

## **EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH WELFARE SCHEMES OF GOVERNMENT OF WEST BENGAL : A STUDY OF MANTESWAR BLOCK IN WEST BENGAL**

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### **Introduction**

Governments generally implement a variety of programmes and schemes in order to maintain balance in the community and prevent it from spiralling into a socio-economic disaster. Social security along with welfare schemes and policies of the government are required to guarantee that the most vulnerable people are safeguarded and supported as they integrate into society

Currently women form half of the population in the world. Yet most of them are not able to express their views freely in social, economic or political sphere of their lives. Women are considered most of the time as second class citizen and deprived of their basic rights. Gender inequality is persistent among the society and women are victims of subordination and discrimination even today. Women mostly lack the freedom of choice and action to shape their own life. Women, particularly in rural regions, have a lower share of assets, skills, education, social standing, leadership characteristics, and mobilisation capacities, which impacts the degree of decision making and authority, and as a result, their reliance on males grows (Basu, 2006). Thus in this situation, empowerment of women has become a necessary phenomenon.

Women empowerment is now a matter of global discussion. Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations speaks of gender equality and empowering all women and girls. According to Kabeer (1999) women empowerment is the capacity to make wise decisions in life in situations when they were previously deprived of this capacity. The process of empowerment is dynamic and multifaceted, allowing women to fully embrace their identities and abilities across all domains of life (Sahay, 1998). Article 38 of the Indian Constitution recommends that the State must try to enhance the welfare of the people by providing social, economic, and political justice and by reducing inequalities in income, position, facilities, and opportunities. The Government of India has recognised the plight of

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women and developed many schemes to combat crimes against women and provide them more opportunities for contribution in country's economy and growth. Some important schemes introduced by Government of India are Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao scheme, Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme, Women Helpline Scheme, Nand Ghar Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and others.

West Bengal has always been regarded as one of the developed states in India. But there have been many challenges in the form of socio-economic inequality in the state. To address these challenges, the Department of Women Development and Social Welfare of the state of West Bengal works towards the protection, equity and inclusion of populations that have been historically oppressed, neglected or excluded from development because of their gender, age, disability or situation. This includes women, senior citizens and other marginalized populations such as persons with disabilities, transgender persons, and homeless persons. The various government schemes which works for the development of the backward and marginalized population, West Bengal includes Lakshmir Bhandar Prakalpa, Jai Bangla Pension Scheme, Kanyashree Prakalpa, Rupasree Prakalpa, Swabalamban, Mukti Alo, Shishu Aloy etc.

#### **Existing works: At a glance**

The relationship between different government schemes and women empowerment have been dealt in various ways in literature. A lot of studies speak about how government schemes, policies and programmes have led to women empowerment. Pandey & Parthasarathy (2019) gave an account of impact of welfare schemes on empowerment of women with special reference to RMK, STEP and E-Haat. The study by Atitkar (2019) gave an account of how schemes and policies of Indian government favoured both women empowerment and entrepreneurship.

Welfare Schemes and its impact on women empowerment have also been conducted in relation to various states. The study Malik (2020) spoke about the role of government schemes on empowerment of women in rural areas of Kashmir. Ara & Shukla (2021) conducted a study in Jharkhand to analyse the impact of government schemes on empowerment of women. A similar kind of study was conducted in Haryana by Sharma (2023) and in Uttarakhand by Verma (2016) where both of them analysed the impact of government welfare schemes on empowerment of women. A study was conducted to analyse the impact of women empowerment schemes in Telangana by Punya (2021). The study by Datta & Desai (2017) gave an account of schemes implemented for women empowerment by Government of Gujarat. The study by Gupta (2022) reported about women empowerment through different government schemes with reference to the state of Chhattisgarh.

Regarding West Bengal, the relation between State Government's welfare schemes and women empowerment is underexplored and needs further investigation. Most studies have used secondary data to explore this topic. Few studies have considered primary data to understand the ground reality of these schemes in empowering women especially in rural areas of West Bengal. Therefore some direct cash benefit schemes provided by Government of West Bengal has been chosen for the selected study. This is due to the fact that monetary benefit of the schemes directly reaches their bank account and there are no middlemen or institution involved. Moreover because each individual has a unique identity, there would be no chance of duplicating accounts. The women can also spend the cash as and when required which they cannot do if the benefit is given in different forms other than cash like subsidised food.

**Table 1: Overview of the selected welfare schemes for the study**

Schemes	Details
<i>Kanyashree Prakalpa</i>	A one-time grant Rs. 25,000 namely K2 given to those girls who continue their studies up to the age of 18 years as well as stay unmarried.
<i>Rupashree Prakalpa</i>	A one-time financial grant of Rs. 25,000 given to economically challenged families at the time of their adult daughters' weddings
<i>Lakshmir Bhandar Prakalpa</i>	A monthly assistance of Rs. 500 is made to the women of General Caste category and Rs.1000 to the women of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe category of West Bengal.
<i>Bidhoba Bhata</i>	A monthly assistance of Rs.1000 to all the unmarried widows residing in West Bengal for more than 10 years and having monthly income below Rs.1000.

Source: West Bengal State Portal

### Objectives of the Study

The authors have framed the following objectives from the existing research gap

F To understand awareness and utilisation of the selected government schemes among the women at Manteswar block in Purba Bardhaman district of West Bengal.

F To explore the impact of the utilisation of the social welfare schemes on empowerment of the women at Manteswar block in Purba Bardhaman district of West Bengal.

### Database and Methodology

This community based cross sectional study was carried out for four months from August 2023 to November 2023 at Manteswar block of Purba Bardhaman district in West Bengal. This study was conducted by taking 250 women as sampling unit. Stratified random

sampling method was used whereby the villages were chosen on the basis of their caste composition so that women from all caste groups are adequately represented. Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire schedule. The analysis in present paper is divided into two sections. The first section considers the awareness and utilisation of the government welfare schemes on the basis of socio-economic and demographic background of the sample.

The second section explores the impact of government welfare schemes and its impact on women empowerment by using Women Empowerment Index(WEI).The indicators used in this study to measure women empowerment have been adapted from the work of Malhotra and Schuler (2002).

**Table 2: Description of the Indicators**

Dimension	Indicators	Statements
Economic Empowerment	EE1	Manage money for the household expenditure
	EE2	Decide where to pay what amount of money
	EE3	Increased purchasing power
	EE4	Able to manage money for emergency situations
	EE5	Say in amount of money to be saved per month
	EE6	Manage resources for repayment of loans
	EE7	Participate in financial discussion of family
Social Empowerment	SE1	Mobility to parent's house
	SE2	Mobility to friends/relatives house
	SE3	Mobility to avail medical facilities
	SE4	Mobility to go to market
	SE5	Mobility for recreation
Household Empowerment	HE1	Participate in important discussion of family
	HE2	Capability to make decisions of daily food and grocery items
	HE3	Capability to make decisions concerning their children
	HE4	Increased respect from the family
Political Empowerment	PE1	Regularly votes in all elections
	PE2	Does not get influenced by others while voting
	PE3	Updated about political news
	PE4	Knowledge of parties operating in that area
	PE5	Representation in local governing bodies
Psychological Empowerment	PSE1	Increased self-respect
	PSE2	Increased respect from community
	PSE3	Increased Confidence in performing daily activities
	PSE4	Increased confidence on making decisions regarding a particular problem
	PSE5	Increased confidence in expressing themselves

For the sake of convenience of the study, all of the indicators selected for the study have been given identical weightage. Respondents in this study were asked to consider the positive improvements (in the five dimensions of their life) after receiving benefits from at least one of the government welfare schemes. There are two response categories for each variable: '0' and '1'. If the answer is positive, the score is given '1' otherwise the score is given '0'. For measuring women empowerment, five dimension indices were considered, and then the women empowerment index (WEI) was constructed in line with the United Development Programmes design approach of Human development indices (Human Development Report, UNDP, 2005). Each dimension's index was built by selecting minimum and maximum values for each underlying indicator. In line with the Human Development Index construction approach (UNDP, 2005); performance in each indicator is given as the minimum and maximum value between '0' and '1'. The beneficiaries who perceived positive change after utilising the benefits of the schemes gave a value of '1' and who did not perceive any positive change gave a value of '0'. The indicators of Women Empowerment Index are

F Economic Empowerment Index

F Social Empowerment Index

F Household Empowerment Index

F Political Empowerment Index

F Psychological Empowerment Index

F The maximum value for Economic Empowerment Index was '7', since there are seven indicators there and minimum value was '0'. A beneficiary who scored '1' on all indicators of economic empowerment had a total score of '7' and who scored '0' on all economic empowerment factors got a total score of '0'. Similarly the maximum value of Social Empowerment Index, Political Empowerment Index and Psychological Empowerment Index was '5' and minimum value was '0'. For House hold Empowerment Index maximum value was '4' and minimum value was '0'. The individual empowerment indices are calculated based on the formula of

$$\text{Individual Empowerment Index} = \frac{\text{actual value} - \text{minimum value}}{\text{maximum value} - \text{minimum value}}$$

Women Empowerment Index is the simple average of the five individual indices.

$$\text{Women Empowerment Index (WEI)} = \frac{1}{5}(\text{Economic Empowerment Index}) + \frac{1}{5}(\text{Social Empowerment Index}) + \frac{1}{5}(\text{Household Empowerment Index}) + \frac{1}{5}(\text{Political Empowerment Index}) + \frac{1}{5}(\text{Psychological Empowerment Index})$$

## Results and Discussion

**Table 3: Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (n=250)**

Characteristics	Total (n=250)	Percentage
<b>Age group(years)</b>		
20-40	99	39.6
40-60	87	34.8
Above 60	64	25.6
<b>Caste Composition</b>		
General	66	26.4
SC	93	37.2
ST	91	36.4
<b>Education Level</b>		
Illiterate	102	40.8
Primary	91	36.4
Secondary	37	14.8
Higher Secondary and above	20	8
<b>Occupation</b>		
Homemaker	199	79.6
Small Business	27	10.8
Labourer	24	9.6
<b>Type of Family</b>		
Nuclear	189	75.6
Joint	61	24.4

Source: Primary Survey

From Table 3, it can be seen that 39.6% sample belonged to age group of 20-40 years, followed by 34.8% sample belonging to age group of 41-59 years with least proportion (25.6%) belonging to age group of 60 and above. 26.4% of the sample belonged to General caste category, whereas sample belonging to Scheduled Caste category and Scheduled Tribe category are 37.2% and 36.4% respectively. Regarding education, most of the respondents were illiterate (40.8 %) with lowest proportion of sample having reached up to higher secondary level or higher (8%). Most of the respondents were homemakers having no source of income (79.6%), with only small proportion of respondents having small business (10.8%) or working as labourers (9.6%). Most of the sample belonged to nuclear family (75.6%) with just 24.4% belonging to joint family.

**Table 4: Source of information about the social welfare schemes**

Source of Information	Respondents Percentage
<i>Duare Sarkar</i> Camps	60
Friends/relatives/neighbours	22
Newspapers	10
News from TV	8

Source: Primary Survey

Awareness is essential to receive the full benefits of the pension schemes. Table 4 shows the various sources from where information regarding the social welfare schemes is available to them. The most important source of information to them is Duare Sarkar (government at doorstep) Camps. Duare Sarkar Camps are outreach programme organized at gram panchayat level and ward level for providing the benefits of the government schemes. These camps serve as particular service provider as well as nodes for the issuance and collection of applications for the schemes. These Camps are held at quite regular intervals whereby the government representatives help the respondents to understand what schemes are they eligible for and how can they apply. Around 60% of the respondents became aware of the various schemes through this camp. Next source of information is hearing from other person who includes friends, relatives and neighbours. Around 22% of respondents came to know about these schemes from neighbours, relatives or friends. When one usually knows about the scheme and gets benefit from it, they inform about it to the neighbours and in this way the information spreads among the para (locality), as these paras in the village are closely knit. Around 10% of the respondents came to know from the newspapers about the pension schemes followed by 8% who came to know about the schemes from news in the TV.

**Table 5: Awareness and Utilisation of the Government Schemes by socio-demographic factors**

Characteristics	Total (n=250)	Aware about all the selected schemes n=240(%)	Utilising at-least one of the selected schemes n=200(%)
Age group(years)			
20-40	99	96(96.9)	82(82.8)
40-60	87	84(96.5)	75(86.2)
Above 60	64	60(93.7)	43(67.1)
Caste Composition			
General	66	65(98.4)	56(84.8)
SC	93	89(95.6)	74(79.5)
ST	91	86(94.5)	70(76.9)
Education Level			
Illiterate	102	97(95)	76(74.5)
Primary	91	87(95.6)	71(78)
Secondary	37	36(97.2)	33(89.1)
Higher Secondary and above	20	20(100)	20(100)
Occupation			
Homemaker	199	191(95.9)	155(77.8)
Small Business	27	26(96.2)	24(88.8)

Labourer	24	23(95.8)	21(87.5)
Type of Family			
Nuclear	189	181(95.7)	151(79.8)
Joint	61	59(96.7)	49(80.3)

Source: Primary Survey

From Table 5, it can be seen that the awareness about the government schemes was as high as 90% and above among the women irrespective of age, caste, educational qualification, occupational structure and type of family. This signified that the information regarding the schemes has reached successfully across most of the respondents. Coming to the utilisation rate across the age group, it was also on the higher side with the 82.8% of respondents from age group 20-40 years and 86.2% from age group 41-59 years were utilising at-least one welfare scheme. But it was in the age group of senior citizens that is 60 and above utilisation rate was on the lower side at 67.1%. This was due to the fact that most of the old women were suffering from various ailments and had no one to look after them. So they found it difficult to go to the Duare Sarkarcamps or gram panchayat offices to fill out the form for availing of the benefits of the schemes. Coming to the utilisation rate across caste groups, the utilisation rate among general caste was higher with 84.8% of sample utilising at-least one of the government schemes followed by 79.55% of the SC and 76.9% ST sample utilising the same. It was also noticeable that higher the education levels of the sample, higher were the utilisation rate of schemes. All the respondents who have studied up to or passed Higher Secondary were utilising at-least one of the government schemes. On a positive note, most of the respondents (77.8%) who were homemaker were utilising the schemes. Among the family structures, more respondents from the joint family (82.05%) were utilising government schemes than respondents from the nuclear family (79.8%). The respondents in joint family usually came to know from each other when Duare Sarkar Camps are taking place in their para. Otherwise many respondents felt that they would have not known about it. It is therefore good to live in joint families where they can exchange information amongst each other.

**Women Empowerment Index: to measure the impact of government welfare schemes on empowerment of women**

**Table 6: Empowerment Index**

<b>Empowerment Index</b>	<b>Value</b>
Economic Empowerment Index	0.601
Social Empowerment Index	0.802
Household Empowerment Index	0.86
Political Empowerment Index	0.455
Psychological Empowerment Index	0.727
Women Empowerment Index	0.689



Source: Computed by authors

According to the work of Majid Hussain (2005), three levels of women empowerment can be identified. The values below 0.500 signifies low level of women empowerment, 0.500-0.800 signifies moderate level of women empowerment and above 0.800 signifies high level of women empowerment. From Table 6, a number of interesting conclusions can be drawn regarding the impact of welfare schemes on empowerment of women.

The moderate value of economic empowerment shows that women perceive that they have become economically empowered after receiving the benefits of the schemes. In most of the households men are considered as the head of the family since they are the sole earning member of the family. So it can be said that the one who contributes financially have the most say in family. Due to the monetary benefits received from the schemes, the respondents now feel economically empowered. With the money received from the schemes many respondents have opened small business or expanded their business. The purchasing powers of the respondents have increased. They take part in family meetings where expenses are discussed. Women's decision-making power is also perceived as benefitting, as it prevents household wealth from being diverted to useless and harmful activities. The respondents have say in what amount to be saved per month and also decide where to pay what amount of money. When women make credit and savings decisions, they maximise their personal and the household's wellbeing. This enables women to raise their spending on their own and their children's well-being. Also most of the respondents have to take loans as by the end of the month they run out of money, so the money received from the schemes also helps in the repayment of the loans. Also some respondents take loan to support their business; the monetary benefit from the schemes also helps in the repayment of loans taken for their small business.

The high value of social empowerment shows that women perceive that their social status have increased after receiving the benefits of social welfare schemes. Social empowerment focuses on rearranging or changing beliefs about decision-making in order to bring about positive changes. According to many respondents, they were previously denied by their husbands to visit their parents, relatives and friends staying far off and were not given the transportation cost. But now the respondents save money from the schemes and use it to visit their parents, relatives or friends staying far off at their own will. Again increasing mobility of women to go to public places such as markets or recreation centres like cinema halls not only demonstrates improved flexibility in selecting choices for individual aspirations but it is also a sign of women's strength within the traditionally patriarchal household structure.

Household Empowerment Index shows the highest value among all other indices which signifies high level of household empowerment has taken place among the respondents. After receiving the monetary benefits the respondents take part in important household decisions of the family as they also contribute money for managing the household. The most important part where the respondents spend their money received from the schemes is food. They also manage money for the household expenditure which includes paying electricity bills and for buying groceries. Many respondents also spend this money for tuitions of their daughters or other educational purposes. The male members of the family willingly give money to educate their sons but are reluctant to educate the girl child. So the mothers and grandmothers have taken upon the responsibility of educating the girl child in the family with the money received from the schemes.

The low value of political empowerment shows that political status of the women has not yet increased to the expected level after receiving the benefits of welfare schemes. Though most of the respondents are aware about which party is in power and who is providing them with the benefits of these schemes yet they do not vote regularly in elections. The women said previously they used to listen to others like their husbands while voting for a particular party. Now they decide themselves to vote for which party but the respondents are not much updated about the political news. None of the respondents had representation in local governing bodies. Most of the women were also lacking inspiration for active political engagement.

The moderate value of psychological empowerment shows that women perceive that they have become psychologically empowered after receiving the benefits of the schemes. It was found that the respondents after receiving the monetary benefits from the schemes now have a say in important decisions of the family. They also feel that after utilising the schemes their self-respect have increased along with the respect in society. Since now they can claim this money they receive from the schemes as their 'own' and utilise this money for their family, they feel now family members look upon them. They feel that though they cannot claim that they exactly have equal status with men in their family but they are taking small steps towards achieving this goal. Women in traditional Indian society have been made to believe they are worthless. Their hard labour in household duties goes unnoticed because such tasks are unpaid. But after receiving the monetary benefits of the schemes they now feel more empowered to express themselves and perform their household duties with much more confidence.

Thus the WEI signifies moderate level of women empowerment has taken place in Manteswar block of Purba Bardhaman district due to the benefits of the welfare schemes.

A lot still remains to be achieved for high level of women empowerment to take place. Proper administrative measures should be taken to see that the benefits of the welfare schemes reach the intended beneficiaries. All kind of corruption and leakages regarding the implementation of the schemes should be corrected. More transparency should be brought about regarding the schemes and proper management of the records should be maintained.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that these government schemes are a source of assistance for women who are both impoverished and economically disadvantaged. Because West Bengal is a village-centric state, most females belongs to the rural lower and medium income classes for whom this monetary benefit is like a blessing. Though there are issues like delay in receiving payments or long queues in banks yet most of the schemes have been proven to be highly successful, particularly among the women of backward and poorer sections of the society. These also assist the women in combating poverty and backwardness, as well as making them capable of enduring various challenges. These schemes focus on women, encouraging the development of women's skills, empowering women, building their capacity, and providing them with self-confidence. The women who have utilised the government schemes thus have higher level of overall empowerment. The schemes have improved the quality of life of the women particularly those from economically and socially disadvantaged communities which is a silver lining in the cloud of atrocities and inequalities existing today.

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