

# Rural Women at Work: A Comparative Study of Sikarpur Gram Panchayat in Jalpaiguri and Hatighisa Gram Panchayat in Darjeeling Districts of West Bengal

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## Abstract

This study examines the occupational status and socio-economic conditions of rural women in two Gram Panchayats of West Bengal namely Sikarpur (in Jalpaiguri district) and Hatighisa (in Darjeeling district) based on survey data from 200 women aged 25 to 55 years. The findings reveal that women in both regions make significant contributions to agriculture, informal work and domestic labour though their roles remain under-recognized. Despite improvements in literacy and Self-Help Group (SHG) participation disparities exist across age, caste and income levels. Hatighisa shows higher awareness of government schemes and better female work participation while Sikarpur demonstrates better educational access and slightly higher income diversity. Economic necessity, not personal empowerment is the primary driver of employment of women with most jobs being temporary and low-paid. Childcare responsibilities particularly among younger women and lack of time among older women remain main barriers to employment. Women face structural challenges such as limited mobility, education and access to stable livelihoods especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions including skill development, improved childcare facilities, awareness programs and sustainable employment opportunities. These measures are essential to enhance women's economic agency, improve quality of life and promote their active role in rural development and local governance.

**Keywords:** Rural Women, Occupational Status, Economic Empowerment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women contribute equally to the development of the economy and society given that they comprise nearly half of the global population [1]. In rural regions, women take on a wide range of labour-intensive responsibilities often with minimal personal time, yet their access to income and control over productive resources remains limited [2]. In sectors like agriculture, small-scale industries and informal enterprises, women in developing countries play a crucial role in economic activities [3].

Historically, women's economic contributions have been undervalued and under-recognized despite their significant impact on economic and social transformation [4]. Although social norms are gradually shifting, women continue to navigate the complex balance between traditional familial duties and

participation in gainful employment. In India, for example, the legal framework supports gender equality, yet the ground realities reveal persistent socio-economic disparities between men and women [5].

Women's autonomy is further restricted by cultural factors such as the prevalent preference for sons over daughters in inheritance and care giving especially in rural and economically challenged homes [6]. Although women engage extensively in unpaid household work and informal economic roles, this labour is often excluded from national statistics contributing to their marginalization in the formal economy [7]. Programmes aimed at empowering rural women focus on improving their socio-economic status promoting participation in decision-making and facilitating access to education and credit [8]. Despite cultural barriers and long-standing gender norms there is growing consensus that empowering women is vital for achieving sustainable development and true gender equality [9].

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Rural women play a vital role in the economic development of their households and communities [10]. Despite their substantial contributions to both the formal and informal sectors, their work particularly in rural India frequently remains invisible, unacknowledged or unpaid [11]. In many cases, women are actively engaged in productive tasks but the distinction between economic and non-economic activities often blurs due to the informal nature of rural livelihoods [12].

In the context of this study, economic activities refer to productive endeavors that directly supplement the family income such as wage labour, self-employment or involvement in agricultural and small-scale enterprises. Non-economic activities, on the other hand include essential household and caregiving responsibilities, unpaid farm work and community-based labour that while productive do not yield direct financial returns.

The current research seeks to comprehend the occupational status of rural women in selected villages of Sikarpur Gram Panchayat (Jalpaiguri district) and Hatighisa Gram Panchayat (Darjeeling district) of West Bengal. These regions present distinct socio-economic dynamics influenced by factors such as caste, ethnicity, access to markets and land ownership.

While policies and schemes have been introduced to promote women's empowerment and economic participation, disparities persist due to structural constraints, limited access to credit, education and mobility restrictions. Developing inclusive solutions that promote gender equity and economic development requires an understanding of the realities of rural women's labour.

## **3. Objectives of the Study**

The study has been undertaken with the following specific objectives:

- To examine the participation of rural women in both economic and non-economic activities
- To identify the factors that hinder involvement of rural women in economic activities
- To analyze the challenges faced by women who are engaged in economic activities
- To understand the nature and characteristics of employment available to rural women

## **4. Research Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive survey method to investigate the occupational status and participation of rural women in both economic and non-economic activities. A total of 200 working rural women aged between 25 years to 55 years were selected as the sample population. The respondents were drawn from

six villages under Sikarpur Gram Panchayat in the Rajganj Block of Jalpaiguri district and four villages under Hatighisa Gram Panchayat in the Naxalbari Block of Darjeeling district, West Bengal. The sample was selected to ensure representation across various social categories including General, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). This approach allowed for an inclusive understanding of how caste and community affiliations intersect with the occupational roles of women.

Primary data were collected through field surveys using a structured interview schedule. This method was particularly appropriate for reaching both literate and illiterate respondents ensuring that no demographic group was excluded due to literacy barriers. The interview schedule included a number of open-ended and closed-ended questions intended to elicit detailed answers about the respondents' and their families' socio-economic backgrounds including educational attainment, the type and nature of their jobs, their involvement in both economic and non-economic activities and their perceptions of the difficulties and limitations they face at work.

## 5. Limitations of the Study

The study was confined to six villages in Sikarpur Gram Panchayat and four villages in Hatighisa Gram Panchayat located in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts respectively. Given this limited geographic scope, the findings may not be fully representative of the broader rural population in North Bengal or West Bengal as a whole. As a result, care must be used when extrapolating the findings outside of the locations under study. The study mainly looked at a small number of socio-economic factors and investigated how remittances and different kinds of employment affected them. Other critical dimensions such as health outcomes, psychological well-being, access to government schemes and gender-based violence were not included in the analysis.

## 6. Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from a total of 200 rural women engaged in various economic and non-economic activities ranging in age from 25 years to 55 years. The study population was drawn from six villages under the Sikarpur Gram Panchayat of the Jalpaiguri district namely Babupara, Pradhanpara, Sonarbari, Cablepara, Sardarpara and Majhabariand and four villages under the Hatighisa Gram Panchayat of the Darjeeling district which include Mongalsingjote, Shebdella, Nayanagar and Birsinghjote.

The discussion explores differences and similarities in occupational status and livelihood experiences among women from diverse age groups, castes, and economic backgrounds across the two Gram Panchayats. Descriptive statistics, comparative analysis and narrative accounts are used to offer a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of rural women in these areas.

**Table 1: General Information of the Respondents**

General Information	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat	Hatighisa Gram Panchayat	Total
Age-Group in years			
25-35	33	30	63
35-45	52	51	103
45-55	15	19	34

Community			
General	41	28	69
Scheduled Caste	42	32	74
Scheduled Tribe	Nil	30	30
Other Backward Class	17	10	27
APL/BPL Profile			
APL (Above Poverty Line)	62	22	84
BPL (Below Poverty Line)	38	78	116
Associated with Self-Help Group			
Yes	95	89	184
No	5	11	16
Occupation			
Housewife	39	25	64
Employed	61	75	136
Monthly Income of the Family in Rupees			
Less than 10000	94	91	185
10001-15000	5	9	14
More than 15000	1	Nil	1
Educational Level			
Illiterate	8	8	16
Primary	40	41	81
Upper Primary	45	47	92
Secondary	4	4	8
Higher Secondary	2	Nil	2
Graduate	1	Nil	1
Marital Status			
Married	98	98	196
Widow	2	2	4
Aware about Education			
Yes	90	91	181
No	10	9	19
Aware about Participation in Panchayati Raj Institution			
Yes	83	90	173
No	17	10	27
Awareness about women's participation in economic activities			
Yes	80	92	172
No	3	1	4
Do not know	17	7	24

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 1 presents the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the 200 rural women sampled for this study categorized by the Sikarpur Gram Panchayat in Jalpaiguri district and Hatighisa Gram Panchayat in Darjeeling district. Table 1 also presents the age-wise distribution of 200 respondents from Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats with an equal number (100) from each. The data reveals that the majority of respondents (51.5 percent) fall within the 35 years to 45 years age group indicating a dominant middle-aged workforce. The 25 years to 35 years age group constitutes 31.5 percent reflecting a significant level of youth participation while only 17 percent belong to the 45 years to 55 years age group suggesting lower engagement of older individuals possibly due to reduced work capacity or retirement. Both gram panchayats exhibit similar trends with Sikarpur showing a slightly higher proportion of younger respondents (33 percent) compared to Hatighisa (30 percent) whereas Hatighisa has a marginally higher representation in the oldest group (19 percent versus. 15 percent). This balanced and comparable distribution highlights the active involvement of the working-age population across both regions.

The community representation in the study highlights significant differences between Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats particularly in the caste composition of rural women. Sikarpur has a higher proportion of General category women (41 percent) and Scheduled Caste women (42 percent) with no women from the Scheduled Tribe category. In contrast, Hatighisa displays a more diverse caste representation with 28 percent General, 32 percent Scheduled Caste, 30 percent Scheduled Tribe and 10 percent Other Backward Class women. The absence of Scheduled Tribe women in Sikarpur alongside their significant presence in Hatighisa (30 percent) underscores a distinct socio-cultural difference between the two regions. This difference in caste representation could be reflective of the varied demographic and social structures present in the two Gram Panchayats with Hatighisa showcasing a more balanced and inclusive community composition.

The poverty line status analysis reveals stark economic contrasts between Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats shedding light on the economic vulnerabilities faced by rural women in these areas. Sikarpur exhibits a significantly higher proportion of women in the Above Poverty Line (APL) category with 62 women compared to just 22 in Hatighisa. This suggests that women from Sikarpur are generally in better economic conditions, likely due to more stable income sources or better access to resources. On the other hand, Hatighisa has a far higher percentage of women in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category with 78 women compared to 38 in Sikarpur. This highlights the greater economic hardship and vulnerability faced by rural women in Hatighisa reflecting a deeper level of poverty in this region. Overall, the data emphasizes the disparity in economic well-being between the two areas with Sikarpur exhibiting more financial stability and Hatighisa struggling with higher levels of poverty.

Both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats exhibit strong participation in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) reflecting the active role that SHGs play in empowering rural women and enhancing socio-economic development. A significant majority of women in both areas are associated with SHGs with 95 women in Sikarpur and 89 women in Hatighisa. This suggests a high level of collective action among rural women emphasizing their involvement in community-based initiatives that contribute to improving livelihoods and promoting financial inclusion. The participation rates are notably high with 95 percent of respondents in Sikarpur and 89 percent in Hatighisa being members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) indicating that SHGs serve as a crucial platform for rural women to access resources, engage in income-generating activities and strengthen social capital. This widespread engagement underscores the essential role of SHGs in fostering women's empowerment and improving their economic status in both villages.

A study supports this observation revealing that SHG members demonstrated significantly higher levels of social participation and mobility with 94 percent of them voting in the last election indicating robust civic involvement. The study further highlights that SHGs enhance women's access to resources strengthen social networks and improve their capacity to make financial and household decisions independently [13].

The occupational status of rural women in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats highlights some key differences in their participation in the labour force. While a significant number of women across both areas are employed (136 women) household responsibilities remain prominent with 64 women identifying as housewives. Sikarpur has a higher proportion of housewives (39 percent) compared to Hatighisa (25 percent) indicating that traditional household roles are more prevalent in Sikarpur. Conversely, Hatighisa has a greater number of employed women (75) than Sikarpur (61) suggesting that Hatighisa offers more economic opportunities or has a more dynamic local economy that supports female labour force participation. These variations in occupational patterns highlight the need for targeted interventions to empower women by enhancing economic opportunities and supporting the balance between work and domestic responsibilities. A study reinforces this observation by analyzing data from over 578,000 villages and noting that female labour force participation varies widely depending on local economic conditions women in villages with fewer opportunities are more likely to remain at home while those in economically vibrant areas are more engaged in paid or agricultural work [14].

The income levels of families in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats reflect the economic challenges faced by rural households. A substantial majority of families in both areas earn less than 10,000 rupees per month with 94 families in Sikarpur and 91 families in Hatighisa falling into this category. This highlights the widespread economic struggles within these communities as approximately 94 percent of families in Sikarpur and 91 percent in Hatighisa earn below this threshold. While Hatighisa has a slightly higher proportion of families earning between 10,000 to 15,000 rupees (nine women in Hatighisa versus five in Sikarpur) both Gram Panchayats show a limited presence of higher-income families. Only one respondent in Sikarpur reported a family income exceeding 15,000 rupees while Hatighisa had no respondents in this higher income category. These findings suggest that while Sikarpur may have a few economically stable families, the overall financial condition in both areas is marked by low-income households, highlighting the urgent need for targeted initiatives to address poverty and enhance income generation opportunities for rural women and their families. A similar observation is made where 82.22 percent of the women beneficiaries were found to belong to low-income households. Most of these women were engaged as agricultural labourers or marginal farmers with very limited earnings underlining the widespread nature of poverty among rural women and the necessity for supportive economic interventions [15].

The educational level of rural women in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats reveals some important insights into the challenges and progress in education. A significant proportion of women in both areas have attained primary or upper primary education reflecting the ongoing importance of foundational education. Sikarpur has a slightly higher percentage of women with upper primary education (45 percent) compared to Hatighisa (47 percent) and more women in Sikarpur have secondary education (two women) and graduate education (one woman) suggesting a marginally better access to advanced education. In contrast, Hatighisa has a higher proportion of women with primary education (41percent) but lacks any women with higher secondary or graduate education. The overall proportion of



illiterate women is low in both villages (around eight percent) indicating some improvement in literacy levels. However, the limited number of women who have pursued higher education highlights the persistent barriers to educational attainment beyond the basic levels in these rural communities. This underscores the need for targeted initiatives to promote education particularly at the higher secondary and graduate levels to enable women to access better opportunities and improve their socio-economic status. This concern is supported by the studies which provide strong empirical backing for the implementation of structured educational policies focused on enhancing rural girls' access to higher education [16] [17].

The marital status data from both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats show that marriage is a dominant social institution in these rural communities. Both Gram Panchayats report 98 percent of women being married which reflects the strong traditional and cultural emphasis on marriage in these areas. Only a small fraction of women are widows with two women in each Gram Panchayat. This highlights the relatively low occurrence of widowhood suggesting a largely stable marital situation within these communities. The near-universal marriage rate of rural women further underscores the significant role of family structures in shaping the social fabric of these regions [18].

The analysis of awareness in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats reveals a high level of knowledge among rural women about the socio-economic and political issues although there are slight differences between the two regions. A significant majority of women in both areas are aware of education (90 percent in Sikarpur versus 91 percent in Hatighisa) showing that access to educational information is widespread. However, the awareness about women's participation in economic activities is slightly higher in Hatighisa (92 percent versus 80 percent in Sikarpur) indicating that women's economic roles might be more visible or emphasized in Hatighisa. In terms of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) both areas show substantial awareness with 83 percent in Sikarpur and 90 percent in Hatighisa reflecting a greater engagement with local governance in Hatighisa. The relatively high levels of awareness in both Gram Panchayats indicate progress in empowering rural women through education and participation in local governance. However, the observed differences highlight the need for targeted interventions to further improves access to information particularly in Sikarpur. This aligns with the findings of a study which reports that while rural women are generally aware of the existence of panchayats reflecting a basic level of awareness and their understanding of the detailed powers and provisions of these institutions such as the 73rd Amendment and seat reservations for women remains limited. This underscores the importance of focused efforts to enhance knowledge of women and engagement with local governance structures particularly in areas like Sikarpur [19].

**Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Educational Level and Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Illiterate	Literate	Total	Illiterate	Literate	Total
25-35	0	33	33	0	30	30
35-45	2	50	52	4	47	51
45-55	6	9	15	4	15	19
Total	8	92	100	8	92	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 2 highlights a clear generational shift in literacy levels across both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram

Panchayats. In the youngest age group of 25 years to 35 years, all respondents are literate indicating the success of recent educational initiatives and growing awareness about the importance of education. The age group of 35 years to 45 years also shows high literacy though a small portion remains illiterate about four percent in Sikarpur and nearly eight percent in Hatighisa suggesting improved but not yet universal access during their formative years. A significant drop in literacy is observed among the oldest age group 45 years to 55 years where illiteracy rises to 40 percent in Sikarpur and over 20 percent in Hatighisa highlighting the lingering impact of limited educational access in earlier decades. This contrast underscores the positive effects of expanding educational infrastructure and outreach in recent years which have markedly improved literacy among younger generations. Interestingly, both Gram Panchayats report identical totals across categories allowing for a direct comparison that reveals similar educational development trajectories, albeit with slightly better literacy retention among older individuals in Hatighisa. A study notes that nearly half of India's illiterate population is above the age of 50 while youth literacy has become nearly universal. This generational gap reflects a broader cohort effect where those who grew up before major education reforms remain disproportionately affected reinforcing the need for continued adult education and literacy efforts in rural areas [20].

**Table 3: Distribution of Respondents according to their Literacy Level by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat						Hatighisa Gram Panchayat			
	Primary	Upper Primary (5to8)	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Graduate	Illiterate	Primary	Upper Primary (5to8)	Secondary	Illiterate
25-35	9	17	4	2	1	0	6	23	1	0
35-45	25	25	0	0	0	2	24	20	3	4
45-55	6	3	0	0	0	6	18	4	0	8
Total	40	45	4	2	1	8	2	2	0	0

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 3 provides a view of literacy levels across different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats highlighting not just whether respondents are literate but also the extent of their formal education. Among the 25 years to 35 years age group, most individuals have attained at least upper primary education with a few even reaching higher secondary and graduate levels particularly in Sikarpur where educational attainment appears slightly more diversified at higher levels. The age group of 35 years to 45 years in both panchayats predominantly holds primary or upper primary education indicating limited access to secondary education during their schooling years. Notably, secondary and higher education are almost absent in this group. The 45 years to 55 years age group shows a steep decline in educational attainment while Hatighisa records more primary-level education in this group than Sikarpur and illiteracy remains significant in both. Interestingly, Hatighisa has no representation in higher educational categories across all age groups while Sikarpur shows minimal but notable



advancement beyond secondary education. This pattern illustrates a generational rise in educational achievement with Sikarpur showing slightly greater upward mobility in formal education than Hatighisa.

**Table 4: Distribution of Respondents according to their Marital Status by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Married	Widow	Total	Married	Widow	Total
25-35	33	0	33	30	0	30
35-45	52	0	52	51	0	51
45-55	13	2	15	17	2	19
Total	98	2	100	98	2	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 4 presents the marital status of respondents across age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats revealing some consistent trends. In both areas, all individuals in the 25 years to 35 years and 35 years to 45 years age groups are married reflecting early and near-universal marriage practices in rural settings. The presence of widows is observed only in the 45 years to 55 years age group with two widows in each Gram Panchayat accounting for around 13 percent in Sikarpur and about 10.5 percent in Hatighisa in that age group. This suggests that widowhood becomes more prominent with age though the overall proportion remains low due to the limited upper-age representation. Importantly, the symmetry in numbers across both panchayats reflects similar socio-cultural norms and demographic patterns regarding marriage and widowhood in these rural communities.

**Table 5: Distribution of Respondents according to their Awareness about Compulsory Education by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
25-35	31	2	33	26	4	30
35-45	50	2	52	47	4	51
45-55	9	6	15	18	1	19
Total	90	10	100	91	9	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 5 reveals a strong correlation between age and awareness of compulsory education in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. Among the younger age groups of 25 years to 35 years and 35 years to 45 years awareness is notably high, over 90 percent of respondents in both regions are aware of the policy suggesting that educational campaigns and exposure to media or institutions have effectively reached these segments. However, awareness drops significantly in the 45 years to 55 years age group especially in Sikarpur where 40 percent of respondents in this group are unaware compared to just over five percent in Hatighisa. This contrast not only highlights generational gaps in awareness but also suggests that Hatighisa may have had more effective outreach or educational penetration among its older residents. Overall, the high level of awareness among the majority reflects the success of initiatives promoting compulsory education though the data also underscores the need for targeted awareness efforts among older populations particularly in Sikarpur.

**Table 6: Distribution of Respondents according to their Awareness about Women's Participation in PRI by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
25-35	29	4	33	25	5	30
35-45	46	6	52	47	4	51
45-55	8	7	15	18	1	19
Total	83	17	100	90	10	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 6 highlights age-wise awareness about women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. Awareness levels are comparatively high among all age groups especially in Hatighisa. Sikarpur follows closely though with slightly lower figures. However, a significant divergence appears in the (45 years to 55 years) age group, only 53 percent in Sikarpur are aware compared to a striking 95 percent in Hatighisa. This indicates a stronger outreach or engagement in local governance processes among older residents in Hatighisa. Overall, Hatighisa shows a higher total awareness (90 percent) compared to Sikarpur (83 percent) suggesting more effective dissemination of information or greater community involvement in PRI matters. The data highlights the importance of sustained awareness campaigns especially targeting older populations in Sikarpur to bridge this knowledge gap.

**Table 7: Distribution of Respondents according to their Awareness about the Kanyashree Scheme by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
25-35	8	25	33	21	9	30
35-45	10	42	52	37	14	51
45-55	2	13	15	12	7	19
Total	20	80	100	70	30	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 7 presents a contrast in awareness of the Kanyashree Scheme between Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In Sikarpur, awareness is alarmingly low across all age groups; here only 20 percent of respondents are aware of the scheme with the 25 years to 35 years age group showing just eight aware individuals out of 33. In contrast, Hatighisa demonstrates significantly higher awareness especially among the 35 years to 45 years age group (72.5 percent) and even among the younger cohort (70 percent). This suggests that Hatighisa has been more effective in disseminating information about the Kanyashree Scheme which targets girls' education and empowerment. The low awareness in Sikarpur particularly among the youth who are most likely to benefit, points to a major gap in outreach, implementation or community engagement regarding this important welfare initiative. This demand for focused awareness campaigns in Sikarpur to ensure eligible beneficiaries are informed and able to access the scheme's benefits.

**Table 8: Distribution of Respondents according to their Awareness about SSA by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
25-35	17	16	33	25	5	30
35-45	30	22	52	44	7	51
45-55	6	9	15	15	4	19
Total	53	47	100	84	16	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 8 reveals significant differences in awareness about the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) between Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In Hatighisa, awareness is consistently high across all age groups with 83 percent overall awareness and peaking at 88 percent in the 25 years to 35 years group. In contrast, Sikarpur shows a more mixed picture, only 53 percent of respondents are aware of SSA and even among the youngest group 25 years to 35 years, awareness is just above 50 percent. The gap is most prominent in the 35 years to 45 years age group where Hatighisa has 86 percent awareness compared to only 58 percent in Sikarpur. These differences suggest that SSA-related outreach and educational messaging have been far more effective in Hatighisa. The data emphasizes the need for stronger awareness campaigns in Sikarpur especially targeting younger and middle-aged residents who are key stakeholders in promoting and supporting elementary education initiatives under SSA.

**Table 9: Distribution of Respondents according to their Awareness about SHG by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
25-35	33	0	33	27	3	30
35-45	48	4	52	45	6	51
45-55	14	1	15	17	2	19
Total	95	5	100	89	11	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 9 shows a high level of awareness about Self-Help Groups (SHGs) across all age groups in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats indicating the widespread impact of SHG initiatives in these rural areas. In Sikarpur, awareness is nearly universal with 95 percent of respondents' informed and full awareness in the 25 years to 35 years age group. Hatighisa also demonstrates strong awareness at 89 percent, with slightly lower figures among the youngest cohort (90 percent). Interestingly, Sikarpur slightly outperforms Hatighisa in all age groups, especially among the 25 years to 35 years age group where awareness is perfect. This reflects effective local mobilization and outreach in Sikarpur and suggests that SHGs have become a well-integrated part of rural socio-economic life promoting participation and possibly offering economic or social benefits that draw community attention across generations.

**Table 10: Distribution of Respondents according to their Knowledge of Employment by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
25-35	23	10	33	26	4	30
35-45	45	7	52	48	3	51
45-55	11	4	15	16	3	19
Total	79	21	100	90	10	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 10 reveals a notable disparity in knowledge about employment opportunities between Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In both areas, the 25 years to 35 years and 35 years to 45 years age groups show high awareness with Sikarpur having 70 percent and 86 percent awareness in these groups respectively while Hatighisa's figures are slightly higher at 87 percent and 94 percent. The 45 years to 55 years age group shows a decrease in awareness in both areas though Sikarpur has a slightly lower percentage (73 percent) compared to Hatighisa (84 percent). Overall, Hatighisa demonstrates a higher total awareness (90 percent) compared to Sikarpur (79 percent) suggesting better access to or dissemination of information regarding employment opportunities in Hatighisa. This could reflect stronger local support systems, initiatives or governmental interventions that have contributed to greater awareness in Hatighisa highlighting a need for similar efforts in Sikarpur to enhance employment related knowledge especially among older residents.

**Table 11: Distribution of the Respondents according to the total Members in their Family by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Members in their Family (in Numbers)				
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat	
	less than 3	3-5	5-7	3-5	5-7
25-35	0	28	5	20	10
35-45	0	26	26	18	33
45-55	1	9	5	6	13
Total	1	63	36	44	56

**Source: Field Survey**

In both panchayats, the majority of families in the 25 years to 35 years age range fall into the 3 to 5 member group (Sikarpur has 28 and Hatighisa has 20) while relatively few have fewer than three or more than five members (Table 11). In the 35 years to 45 years age group, a notable shift occurs, with a significant rise in larger families (5 to 7 members) particularly in Hatighisa (33 families) suggesting a trend of family expansion as age increases. Similarly, the 45 years to 55 years age group reflects fewer families overall but a persistent presence of larger households (5 to 7 members). Overall, the data indicates that medium-sized families (3 to 5 members) are most common but the proportion of larger families grows with the age of the household members especially in Hatighisa which may reflect generational growth or differing socio-economic or cultural patterns between the two regions.

**Table 12: Distribution of the Respondents according to the Number of Adult Persons in their Family by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Number of Adult Persons in their Family					
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Less than 3	3-5	5-7	Less than 3	3-5	5-7
25-35	23	10	0	14	16	0
35-45	7	28	17	12	23	16
45-55	1	10	4	0	12	7
Total	31	48	21	26	51	23

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 12 illustrates the distribution of respondents based on the number of adult persons in their families across three age groups (25 years to 35 years, 35 years to 45 years, and 45 years to 55 years) in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In the 25 years to 35 years age group, the majority of families have fewer than three adults particularly in Sikarpur (23 families) indicating younger nuclear family structures. As age increases, the number of families with (3 to 5) and (5 to 7) adult members rises especially in the 35 years to 45 years age group where both panchayats show a notable shift toward extended family structures in Sikarpur having 28 and 17 families in the (3 to 5) and (5 to 7) adult categories respectively and Hatighisa with 23 and 16 families. In the 45 years to 55 years group, although the number of respondents declines, medium-sized adult family units (3 to 5 adults) remain prevalent. The overall trend suggests that as respondents age, families tend to include more adult members possibly due to children reaching adulthood or joint family living with Hatighisa consistently showing slightly higher proportions of larger adult family units. This reflects socio-cultural tendencies towards extended family systems in older age groups.

**Table 13: Distribution of the Respondents according to the Number of Children in their Family by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Number of children in their Family							
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat				Hatighisa Gram Panchayat			
	1	2	3	No Children	1	2	3	No Children
25-35	12	19	2	0	5	24	1	0
35-45	23	11	1	17	11	22	0	18
45-55	2	0	0	13	8	1	0	10
Total	37	30	3	30	24	47	1	28

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 13 presents the distribution of respondents according to the number of children in their families across different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. The majority of families in the 25 years to 35 years age range have one or two children and there are no childlessness cases, which suggest that family formation is still in its early phases. As age increases to the 35 years to 45 years group, a notable number of families in both Sikarpur (17) and Hatighisa (18) report having no children suggesting the influence of socio-economic or health-related factors on fertility. In the 45 years to 55

years age group, childlessness further increases in Sikarpur while Hatighisa still records a few families with one child indicating possible generational shifts or differing family planning preferences. While two-child families are the most common overall especially in Hatighisa, the presence of childless families in older age groups is significant and calls for deeper investigation into local demographic or cultural influences shaping family structures. This pattern is supported by findings from the NFHS-2 and NFHS-3 data which show that childlessness rates vary by age often peaking in specific cohorts before declining. Though younger women may experience childlessness due to biological or timing factors, older women (particularly those aged 35 years to 49 years) generally report lower rates. Socio-economic and regional factors such as education, standard of living and age at marriage also play a role in influencing childbearing patterns which may explain the differences observed between Sikarpur and Hatighisa [21].

**Table 14: Distribution of the Respondents according to the Monthly Income of their Family by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Monthly income of the family (in Rupees)							
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat				Hatighisa Gram Panchayat			
	<5000	5001to10,00	10,001to15,00	25,001to30,00	<5000	5001to10,00	10,001to15,00	
25-35	3	28	1	1	2	28	0	
35-45	1	47	4	0	1	44	6	
45-55	3	12	0	0	3	13	3	
Total	7	87	5	1	6	85	9	

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 14 presents the distribution of monthly income of the family across different age groups (25 to 35, 35 to 45, 45 to 55 years) in two Gram Panchayats, Sikarpur and Hatighisa. In both areas, the majority of respondents fall within the Rupees 5001 to Rupees 10,000 income bracket indicating a predominance of low-income households. In Sikarpur, the 35 years to 45 years age group is most represented in this bracket (47 families) suggesting this age group forms the economic backbone. A marginal number of families report earnings above Rupees 10,000 with only one family in Sikarpur earning Rupees 25,001 to Rupees 30,000 and none in Hatighisa. The 45 years to 55 years age group consistently reports lower incomes indicating limited economic activity or possible dependency. Hatighisa shows a slightly better economic scenario in the 35 years to 45 years and 45 years to 55 years brackets with more families earning Rupees 10,001 to Rupees 15,000 than Sikarpur. Overall, the data reflects that both panchayats are largely comprised of economically weak households with a narrow presence of higher-income families and a clear concentration of economic activity in the middle age groups.

**Table 15: Distribution of the Respondents according to the Monthly Expenditures of their Family by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Monthly Expenditures of the Family (in Rupees)									
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat					Hatighisa Gram Panchayat				
	<3000	3001-5000	5001-7000	7001-9000	9001-11,000	<3000	3001-5000	5001-7000	7001-9000	9001-11,000



25-35	2	25	5	0	1	1	15	14	0	0
35-45	1	25	22	3	1	1	16	23	11	0
45-55	2	4	6	3	0	1	7	8	2	1
Total	5	54	33	6	2	3	38	45	13	1

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 15 outlines the monthly family expenditures across three age groups (25 to 35, 35 to 45, 45 to 55 years) in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In both areas, the highest concentration of families falls within the Rupees 3001 to Rupees 7000 expenditure range reflecting modest spending patterns consistent with low-income levels seen earlier. In Sikarpur, 54 families spend Rupees 3001 to Rupees 5000 while in Hatighisa, it is slightly lower at 38 suggesting tighter budgeting in the latter. Notably, Hatighisa has a higher number of families (45) in the Rupees 5001 to Rupees 7000 bracket compared to Sikarpur (33) indicating relatively higher spending capacity possibly backed by marginally better income. The 35 years to 45 years age group leads in higher expenditure in both regions aligning with their economic activity peak. Expenditure beyond Rupees 7000 is rare in both locations with only a few families reporting such spending underscoring financial constraints. Overall, the data shows that most families have low to moderate spending limitations although Hatighisa households show slightly higher spending habits especially among those aged 35 years to 45 years which may indicate slightly better economic resilience.

**Table 16: Distribution of Respondents According to their Occupation by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Unemployed (Housewife)	Employed	Total	Unemployed (Housewife)	Employed	Total
25-35	22	11	33	12	18	30
35-45	14	38	52	9	42	51
45-55	3	12	15	4	15	19
Total	39	61	100	25	75	100

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 16 represents that in both regions, the 35 years to 45 years age group shows the highest employment with 38 employed women in Sikarpur and 42 in Hatighisa which indicates that this age group is the most economically active. Sikarpur has a higher proportion of unemployed women (39 percent) compared to Hatighisa (25 percent) suggesting a relatively better employment scenario in Hatighisa. In the 25 years to 35 years age group, Sikarpur has a higher number of unemployed housewives (22 out of 33) compared to Hatighisa (12 out of 30) possibly reflecting early marriage or child-rearing responsibilities affecting workforce participation. Among the 45 years to 55 years group, employment remains modest in both areas but slightly higher in Hatighisa. Overall, Hatighisa demonstrates a more favorable employment pattern among women particularly in younger and middle age groups while Sikarpur shows a relatively higher dependency ratio with a larger number of housewives and fewer women contributing to the workforce.

**Table 17: Distribution of Respondents According to their Opinion for Not Involvement in Economic Activities by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Opinion of Unemployed Respondents for not involvement in economic activities				
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat	
	Negligence Towards Children Care	Lack of Time		Negligence Towards Children Care	Lack of Time
25-35	22	0		10	2
35-45	7	7		5	4
45-55	0	3		0	4
Total	29	10		15	10

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 17 highlights the reasons cited by unemployed women for not participating in economic activities across different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In both areas, “negligence towards child care” emerges as a dominant concern particularly among women aged 25 years to 35 years with all 22 respondents in Sikarpur and 10 out of 12 in Hatighisa citing it as the primary reason for not engaging in paid work. This underscores how domestic responsibilities significantly limit younger women’s workforce participation. Among the 35 years to 45 years age group, responses are more balanced between child care and lack of time reflecting the dual burden of parenting and household duties. In the 45 years to 55 years group, the concern shifts more toward lack of time possibly due to care giving for elderly family members or continued household responsibilities. Overall, Sikarpur shows a stronger pattern of withdrawal from work due to childcare duties while Hatighisa presents a slightly more diversified set of reasons. These findings align with a study highlights that even when rural work is flexible, maternal employment remains constrained by childcare demands especially among younger women. Further analysis also shows that unpaid domestic and care work often acts as a ‘trap,’ forcing many rural women into premature withdrawal from the labour market or informal, low-hour jobs, pointing to the urgent need for child care services and time-saving infrastructure to support rural women’s economic empowerment [22].

**Table 18: Distribution of Unemployed Respondents according to their Husband’s Occupation by Age Group**

Occupation of Unemployed Respondents’ Husband	Age-Group of Unemployed Respondents (in Years)					
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	25-35	35-45	45-55	25-35	35-45	45-55
Agriculture	3	3	7	2	2	3
Part Time Helper	5	12	1	4	13	2
Construction workers	3	4	1	4	3	0
Labour	2	5	0	6	6	3
Driver	6	11	0	6	11	3
Service	4	1	0	2	4	1
Business	10	12	4	4	8	5
Poultry	0	4	2	2	4	2

Total	33	52	15	30	51	19
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**Source: Field Survey**

Table 18 provides insights into the occupations of the husbands of unemployed women across different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In both regions, a significant number of their husbands are engaged in low-income, informal sector jobs such as part-time helpers, drivers and labourers. The largest share in the 35 years to 45 years age group across both regions belongs to part-time helpers and drivers indicating unstable or irregular income sources which may discourage women from seeking employment due to economic insecurity or the need to manage households singlehandedly. Business is another notable occupation especially in Sikarpur (26 cases across age groups) suggesting that in some cases, women may be staying home to support family-run businesses. In Hatighisa, a larger number of husbands are in the labour and driver categories especially in the younger age group 25 years to 35 years which may reflect more economic vulnerability. Poultry and service occupations contribute minimally in both areas. Overall, the data reflects that most unemployed women are married to men engaged in semi-skilled or informal sector jobs which may influence women's non-participation in economic activities due to financial instability traditional gender roles or the necessity of managing household responsibilities in single-income families.

## Employed Rural Women Status:

**Table 19: Distribution of Employed Respondents according to the Nature of their Employment by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Nature of employment			
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat		Hatighisa Gram Panchayat	
	Permanent	Temporary	Permanent	Temporary
25-35	1	10	0	18
35-45	0	38	0	42
45-55	0	12	0	14
Total	1	60	1	74

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 19 presents the distribution of employed women by the nature of their employment which are permanent or temporary across age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. A striking trend in both regions is the overwhelming dominance of temporary employment, especially among women in the 35 years to 45 years age group with 38 in Sikarpur and 42 in Hatighisa. The 25 years to 35 years and 45 years to 55 years age groups also follow this trend with no significant presence in permanent jobs. Sikarpur has only one respondent in a permanent role in 25 years to 35 years age group while Hatighisa has just one in 45 years to 55 years age group highlighting the lack of job security and stable income for women. The data reflects the precarious nature of female employment in rural areas where women are primarily absorbed into irregular, low-paying and unprotected work. This vulnerability may further limit their economic empowerment and access to social security benefits underlining the urgent need for policy attention toward creating sustainable and secure employment opportunities for rural women.

**Table 20: Distribution of Employed Respondents according to the Number of Months getting Employment by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Number of Months getting Employment by the Respondents							
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat				Hatighisa Gram Panchayat			
	<3 months	4-6 months	7-9 months	10-12 months	<3 months	4-6 months	7-9 months	10-12 months
25-35	0	8	0	3	4	12	1	1
35-45	3	25	3	7	1	29	3	9
45-55	1	4	3	4	0	10	1	4
Total	4	37	6	14	5	51	5	14

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 20 illustrates the duration of employment (in months) among women respondents across different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In both regions, the majority of women are employed for four to six months a year which is 37 in Sikarpur and 51 in Hatighisa indicating a heavy reliance on seasonal or irregular work particularly among the 35 years to 45 years age group. A small portion of women gain employment for 10 to 12 months (14 in each panchayat) reflecting limited access to stable, year-round jobs. Employment lasting less than three months is minimal suggesting that most women manage to find work for at least a few months though it remains inconsistent. Notably, Hatighisa shows a slightly better pattern in the 25 years to 35 years age group with more women (12) employed for four to six months compared to Sikarpur (eight) but both regions show limited long-term employment opportunities. Overall, the data reveals that women's employment in these areas is largely short-term and unstable further underlining the precarious nature of rural female labour and the need for more sustainable livelihood interventions.

**Table 21: Distribution of Respondents according to their Reasons for Employment by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Reasons for Employment						
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat				Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	To Supplement Family Income	For Better Facilities to Children	Repayment of Loan	Economic Independence	To Supplement Family Income	For Better Facilities to Children	Economic Independence
25-35	8	2	0	1	14	3	1
35-45	30	3	2	3	35	7	0
45-55	10	0	0	2	15	0	0
Total	48	5	2	6	64	10	1

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 21 highlights the motivations behind women's employment across age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In both regions, the primary reason for employment is to supplement family income cited by 48 women in Sikarpur and 64 in Hatighisa indicating that women are working largely out of economic necessity rather than personal aspiration. The 35 years to 45 years age group shows the

highest involvement reinforcing its status as the most economically active cohort. Secondary motivations such as providing better facilities for children or achieving economic independence are far less common suggesting limited agency in employment decisions. Loan repayment is cited by only two women in Sikarpur and is absent in Hatighisa, while the desire for economic independence is slightly more evident in Sikarpur (six women) than in Hatighisa (one) pointing to a modest emergence of self-reliance among older women. This pattern aligns with a study which finds that women from below poverty line households engage in insecure, poorly paid work primarily out of necessity often working long hours to support their families. These findings reinforce the conclusion that rural women's employment is driven predominantly by household financial pressures underscoring the urgent need for policies that promote not only economic participation but also personal agency and long-term professional development [23].

**Table 22: Distribution of Respondents according to the Types of Employment by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat		Hatighisa Gram Panchayat	
	Employed in Agricultural Activities	Employed in Non- agricultural Activities	Employed in Agricultural Activities	Employed in Non- agricultural Activities
25-35	5	6	1	17
35-45	17	21	1	41
45-55	9	3	2	13
Total	31	30	4	71

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 22 compares the nature of employment which is agricultural versus. non-agricultural among women across age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. A clear distinction emerges between the two regions, Sikarpur shows a balanced distribution of women employed in agricultural (31) and non-agricultural (30) activities indicating reliance on both traditional farming and other livelihood options. In contrast, Hatighisa has a dominant presence of women in non-agricultural work (71 out of 75) particularly in the 35 years to 45 years age group suggesting greater diversification of employment opportunities beyond agriculture. This could be due to better access to informal sector jobs, self-employment or small-scale industries in Hatighisa. The low participation in agricultural work in Hatighisa (only four women) further indicates either reduced access to land-based livelihoods or a structural shift in the rural economy. In Sikarpur, however, agricultural employment remains significant especially among the 35 years to 45 years age group. Overall, the data reveals a transitional rural economy where Sikarpur is still rooted in agriculture while Hatighisa reflects a shift toward non-agricultural employment and it is possibly due to better connectivity, infrastructure or alternate livelihood schemes.

**Table 23: Distribution of Respondents according to the Agricultural Activities by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Types of Work in Agricultural Activities			
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat
	Uprooting and Seeding	Transplanting	Selling Vegetables	Selling Vegetables

25-35	3	1	1	1
35-45	8	3	6	1
45-55	5	2	2	2
Total	16	6	9	4

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 23 details the types of agricultural work performed by women in different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In Sikarpur, women primarily engage in uprooting and seeding (16 respondents) followed by transplanting (six respondents) indicating active involvement in the early and mid-stages of crop cultivation. Selling vegetables also features as an important activity (nine respondents) suggesting participation in both production and marketing. Among age groups, the 35 years to 45 years category shows the highest involvement in all types of agricultural tasks reflecting their peak economic activity. In Hatighisa, agricultural work is mostly limited to selling vegetables (four respondents) with minimal participation in uprooting or transplanting indicating a more specialized or reduced role in agriculture possibly due to greater focus on non-agricultural employment. The overall pattern shows that Sikarpur women are more involved in hands-on agricultural labour while Hatighisa women engage more in market-related activities within agriculture. This suggests differences in the rural economy and women's roles between the two areas.

**Table 24: Distribution of Respondents according to the Non-Agricultural Activities by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Types of Work in Non-Agricultural Activities							
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat					Hatighisa Gram Panchayat		
	Mid-day Meal	Labour	Service	Business	Poultry	Labour	Service	Business
25-35	1	4	1	0	0	16	0	1
35-45	5	9	0	5	2	29	1	11
45-55	0	2	0	0	1	11	1	1
Total	6	15	1	5	3	56	2	13

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 24 illustrates that in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats, women's engagement in non-agricultural activities is largely concentrated in labour-intensive jobs. In Sikarpur, labour work involves 15 women with the 35 years to 45 years age group being the most active alongside some participation in business (five women), mid-day meal provision (six women) and poultry (three women). Service-related jobs are minimal. In Hatighisa, labour employment is even more dominant with 56 women working mainly in this sector especially in the 35 years to 45 years age group while business activities involve 13 women and service jobs only two. Younger and older age groups are less involved across all categories. Overall, the data indicates that women in both regions predominantly work in labour and small-scale business roles with limited presence in service or specialized sectors reflecting constrained employment diversity in rural non-agricultural work.



**Table 25: Distribution of Respondents according to the Monthly Income in Agriculture by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Monthly income from agricultural Activities (in Rupees)					
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat				Hatighisa Gram Panchayat	
	Less than 1000	1001-2000	2001-3000	3001-4000	Less than 1000	1001-2000
25-35	0	4	0	1	1	0
35-45	0	1	8	8	1	0
45-55	2	1	1	5	1	1
Total	2	6	9	14	3	1

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 25 shows the monthly income earned by women from agricultural activities across different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In Sikarpur, most women earn between (2001 and 4000) rupees with the 35 years to 45 years age group contributing the highest earnings that is eight women earning (2001 to 3000) and another eight earning (3001 to 4000) rupees. The 45 years to 55 years age group also shows moderate income in the higher brackets. Very few women earn less than 1000 rupees indicating a relatively better income distribution from agriculture in Sikarpur. In contrast, Hatighisa shows much lower income levels from agriculture with almost all women earning less than 2000 rupees per month and very few women in the 25 years to 35 years and 45 years to 55 years age groups earning even up to 1000 rupees. This suggests that agricultural income is generally higher and more varied in Sikarpur while in Hatighisa, it remains quite limited and less lucrative possibly reflecting differences in landholding, productivity or the extent of agricultural engagement between the two regions.

**Table 26: Distribution of Respondents according to the Monthly Income in Non-Agricultural activities by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Monthly income from Non-agricultural activities (in Rupees)												
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat							Hatighisa Gram Panchayat					
	Less than 1000	1001-2000	2001-3000	3001-4000	4001-5000	5001-7000	7001-13000	Less than 1000	1001-2000	2001-3000	3001-4000	4001-5000	5001-7000
25-35	1	0	0	2	2	0	1	0	3	5	9	0	0
35-45	5	2	3	5	6	0	0	1	7	9	15	8	1
45-55	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	5	4	0
Total	6	3	3	8	8	1	1	1	10	18	29	12	1

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 26 highlights in Sikarpur Gram Panchayat, the majority of women (about 62 percent) earn between Rupees 3001 and Rupees 5000 per month with 26.3 percent earning less than Rupees 3000 and a small 10.5 percent earning above Rupees 7000. Specifically, 21.1percent earn Rupees (3001 to 4000), another 21.1 percent earn Rupees (4001 to 5000) while only 5.3 percent fall into the highest income

bracket of Rupees (13,001 to 14,000). In Hatighisa, income is more concentrated in the Rupees (2001 to 4000) range comprising nearly 65 percent of respondents with 7.2 percent earning below Rupees 1000 and only about two percent earning above Rupees 7000. The largest single group (37.7 percent) earns between Rupees (2001 to 3000) followed by 15.6 percent in Rupees (3001 to 4000) and 12.4 percent in Rupees (4001 to 5000). Overall, Sikarpur shows a more even income distribution with a slight skew towards middle and higher earnings whereas in Hatighisa, women predominantly earn moderate incomes within the mid-range bracket highlighting differences in economic opportunities across the two regions.

**Table 27: Distribution of Respondents according to the Opinions of the Employed Respondents about not participating in Economic Activities by the Rural women by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Opinions of the Employed Respondents about not participating in Economic Activities by the Rural women				
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat			Hatighisa Gram Panchayat	
	Illiteracy	Social Status	Economic Status	Illiteracy	Social Status
25-35	3	16	3	1	11
35-45	6	7	1	3	6
45-55	0	3	0	2	2
Total	9	26	4	6	19

**Source: Field Survey**

Table 27 reveals that employed respondents in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats attribute rural women's non-participation in economic activities primarily to social status and illiteracy. In Sikarpur, the dominant reason cited is social status (26 out of 39 responses) especially among women aged between 25 years to 35 years followed by illiteracy (nine) and economic status (four) indicating that social constraints and lack of education are seen as major barriers. Similarly, in Hatighisa, social status is again the leading factor (19 out of 31 responses) with illiteracy (six) also considered significant especially among younger and middle-aged women. Notably, economic status is not mentioned in Hatighisa suggesting that social and educational disadvantages outweigh purely financial reasons in limiting women's economic engagement. Overall, the responses reflect the perceived influence of patriarchal norms and lack of education as critical deterrents to rural women's active economic participation in both gram panchayats.

**Table 28: Distribution of Respondents according to the Various Problems faced by the Employed Respondents by Age Group**

Age Group in years	Various Problems faced by the Employed Respondents								
	Sikarpur Gram Panchayat					Hatighisa Gram Panchayat			
	Heavy Work Load	Irregular Payment	Health Problem	Rearing Problem	No Problem	Heavy Work Load	Health Problem	Rearing Problem	No Problem
25-35	1	0	0	1	9	0	0	6	12
35-45	0	1	1	2	34	0	2	1	39
45-55	1	0	2	0	9	1	3	0	11

Total	2	1	3	3	52	1	5	7	62
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**Source: Field Survey**

Table 28 highlights the problems faced by employed rural women across different age groups in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats. In Sikarpur, the overwhelming majority of respondents (52 out of 61) reported facing no major problems indicating relatively better work conditions or adaptability to their roles. A few women mentioned issues such as heavy workload (two), irregular payment (one), health problems (three) and child-rearing challenges (three) suggesting that while challenges exist, they affect only a minority. In contrast, in Hatighisa, although a significant number (62 out of 75) also reported no issues, there were slightly more instances of problems: health problems (five) and rearing problems (seven) particularly among the younger 25 years to 35 years age group. This reflects that although most employed women in both regions experience relatively manageable work conditions, a small portion especially in Hatighisa, continue to face difficulties related to health and family responsibilities which could potentially impact their long-term participation in the workforce.

## 7. Summary and Conclusion

This study investigates the occupational status of rural women in selected villages of Sikarpur (Jalpaiguri) and Hatighisa (Darjeeling) Gram Panchayats in West Bengal highlighting their significant yet often unrecognized contributions to both economic and non-economic activities. Despite participating in agriculture, informal enterprises and household labour, rural women face persistent challenges such as limited access to resources, education, credit, and mobility, influenced by caste, class and traditional gender norms. Based on data from 200 women aged 25 to 55 years, the research underscores the need for inclusive policies that acknowledge their work, address structural barriers and promote their socio-economic empowerment.

It reveals distinct socio-economic patterns shaped by age, caste, poverty status and employment. While most respondents fall within the 35 years to 45 years age group, community composition also differs that is Hatighisa has notable Scheduled Tribe representation absent in Sikarpur. Economic disparities are evident, with Hatighisa showing a higher percentage of Below Poverty Line families. Despite widespread poverty, SHG participation is strong in both areas. Employment patterns show more housewives in Sikarpur and greater economic activity in Hatighisa. Most families earn below Rupees 10,000 per month and higher education remains limited though literacy rates are improving. Nearly all women are married and awareness levels about education, women's work and governance are high especially in Hatighisa indicating progress but also the need for focused interventions in education, income generation and empowerment.

The study reveals clear generational and regional disparities between Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats in terms of literacy, awareness, family structure and economic conditions. While both regions show a generational rise in literacy and educational attainment, Sikarpur demonstrates slightly better access to higher education whereas Hatighisa consistently outperforms Sikarpur in awareness of government schemes such as compulsory education, Kanyashree, SSA and employment opportunities. Marriage remains nearly universal under 45 years with widowhood appearing in older age groups. Family size and number of adult members increase with age indicating a shift toward extended family systems especially in Hatighisa. Notably, the rise in childless families in the 35 years to 55 years age group particularly in Sikarpur may reflect socio-economic or health-related challenges. Economically

both panchayats are dominated by low-income households with moderate expenditures though Hatighisa shows slightly better income and spending capacity. Overall, while educational and SHG awareness is improving, Sikarpur requires targeted interventions in scheme awareness and economic opportunities especially among older and disadvantaged groups.

The study depicts the dynamics of women's employment in Sikarpur and Hatighisa Gram Panchayats highlighting notable contrasts and common challenges. The age range of 35 years to 45 years is the most economically active in Hatighisa exhibiting lower unemployment rates and a comparatively better employment situation than Sikarpur. The main causes of women's unemployment especially among those aged 25 years to 35 years are domestic duties, particularly childcare. Most unemployed women's husbands are engaged in informal, low-income jobs influencing women's workforce participation. Employment is largely temporary and seasonal with the majority working four to six months annually especially in Hatighisa. Women mainly work to support household income not for self-empowerment with limited access to permanent or high-paying jobs. While Sikarpur women are equally engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural work, Hatighisa women are concentrated in non-agricultural labour. Agricultural tasks in Sikarpur include hands-on roles like seeding and transplanting whereas Hatighisa women are more involved in selling produce. Non-agricultural work for women in both areas is dominated by labour and small businesses with minimal presence in services. Income levels are modest with Sikarpur showing slightly better distribution and occasional higher earnings while Hatighisa reflects a more constrained income pattern. Social status and illiteracy are the main barriers to economic participation of women in both regions. Most employed women report no major workplace problems though a few in Hatighisa face health and family-related challenges. The findings underscore the need for childcare support, skill development, stable employment opportunities and targeted social interventions to enhance economic engagement of women in rural areas.

In conclusion, this study clearly shows that rural women in both Sikarpur and Hatighisa play a vital but often unnoticed role in the local economy through their work in agriculture, informal sectors and household responsibilities. While Hatighisa shows slightly better awareness of government schemes and higher work participation, Sikarpur demonstrates better access to education and occasional higher income. However, both areas struggle with poverty, lack of permanent jobs and limited access to resources especially among women from disadvantaged castes and older age groups. Most women work to support their families rather than for personal growth and childcare remain a major barrier to employment. In order to genuinely empower rural women, enhance their quality of life, and acknowledge their critical role in community development, the study emphasizes the urgent need for targeted measures like skill development training, improved childcare, awareness campaigns and sustainable job creation.

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