



Research Paper

Scenario of Women Empowerment: A Regional Analysis of Selected Indicators in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT: The present study focuses on West Bengal and looks at some indicators of women's empowerment in different regions of that state. Nowadays women are facing various problems, they suffer from low literacy, malnutrition, lack of access to health care facilities, early marriage, dowry system, gender inequality etc. Besides they have no interest in politics. To find out the reason, this study mainly concerned women's literacy rate, education level, age at marriage, work participation rate and decision-making power. This study based on secondary data, uses data from census data 2011 & NFHS data. This study analyzes the gender gap in both rural and urban areas on these indicators and also assesses the condition of socio-economic variables. The research identifies various types of challenges faced by women which can impact their overall empowerment. This study discovered that their level of education is low, their early marriages are common and their work participation rate is very low. The study uncovers that, in many cases, women may not have the autonomy to make choices about their own lives. To empower women, it's important to have more Self-Help Groups and NGOs. These groups can teach and raise awareness among women. Setting up institutions and training centres in rural areas is crucial. We also need to improve the education system, create jobs for girls, and make sure that government hospitals and health services for women are better.

KEYWORDS: Women Empowerment, Literacy Rate, Education Level, Marriage Age, and Decision-Making Power.

Received 14 July, 2024; Revised 28 July, 2024; Accepted 30 July, 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Women's Empowerment is a self-acquired process to achieve women's choices such as decisions about their health and bodies, employment, and political representation. This process happens gradually at individual, household, community, country, and global levels. It aims to make women feel like equal members of society, enabling them to make decisions independently without fear or obstacles (H.R Rashmi & K.S Malipatil, 2017). Empowering women allows them to be self-sufficient in various aspects such as thoughts, rights, and decisions, without infringing on others (Lynne, D. 2011). It promotes gender equality, granting women the freedom to make their own choices and ensuring equal rights in society compared to men. Women's empowerment also involves giving women the power to speak out against social issues like domestic violence and dowry demands. This can be achieved by providing good education to girls, treating them equally to boys, and allowing them to voice their opinions on social and family matters (Khan & Ara, 2006). It requires creating safe workplaces for girls, offering job opportunities, and freeing them from traditional restrictions related to household work.

In some parts of society, women still lack the freedom to lead their desired lives. Often, girls are denied access to education and receive minimal opportunities for learning. They aren't allowed to express their opinions on any matter and have limited decision-making power. Living with so many restrictions is challenging. While the number of women is increasing, their societal status remains below expectations. They face discrimination in various aspects, including literacy rate, employment, access to medical facilities, and education. Wage differentials between men and women persist, with women earning less for their labour. Despite reserved seats

for women in panchayat bodies, their influence is often overshadowed by their male counterparts. Child marriage is still prevalent in many parts of the country, impacting the overall well-being of women. Many women lack essential facilities for their health and dignity and face various challenges, including low access to resources, services, education, and income. Addressing gender inequality is necessary for the inclusive development of a country.

This study explores how empowered women are in West Bengal by looking at various factors. It measures women's literacy rate and education level. Additionally, it investigates the age at which women typically get married. The study also assesses women's participation in the workforce to understand their job capabilities. Another crucial aspect is how much influence women have in decision-making. The study also examines the gender gap and analyses both rural and urban areas separately to capture the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women in different settings. By delving into socio-economic variables, such as income, occupation, and access to resources, the research seeks to understand how these factors contribute to women's empowerment in West Bengal. Beyond identifying challenges, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's empowerment to pave the way for targeted solutions and policies to improve the lives of women in the region.

II. STUDY AREA

The research was conducted in West Bengal, situated between 21°25'24"N to 27°13'15"N and 85°48'20"E to 89°53'04"E longitude. This state, located in the eastern region of India along the Bay of Bengal, spans an area of 88,752 square kilometres. West Bengal shares its borders with the Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Sikkim, and Assam. The state capital is Kolkata, the seventh-largest city, and the third-largest metropolitan area in India. West Bengal has a total population of 91,347,736, with 46,809,027 being males and 44,467,088 females. The overall population density is 1,029 persons per square kilometre (Census, 2011).

III. OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the regional pattern of women's educational status and age at marriage in West Bengal.
2. To study women's work participation status and decision-making power in the study area.

IV. DATA SOURCE

This study is all about using information from secondary data. The researcher gathered this information from different places, including both government and non-government agencies. The two main sources used are the District Census Handbook from 2011 and the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) conducted in 2015-16. These sources provide a wealth of data that helps us understand various aspects related to the research. By relying on these established sources, aim to analyze and draw conclusions based on the wealth of existing information available.

V. METHODOLOGY

Descriptive statistical techniques have been used to analyze and present the Data. Tables and diagrams have been prepared by using MS Excel and SPSS software. Thematic maps are prepared by Arc GIS software to show the study area and spatial distributional pattern of the study area. To measure the educational status, literacy rate and level of education (%) have been used. Age at marriage is one of the proxies of women empowerment used in percentage. Similarly, to study and present economic empowerment, the work participation rate is used. Further, it captures another dimension of empowerment information of independent decision-making power which is also a proxy of the number of living children, Age at first birth, and contraceptive use methods.

The female literacy rate is calculated as,

$$\frac{\text{Total literate female}}{\text{Total female population (age seven and above)}} \times 100$$

Women's Work Participation Rate is calculated as,

$$\frac{\text{Total female workers}}{\text{Total female population}} \times 100$$

VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Education plays a crucial role in the development of society and the well-being of women, as recognized in existing literature. It is a key factor in women's empowerment, serving as an important measure to address poverty, child mortality, and population growth. Education is also instrumental in achieving gender equality and fostering sustainable development, peace, and democracy (UNESCO 2010). Improved literacy enhances people's efficiency, which helps them earn more, maintain better health, and improve their quality of life.

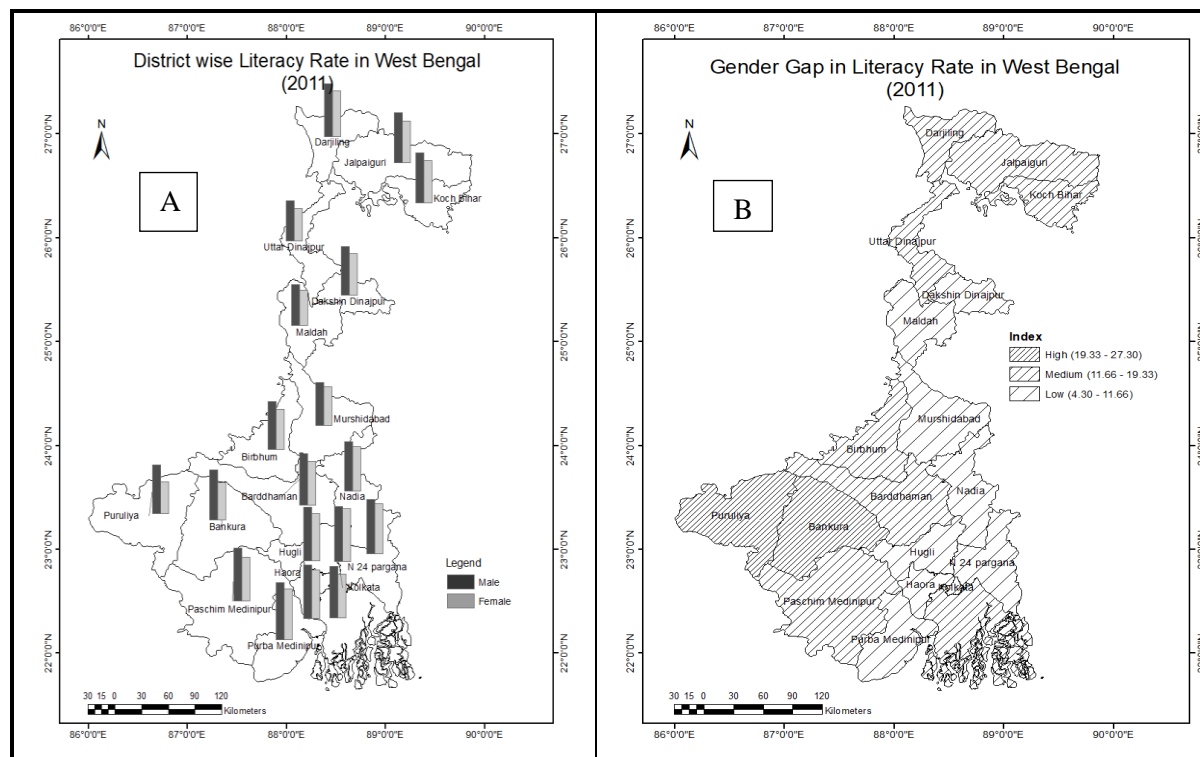
In India, a person is considered literate if they can read, write, and understand a simple message in any language. The 2011 census reveals that approximately three-fourths of the population is literate (74.04 percent). However, there is a significant gender disparity. The male literacy rate is 82.14 percent, while the female literacy rate is 65.46 percent, resulting in a national gender gap in literacy of around 17 percent. Interestingly, from the 2001 to 2011 censuses, the female literacy rate improved by 11.3 percent, surpassing the 6.28 percent change observed in male literacy.

1. Regional Analysis of Literacy Rate:

West Bengal, located in eastern India, stands out for its notable achievements in demographics, society, and economic development. The state has made significant strides in women's development, surpassing even economically advanced states like Maharashtra and Gujarat in several areas. One of the most notable achievements is its female literacy rate, which exceeds the national average. As of the latest data, more than 70 percent of females in West Bengal are literate, compared to the national average of 65 percent.

The disparity between rural and urban literacy rates becomes evident when broken down by region. In rural areas of West Bengal, the female literacy rate stands at 65.5 percent, whereas in urban areas, it reaches 81 percent. Both figures are above the national averages, yet there remains a substantial gap between the two regions. Specifically, the literacy gap between rural and urban areas is 12.94 percent in West Bengal, compared to a 7.39 percent gap at the national level.

Between 2001 and 2011, West Bengal experienced a higher annual growth rate in female literacy compared to male literacy. Female literacy increased by 4.04 percent per year, while male literacy grew by 2.3 percent annually. Additionally, there were notable differences in literacy growth rates between genders in rural and urban settings. In rural areas, female literacy grew at an annual rate of 3.8 percent, whereas male literacy grew at 2 percent. Conversely, female literacy increased by 4.45 percent per year in urban areas, while male literacy grew by 3 percent.



Map 1: Regional Variation of Literacy Rate and Gender Gap in West Bengal

Map-1 (A&B) illustrates regional variations in male-female literacy rates and the gender gap at the district level across West Bengal. The overall literacy rate in the state is 76.3 percent. Purba Medinipur leads with the highest literacy rate at 87.0 percent, followed by Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, Howrah, and Hugli. Notably, districts with higher literacy rates are generally located around the state capital, Kolkata, whereas peripheral areas exhibit lower literacy rates.

At the district level, significant gender disparities in literacy rates are observed. Purba Medinipur boasts the highest male literacy rate at 92.3 percent, while Kolkata has the highest female literacy rate at 84.1 percent. The most pronounced gender gap in literacy is found in Purulia, with a difference of 27.3 percent, whereas Kolkata has the smallest gap at 4.3 percent. Eleven districts have a gender gap in literacy that exceeds the state average. Map-1 (B) indicates that the gender gap is generally lower in the eastern and northern regions of the state, where literacy rates are also lower compared to the state average. This trend is attributed to factors such as the presence of educational institutions, the availability of educational facilities, high levels of urbanization, and strong connectivity with the state capital, all of which contribute to the promotion of education in these districts (Khan, 2016).

2. Regional Analysis of Levels of Education:

Education is a fundamental tool for societal advancement and individual development. It plays a crucial role in shaping culture, driving economic growth, and improving the standard of living. Investment in education enhances human skills, which are essential for economic progress, increased national income, and overall societal

Table 1: Regional variation of Level of Education of Females in West Bengal (%)

Districts Name	% of Below Primary	% of Primary	% of Middle	% of Matric/Secondary	% of Higher Secondary/Intermediate and % of Non-technical diploma	% of technical diploma or certificate and % of Graduates & above
Darjeeling	48.10	49.19	49.56	47.51	46.37	44.81
Jalpaiguri	48.20	49.90	52.27	47.15	43.71	38.22
Koch Bihar	47.94	49.55	51.73	46.68	41.18	32.65
Uttar Dinajpur	47.39	50.36	50.67	44.00	38.10	27.88
Dakshin Dinajpur	47.91	49.47	50.61	45.45	40.09	30.90
Maldah	48.42	52.02	51.45	43.88	38.60	28.32
Murshidabad	47.94	51.95	53.48	45.88	39.19	29.09
Birbhum	48.02	48.75	48.97	41.05	35.84	26.98
Bardhaman	47.83	48.53	49.92	45.22	41.41	35.15
Nadia	47.97	49.67	50.67	44.30	39.62	35.36
North Twenty-Four Parganas	47.68	50.18	51.93	47.54	44.42	40.29
Hugli	48.12	50.03	52.45	48.31	45.35	38.49
Bankura	48.37	47.65	46.04	39.74	34.56	27.07
Purulia	48.22	46.96	44.15	36.74	30.80	24.34
Howrah	48.06	50.14	52.91	49.40	47.03	40.10
Kolkata	47.43	48.29	48.98	47.84	46.98	43.61
South Twenty-Four Parganas	48.48	50.61	52.16	46.88	42.11	34.46
Paschim Medinipur	48.56	48.82	49.39	42.99	38.42	30.89
Purba Medinipur	48.70	49.47	50.82	44.21	38.03	31.18
West Bengal	30.72	25.46	20.89	8.22	8.48	6.34

Source: Computed by Scholar from District Census Handbook. Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India, Government of India, New Delhi, (2011).

well-being. Moreover, education is instrumental in reducing poverty and improving public health (Kishor & Gupta, 2009). It empowers individuals by expanding their awareness of their potential and strengths, thereby equipping them to challenge oppression and discrimination. A child's educational journey begins at home, with parents serving as the first teachers. The role of the mother is particularly significant in a child's early development, emphasizing the need for girls to receive education to prepare them for future roles, including motherhood.

In West Bengal, there are notable gender disparities in educational attainment. Data indicates that female enrollment rates are higher at the Below Primary, Primary, and Middle levels compared to their male counterparts. However, this trend reverses at higher levels of education. Female enrollment rates decline significantly at the Matric/Secondary, Higher Secondary/Intermediate, and Non-Technical Diploma levels, as well as in Technical Diplomas or Certificates and Graduate & Above levels. These disparities are influenced by factors such as early marriage and societal beliefs that confine women primarily to domestic roles, while men are prepared for professional occupations. Consequently, the gender gap widens as educational levels increase.

Table 1 illustrates that female enrollment is higher than male enrollment at the Below Primary (30.72%), Primary (25.46%), and Middle (20.89%) levels. However, the enrollment of females is lower at the Matric/Secondary (8.22%), Higher Secondary/Intermediate, Non-Technical Diploma (8.48%), and Technical Diploma or Certificate and Graduate & Above levels (6.34%). Several factors contribute to the low levels of female education, including poverty, early marriage, and the burden of domestic responsibilities. In co-educational schools, girls may face additional challenges, such as social pressure and a lack of support for pursuing higher education, especially in rural areas. Issues such as lack of parental interest, as well as alcoholism or drug abuse by fathers, also serve as significant barriers to female education (Sengupta & Guha, 2002).

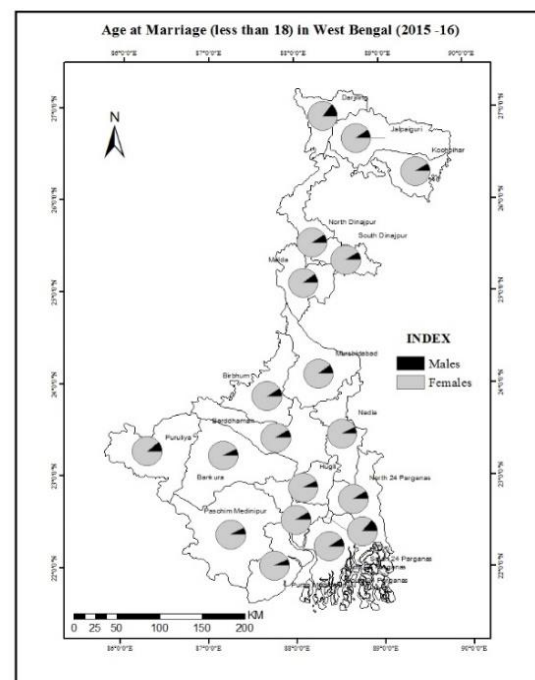
3. Regional Analysis of Age at Marriage:

The age of marriage is a crucial factor influencing a woman's education and socio-economic status. Understanding the ideal age for marriage is essential for navigating the challenges of family life and achieving personal growth. In India, post-independence legal reforms established the minimum age for marriage at 18 for females and 21 for males. Despite these regulations, a significant number of girls in India still marry before the age of 18.

Map 2 offers a detailed view of district-wise statistics for marriages occurring before the age of 18 in West Bengal. Murshidabad district stands out with the highest percentage of ever-married individuals under 18, with 6.17 percent of males and 50.71 percent of females in this category. In contrast, the lowest percentages are observed in Uttar Dinajpur, with 3.35 percent for males, and in Kolkata, where only 22.75 percent of females marry before 18.

A closer examination reveals significant disparities between rural and urban areas. In West Bengal, 4.4 percent of males and 44.9 percent of females in rural areas marry before the age of 18, compared to 3.5 percent of males and 30.7 percent of females in urban areas (Census of India, 2011). The mean age at marriage for both genders is generally higher in urban areas compared to rural ones. This difference is largely attributed to the higher levels of education found in urban settings. Urban residents tend to have better access to educational opportunities, which delays marriage and supports personal development.

In contrast, rural parents, often with lower levels of education, may prioritize early marriages for their children. They may perceive girls as beneficial for their marital family but as economic burdens to be relieved at an earlier age. Social norms and pressures, such as the belief that younger brides require smaller dowries and concerns about safety, also play a role in the prevalence of early marriages (Kishor & Gupta, 2009).

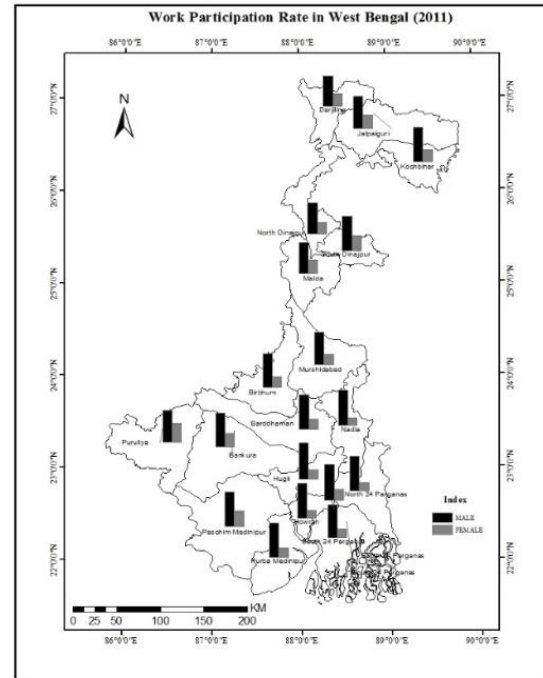


Map 2: Regional Variation of Age at Marriage (>18) in West Bengal

4. Regional Analysis of Work Participation Rate:

Work Participation is a key indicator of economic growth and development. According to the Census of India, the Work Participation Rate (WPR) measures the proportion of the working population relative to the total population in a given area. It is calculated as the percentage of total workers both main and marginal with the total population. As per the 2011 Census, India's overall work participation rate is 39.1 percent. However, this statistic masks a significant gender disparity: the male participation rate is 51.7 percent, whereas the female participation rate is considerably lower at 25.6 percent. Map 3 illustrates the district-wise distribution of the work participation rate in West Bengal. The state's overall WPR stands at 38.1 percent, with Purulia exhibiting the highest rate at 42.6 percent, and Nadia having the lowest at 35.6 percent. The gender gap is particularly striking in Nadia, where the male work participation rate is 47.1 percent compared to a much lower female participation rate of 22.2 percent.

A deeper examination of the data reveals that in West Bengal, the female work participation rate is 19.4 percent in rural areas compared to 15.4 percent in urban areas. The gender gap is also evident, with a discrepancy of 37.8 percent in rural areas and a slightly higher gap of 41.5 percent in urban settings (Census of India, 2011). These figures highlight that despite the overall work participation rate being relatively low, the disparity between male and female participation is quite pronounced.



Map 3: Regional Variation of Work Participation Rate in West Bengal

Additionally, variations in work participation rates based on religious affiliations reveal that Muslim women have a lower work participation rate of 14.0 percent compared to 19.1 percent for Hindu women. This disparity is partly due to marriage constraints and parental expectations which limit the opportunities for women, particularly in certain religious communities (Census of India, 2011).

Socio-economic and demographic factors play a significant role in shaping the work participation rates among women. For instance, the perception of Muslim women's labour, particularly in domestic roles, often goes unrecognized and undervalued in both family and societal contexts. Married Muslim women are frequently engaged in unskilled agricultural and industrial labour, characterized by long working hours and minimal holidays, as highlighted in the Sachar Committee Report of 2006.

5. Regional Analysis of Decision-Making Power:

The decision-making process is a pivotal aspect of women's empowerment, providing significant insights into the level of autonomy and freedom women experience in their daily lives. According to Khan and Ara (2006), the ability of women to make decisions in various domains reflects their empowerment and socio-economic status. This analysis explores the decision-making power of women in West Bengal across seven critical variables, illustrating the extent of gender disparities and highlighting regional variations within the state.

In West Bengal, there is a marked disparity in women's autonomy across different districts, with significant variations in their decision-making power. For instance, in table-2, the data shows that in North Twenty-Four Parganas, a notable 76.4 percent of women have the authority to decide how to manage their own money, making it the district with the highest level of women's financial autonomy. In stark contrast, Bankura exhibits the lowest level of this autonomy, with only 38.20 percent of women having control over their finances. This disparity underscores a broader pattern where women's decision-making power is not uniformly distributed across the state.

The differences extend to other aspects of women's lives as well. For example, Darjeeling stands out as the district where the highest percentage of women, 78.4 percent, are permitted to visit health facilities, reflecting relatively greater autonomy in health-related decisions. Conversely, Uttar Dinajpur represents the lower end of

the spectrum with only 40.60 percent of women having access to health care services. Similarly, Darjeeling leads in terms of women's engagement in leisure activities, with 18.10 percent of women attending a cinema hall or theatre at least once a month. In contrast, Birbhum has the lowest rate, with just 2.20 percent of women participating in such activities, demonstrating a significant gap in opportunities for recreational engagement.

Table 2: Women's decision-making on different aspects of West Bengal (%)

Name of the State & Districts	Has money that the respondent alone can decide how to use	Usually allowed to go to the health facility	Usually, go to a cinema hall or theatre to see a movie at least once a month	Has a bank or savings account that the respondent uses	Has the mobile phone that the respondent uses	Usually allowed to go to the market	Usually allowed to go to places outside this village
Darjeeling	60.5	78.4	18.1	51.4	51.7	76.9	78.2
Jalpaiguri	55.1	67.3	4.4	33.2	36.6	62.5	65.9
Koch Bihar	41.4	57.8	5.7	44.6	38.3	57.6	74
Uttar Dinajpur	53.1	40.6	3.5	40.5	26	42.4	57.5
Dakshin Dinajpur	57.6	57.3	9.8	45.7	25.2	58.7	58.6
Maldah	58.9	66.9	6.3	52.8	38.7	67.7	64.2
Murshidabad	66.6	64	4.2	46.7	47.2	69.8	72.7
Birbhum	54.9	68.4	2.2	45.1	28.5	66.2	72.9
Bardhaman	60.4	58.2	3.1	37	39.4	61.2	62.7
Nadia	46	61.2	4.4	44.3	39.9	65	70.5
North Twenty-Four Parganas	76.4	80.5	12	55.6	51.1	78.7	72.1
Hugli	62.1	69.1	8.1	50	49.7	66.7	68.8
Bankura	38.2	59.5	2.6	33.7	28.4	61.2	70.1
Purulia	47.7	54.1	2.6	29.3	25.6	51.9	58.6
Howrah	52.1	71.7	12.5	49.1	60.3	69.6	78.1
Kolkata	67.4	61.9	13	59.1	67.7	71	70.1
South Twenty-Four Parganas	61.8	67.5	6.4	27.9	34	67.3	69.3
Paschim Medinipur	51.7	70.6	3.1	39.5	40.4	65.5	75
Purba Medinipur	53.5	67.9	6	42.4	38.3	69.9	70.2
West Bengal	58.1	65.6	6.6	43.5	41.8	66.2	69.5

Source: Computed from National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India.

Further illustrating the regional disparities, Kolkata is the top district for women owning a bank or savings account, with 59.10 percent of women having access to such financial services. On the other hand, South Twenty-Four Parganas has the lowest percentage of women with a bank account, at 27.90 percent. In terms of mobile phone ownership, Kolkata again ranks highest with 67.70 percent of women owning a mobile phone, while Dakshin Dinajpur is at the lower end with just 25.20 percent of women possessing a mobile phone. The data also reveals that North Twenty-Four Parganas has the highest percentage of women allowed to go to the market, with 78.80 percent of women enjoying this freedom, whereas Uttar Dinajpur shows the lowest rate at 42.40 percent.

When it comes to the freedom to travel outside their village, Darjeeling ranks highest with 78.20 percent of women being allowed to go beyond their village boundaries, while Uttar Dinajpur records the lowest percentage at 57.50 percent. These variations in decision-making power across districts highlight the unequal distribution of autonomy among women in West Bengal.

The analysis also sheds light on how religious affiliations influence women's decision-making power. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), there are notable differences between Hindu and Muslim women regarding their decision-making autonomy. For Hindu women, Murshidabad emerges as the district with the highest decision-making power, while for Muslim women, Purba Medinipur stands out as the

leading district in various aspects of decision-making autonomy. The overall top districts for both Hindu and Muslim women's empowerment include Murshidabad, Purba Medinipur, Kolkata, and Howrah. Conversely, districts such as Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Nadia, Bankura, Purulia, South Twenty-Four Parganas, and Paschim Medinipur are characterized by lower levels of decision-making power for women across both religious groups.

VII. MAJOR FINDINGS

The indicators of women's empowerment in various domains, along with their background characteristics, are summarized below:

1. Status of Education and Marriage of Women:

In examining the status of education and marriage of women in West Bengal's districts, distinct patterns emerge. The female literacy rate is notably high in Kolkata but significantly lower in Purulia, accompanied by a pronounced gender gap. An analysis by residence reveals higher literacy rates in urban areas compared to rural ones. Additionally, the literacy rate is observed to be higher among the Hindu population compared to the Muslim community. Within the realm of education, a shift is evident in enrollment ratios between school and higher education. While females exhibit higher enrollment in school than males, this trend is reversed at the graduate level, with a 9.49 percent higher enrollment of males. Notably, most females complete intermediate or graduation in urban areas. Primary-level education is more prevalent in rural areas, while graduate-level education is more prominent in urban areas. The study uncovers instances where females in rural areas have reached post-graduate levels.

An exploration of the comparative age at marriage between males and females at the state level highlights substantial differences. A considerable percentage of females (40.27%) marry below the age of 18, in stark contrast to the percentage of males (4.13%). Urban areas exhibit lower proportions of ever-married individuals. At the state level, more males (4.4%) and significantly more females (44.9%) get married in rural areas, while fewer males (3.5%) and females (30.7%) marry in urban areas.

2. Status of Women in Work Participation and Decision-Making:

Shifting focus to the status of women in work participation and decision-making, Purulia stands out with the highest work participation rate, surpassing the state average, while Nadia reports the lowest rate. The gender gap in work participation is pronounced, with male participation consistently higher in both residence and religion. Female participation is notably low in the primary sector but peaks in the secondary, tertiary, and quaternary sectors. The dominance of rural areas in the primary sector contrasts with urban areas leading in the secondary, tertiary, and quaternary sectors.

Regarding decision-making, a substantial percentage of females enjoy the freedom to decide how to use their money. They are generally allowed to visit health centres, markets, and locations outside their villages. However, the attendance of females in cinema halls or theatres is relatively low, with only 6.60 percent attending at least once a month. The study also underscores a higher level of decision-making power among Hindu women compared to their Muslim counterparts.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The empowerment of women in West Bengal reveals a complex interplay of educational, economic, and socio-cultural factors that collectively influence their status and autonomy. This study meticulously examines various dimensions of women's empowerment, including literacy rates, educational attainment, age at marriage, work participation, and decision-making power, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape.

Education is a fundamental pillar for the empowerment of women, significantly impacting their socio-economic status and overall well-being. In West Bengal, while the female literacy rate exceeds the national average, notable disparities persist between rural and urban areas, as well as among different districts. Urban regions show higher literacy rates and educational attainment, highlighting the influence of better access to educational resources and facilities. However, the decline in female enrollment at higher education levels, particularly beyond primary and middle school, underscores the challenges posed by early marriage, societal expectations, and economic constraints. This trend is more pronounced in rural areas, where traditional norms and lower socio-economic conditions often hinder girls' educational aspirations.

Women's participation in the workforce is a crucial indicator of their economic empowerment. Despite advancements, significant gender gaps remain in work participation rates, with male participation consistently higher across both rural and urban areas. Women are predominantly engaged in the secondary, tertiary, and quaternary sectors, with lower representation in the primary sector. This distribution reflects the broader economic structure and the limited opportunities available to women, particularly in rural settings. Additionally, religious affiliations influence work participation rates, with Muslim women facing more constraints compared to their Hindu counterparts. The socio-economic and cultural factors, including marital expectations and parental influence, further exacerbate these disparities.

The ability of women to make independent decisions in various aspects of their lives is a crucial measure of their empowerment. In West Bengal, significant regional variations exist in women's decision-making power, reflecting the uneven distribution of autonomy across districts. Urban women generally exhibit greater decision-making authority, particularly in financial matters, health-related decisions, and mobility. Conversely, women in rural areas face more significant restrictions, often dictated by traditional norms and lower educational levels. The data also highlights the influence of religious affiliations, with Hindu women enjoying relatively higher decision-making power compared to Muslim women. Despite these advancements, challenges remain, particularly in enhancing women's participation in recreational activities and ensuring their access to financial services and mobile technology.

The study underscores the importance of a multi-faceted approach to women's empowerment, integrating educational, economic, and social dimensions. To achieve meaningful progress, policies must address the unique challenges faced by women in different regions, considering the socio-cultural and economic contexts. Enhancing educational opportunities, promoting economic participation, and empowering women to make independent decisions are crucial steps toward achieving gender equality and fostering inclusive development in West Bengal. Future research should continue to explore these dimensions, providing insights for targeted interventions that can transform the lives of women and contribute to the overall progress of society.

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