

The Role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Transforming Women's Lives in Rural Odisha

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Abstract

Women's self-empowerment in Odisha is a crucial step towards challenging traditional norms and promoting gender equality. This study explores how women might reject patriarchal norms and attain socio-economic autonomy. The research highlights the importance of education, skill development, and grassroots efforts like Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in promoting financial independence, decision-making skills, and community engagement. This study examines how women in Odisha are recovering their roles in family and society via the lens of cultural heritage, legislative reforms, and grassroots action. The study highlights the importance of education and computer literacy in promoting self-empowerment. Collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations also fosters long-term improvement. Success stories highlight women as change makers, fostering a movement for gender equality and inclusive development. This research highlights the need of investing in education, policy assistance, and grassroots participation to empower women and promote equality and inclusion in Odisha.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, gender equity, Odisha, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), education, digital literacy, grassroots activism, socio-economic autonomy

I. INTRODUCTION

Dogmatic beliefs, often rooted in rigid ideologies or traditions, significantly impact women's lives by reinforcing outdated gender roles and limiting their freedom and opportunities. These beliefs prescribe fixed roles for women, such as being primary caregivers or submissive partners, thereby restricting access to education, professional growth, and personal autonomy. Women are frequently pressured to conform to specific standards in behavior and appearance, which suppresses individuality and diminishes self-confidence. In more extreme cases, dogmatic views justify gender-based violence, including domestic abuse and forced marriages, by portraying women as subordinate or property. Moreover, such ideologies may oppose women's rights to education, reproductive autonomy, and employment, reinforcing systemic inequality. The influence of dogma also extends to mental health, where societal expectations can lead to stress, anxiety, or depression when women struggle to meet imposed norms. Educational and career restrictions further widen gender disparities in various sectors, undermining women's economic empowerment. Ultimately, dogmatic beliefs help sustain patriarchal systems, barring women from leadership and decision-making roles, and entrenching male dominance in both private and public spheres. These inflexible belief systems continue to obstruct the path to gender equity, making it essential to challenge and transform such mindsets for the holistic development and empowerment of women.

Overview of Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is the process of enabling women to gain control over their lives by making informed decisions, accessing resources, and actively participating in all societal dimensions. It involves economic, political, social, and legal dimensions, ensuring women have opportunities and protections equal to men. In Odisha, empowering women is crucial for sustainable development. Economically, empowered women boost productivity and invest more in family health and education, fostering community well-being. Many rural women work in agriculture and informal sectors; giving them access to land, credit, and entrepreneurial opportunities helps break poverty cycles. Women's autonomy in health decisions results in better outcomes for families, including reduced maternal and infant mortality. Culturally, empowerment challenges harmful norms like dowry and child marriage, promoting gender justice and dignity. Social empowerment ensures women have access to education, healthcare, and services, while political empowerment enhances their presence in governance, influencing policy decisions that reflect women's needs. Though Odisha has made progress, deeply rooted gender norms still hinder equality. However, initiatives such as panchayat-level reservations have encouraged women's leadership. Empowered women become agents of change, inspiring future generations and driving societal transformation toward equity, justice, and inclusive development in Odisha.

Table 1: Key Institutional Interventions for Women's Empowerment in Odisha

Program / Scheme	Strategic Objective and Operational Focus
Mission Shakti	A state-driven initiative fostering the formation of Women's Self-Help Groups (WSHGs), aimed at enhancing financial inclusion, entrepreneurial capacity, and socio-economic advancement.
Sakhi Nari Sewa Kendra	A centralized support and grievance redressal system for women facing domestic violence or abuse, offering legal counselling, psychological support, and immediate relief services.
Educational Advancement Programs	Targeted schemes to uplift female education levels, especially in rural zones, through scholarships, retention incentives, and infrastructure enhancements for girls' schooling.
Women's Health and Reproductive Services	Public health interventions focusing on maternal care, reproductive autonomy, and access to essential health services to ensure improved health outcomes for women and children.
Economic and Skill Development Schemes	Initiatives aimed at economic upliftment through vocational training, promotion of women entrepreneurs, and capacity building in agriculture and allied sectors.

Table 2: Project Objectives and Implementation Strategies for Women's Empowerment

Core Objective Area	Specific Objective	Implementation Strategy / Key Actions
Economic Independence and Financial Empowerment	To enhance women's financial autonomy through access to resources and entrepreneurship.	Form and support SHGs, facilitate microfinance access, and deliver training in income-generating activities (e.g., handicrafts, agriculture).

Core Objective Area	Specific Objective	Implementation Strategy / Key Actions
Educational Access and Gender Equity	To bridge the gender gap in education and promote learning opportunities for girls and women.	Provide scholarships, run awareness campaigns, and deliver vocational training to improve employability.
Health and Reproductive Services Access	To improve health outcomes by enhancing women's access to essential healthcare and reproductive services.	Launch awareness drives, set up community health centers, and deliver prenatal, family planning, and general care services.
Political Participation and Leadership	To increase women's involvement in governance and decision-making roles.	Conduct leadership training, organize political awareness sessions, and support women candidates in local elections.
Prevention of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)	To combat GBV by strengthening support systems and raising legal and social awareness.	Establish helplines, offer legal aid and counseling, and conduct community education on women's rights and protections.

II. RELATED WORK

Odisha is characterized by a deeply entrenched patriarchal cultural framework, wherein women, particularly those in rural settings, are expected to adhere to prescriptive roles within both familial and societal structures. These roles often encompass child-rearing responsibilities and the preservation of family honor. Sahoo (2012) asserts that certain cultural practices, such as early marriage and a pronounced focus on motherhood, substantially constrain women's autonomy and hinder their opportunities for self-actualization. The societal expectation that women forgo education and professional careers further exacerbates their marginalization, resulting in their limited participation in decision-making processes at both the familial and community levels. Individuals socialized within such patriarchal systems may internalize these oppressive cultural norms, which leads to diminished self-esteem, restricted aspirations, and a lack of self-efficacy. Behera (2016) posits that many rural women in Odisha regard their primary function as serving the needs of their families, internalizing the belief that deviations from this role are socially unacceptable. This internalized ideology poses a significant barrier to challenging the pervasive gendered social norms that restrict women's agency. In recent years, however, there has been a notable rise in efforts aimed at challenging these ingrained patriarchal structures and fostering female empowerment in Odisha. Feminist activists and local organizations have made considerable progress in advocating for women's education, awareness, and economic independence. Patnaik (2019) highlights initiatives such as women's self-help groups (SHGs) and vocational training programs, which have facilitated women's financial autonomy, thereby enhancing their capacity to challenge traditional gender norms. These initiatives are designed to disrupt cycles of dependency and provide women with the requisite tools for empowerment.

Education has emerged as a critical mechanism for women's empowerment in Odisha. According to Dash (2015), access to education significantly increases the likelihood of women contesting entrenched gender norms. Educated women are more likely to enter the workforce, engage in informed decision-making, and assert their rights to gender equality in both their personal and professional lives. Nonetheless, despite improvements in literacy rates, rural women continue to encounter formidable barriers to education,

including economic limitations and deeply embedded gender biases. The media has also played an instrumental role in challenging gender stereotypes and facilitating women's empowerment in Odisha. The proliferation of digital platforms has enabled women to articulate their personal narratives and share experiences, contributing to a broader discourse on gender equality. Pattnaik (2020) discusses how local media and social media platforms are increasingly showcasing stories of women who have defied traditional gender roles, thereby serving as a source of inspiration for other women to challenge normative constraints. Despite the progress made, significant challenges persist. Sahoo (2012) emphasizes that entrenched cultural beliefs, low levels of awareness, and pervasive poverty continue to curtail women's opportunities for comprehensive empowerment. Furthermore, rural women in Odisha face heightened barriers relative to their urban counterparts, particularly in terms of access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study on women's self-empowerment in Odisha employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to provide a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related factors that influence women's empowerment. The primary goal is to explore how education, skill development, government policies, and grassroots movements contribute to empowering women, while also identifying the challenges and potential solutions for overcoming these barriers. The research design is exploratory and descriptive, enabling a detailed examination of historical trends, current policies, and case studies to draw meaningful insights regarding women's empowerment in the region.

Data collection for this study involves both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is gathered through structured surveys targeting women from various socio-economic backgrounds in Odisha, along with semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, such as policymakers, NGO representatives, educators, and beneficiaries of empowerment programs. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) are conducted with members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and grassroots activists to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and challenges. Secondary data includes government reports and policies, particularly on women's empowerment initiatives like Mission Shakti, academic literature, and media coverage, including digital and print campaigns focusing on gender equality.

The data analysis employs both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs are analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and narratives. Quantitative survey data are analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential methods, such as chi-square tests and regression analysis, to uncover patterns and correlations. Ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and adhering to data protection guidelines, are strictly followed throughout the research process. While acknowledging the limitations, such as potential biases in self-reported data and the difficulty in reaching marginalized women with limited access to technology, efforts are made to ensure the reliability of the findings through data triangulation.

Historical Background of Women in Odisha

Women's empowerment is essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. In Odisha, a state known for its cultural diversity, the condition of women has evolved significantly over the years. While many challenges persist, there have been considerable improvements in various areas that contribute to women's empowerment. Historically, women in Odisha enjoyed a respectable position in society, but over time, socio-economic barriers and patriarchal norms limited their growth and

opportunities. In recent decades, various efforts have been made to improve their status, particularly through education, welfare schemes, and support from non-governmental organizations. Education has played a pivotal role in empowering women in Odisha. The female literacy rate has risen substantially, driven by government initiatives like mid-day meal programs, free education, and awareness campaigns. Educated women are more likely to participate in the workforce, make informed decisions, and lead independent lives. However, in rural and tribal areas, access to education still remains a challenge. The Government of Odisha has launched several schemes aimed at uplifting women socially and economically. Programs such as Mission Shakti, the Mamata Scheme, and the Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana have provided women with access to financial support, healthcare, and self-employment opportunities. One-stop centres like Sakhi also offer support services to women facing violence and abuse. NGOs have been instrumental in reaching out to women at the grassroots level. Organizations like SEWA, CYSD, and Pragati work towards creating awareness, offering skill development training, and supporting health and legal literacy. Their community-based approach makes empowerment more accessible and sustainable, especially in remote areas. Despite these efforts, several challenges remain. Cultural taboos, gender-based violence, limited economic opportunities, and poor implementation of policies hinder progress. Bridging the urban-rural divide and ensuring effective policy execution are crucial for long-term change.

Case Studies of Empowered Women in Odisha

1. Education-Based Empowerment

Case Study: Sushila from Kandhamal District

Sushila, a tribal girl from Kandhamal, was the first in her village to complete higher secondary education. Supported by the NGO Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), she received free education, boarding, and skill development. With strong academic performance, she pursued a B.Ed. and became a teacher, now inspiring other girls in her community to attend school.

Impact: Her journey has changed perceptions around girls' education in her village.

2. Financial Empowerment through SHGs

Case Study: Mamata Mahila SHG, Ganjam District

Formed under the Mission Shakti program, this SHG started with mushroom cultivation. Over time, with training from the Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM), the group diversified into turmeric processing and tailoring. Their annual income grew from ₹10,000 to over ₹3 lakhs.

Impact: The women gained economic independence and decision-making power in their households.

3. Entrepreneurship Empowerment

Case Study: Laxmi Das, Bhubaneswar

Laxmi, once a domestic worker, received training under the Odisha State Urban Livelihood Mission (OSULM) to start a food cart business. She now runs a successful catering service with ten women under her.

Impact: She employs and mentors other women, creating a ripple effect of empowerment.

4. Political Empowerment

Case Study: Rukmini Sethi, Sarpanch, Koraput

Rukmini, elected as sarpanch from a reserved women's seat, initiated several development works like clean water supply and girls' hostel construction. With leadership training from PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia), she improved governance in her Panchayat.

Impact: Increased participation of women in gram sabhas and policy-making.

5. Legal and Rights Awareness Empowerment

Case Study: Sunita Rout, Cuttack

A survivor of domestic violence, Sunita was helped by Mahila Shakti Kendra. After legal counseling and shelter, she filed for maintenance and custody of her child. Today, she works as a paralegal volunteer educating women about their rights.

Impact: Her story motivates other women to speak up against violence.

Role of Media and Technology in Women's Empowerment

S. No.	Aspect	Description	Examples
1	Expression & Storytelling	Platforms enable women to share personal narratives and express themselves freely.	#MeToo, blogs, vlogs on Instagram, Twitter, etc.
2	Challenging Stereotypes	Women use social media to redefine gender roles and body image.	#BodyPositivity, #EveryBodyIsBeautiful
3	Digital Activism	Platforms help organize movements and protests.	#WomensMarch, #HeForShe
4	Legal Advocacy	Social media is used to raise awareness and push for legal reforms.	#RepealThe8th (Ireland)
5	Support Networks	Online groups help women build communities, share advice, and find mentors.	r/Feminism, LeanIn.org
6	Entrepreneurship	Women use platforms for business branding, and selling products.	Instagram stores, Kickstarter campaigns
7	Skill Development	Access to free/affordable learning tools and communities.	YouTube tutorials, LinkedIn Learning
8	Safety & Violence Awareness	Women raise awareness of violence and advocate for safety reforms.	#NotOneMore, #TimesUp

Impactful Awareness Campaigns

Several global awareness campaigns have played a transformative role in promoting women's empowerment by challenging societal norms, advocating for rights, and amplifying the voices of women. One of the most influential movements is the #MeToo campaign, which began as a grassroots movement by activist Tarana Burke and gained global momentum in 2017. It empowered women to speak openly about their experiences with sexual harassment and assault, leading to a cultural reckoning across industries and prompting reforms in workplace policies and legal systems. Complementing this is the #Time's Up campaign, launched by Hollywood celebrities, which created a legal defense fund to support victims of workplace harassment and pushed for safer, more equitable working environments. Another significant initiative is #HeForShe, a campaign by UN Women that emphasizes the role of men and boys in the fight for gender equality. Spearheaded by actress Emma Watson, it encourages male participation in dismantling gender-based discrimination, fostering inclusive advocacy worldwide. In 2014, the

#BringBackOurGirls campaign drew global attention to the abduction of over 270 schoolgirls in Nigeria by Boko Haram. This movement highlighted the vulnerability of girls in conflict zones and reignited global conversations on the importance of girls' education and safety.

Meanwhile, the #GirlsCount campaign by the ONE Campaign spotlighted the staggering statistic of over 130 million girls being out of school. Through engaging digital storytelling, public figures and activists helped raise awareness and encouraged policy action for universal access to education. Although not exclusively a gender-based movement, #BlackLivesMatter also intersects significantly with women's issues, particularly focusing on the systemic racism and violence faced by Black women and LGBTQ+ individuals. This movement broadened the feminist dialogue to include race, class, and sexuality, promoting a more intersectional approach to empowerment.

Recommendations and Way Forward

Strategy	Objective	Action Points
Education Awareness	& Promote gender equality mindsets.	Gender-sensitive curricula, media campaigns.
Legal & Policy Reforms	Enforce protective laws.	Gender quotas, repeal outdated laws.
Cultural Dialogue	Challenge harmful traditions.	Engage religious leaders, promote inclusive interpretations.
Economic Empowerment	Promote financial independence.	Microfinance, women-led businesses.
Tech & Media Advocacy	Use media for change.	Campaigns, digital literacy, documentaries.
Community Initiatives	Mobilize local support.	SHGs, grassroots activism, youth engagement.
Female Leadership	Encourage women in power.	Mentorship, showcasing role models.
Mental Health Support	Address psychological impact.	Counseling, safe spaces, school programs.
Engage Men & Boys	Include men in the movement.	Ally campaigns, education programs.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the impact of progressive legislation, community activities, and local leaders on empowering women to transcend conventional conventions. Programs promoting women's education, economic independence, and legal protection are empowering them to claim their rights and live more freely. Microfinance, vocational training, and entrepreneurial initiatives empower women to defy established gender norms and generate their own income. Technology and social media empower women to express themselves, raise their voices, and interact with others. These tools have empowered women in Odisha to confront injustice and demand better treatment, breaking away from outdated customs and cultural expectations. Despite the improvements made, substantial difficulties remain. Women, particularly in rural regions, continue to face barriers due to patriarchy, societal shame, and insufficient resources. Success stories of individuals who have overcome obstacles demonstrate the possibility of

transformation. Future efforts should prioritise empowering women via education, economic opportunity, and leadership initiatives. To combat negative gender stereotypes, it's important to include both men and boys. To empower women in Odisha, ongoing legal improvements, societal support, and cultural adjustments are important. Empowering women to live on their own terms improves their lives and contributes to a more equitable society for everyone. Odisha's progress towards completely recognising and respecting women's rights is encouraging.

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