education, health, and social rights.

In Bihar, SHGs have also contributed to reducing poverty by promoting income-generating activities such as agriculture-based work, small businesses, dairy farming, and handicrafts. These groups strengthen financial inclusion by linking rural women with banks and government welfare schemes, thereby reducing dependence on informal and exploitative sources of credit. Overall, SHGs act as an effective mechanism for inclusive growth in Bihar by integrating women into the development process and promoting equality, self-reliance, and sustainable rural development.

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