
Tribal Women Empowerment in Telangana: A Study of Tribal Habitation in Khammam District

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Abstract:

This study examines the multidimensional aspects of tribal women's empowerment in selected thandas of Khammam District, Telangana. It analyzes socio-economic, political, and legal dimensions of empowerment among 50 randomly selected tribal women using structured interviews and descriptive statistical methods. The findings reveal low literacy levels, limited financial independence, minimal land ownership, and restricted participation in family and local governance decision-making. Although a significant number of women are members of Self-Help Groups and actively participate in voting, independent political decision-making and leadership participation remain limited. Awareness of legal rights and participation in women's awareness campaigns are notably low. The study highlights persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers affecting empowerment outcomes. It emphasizes the need for education, skill development, political awareness, and rights-based interventions. Strengthening economic opportunities and enhancing participation in local governance are essential for meaningful empowerment. The research concludes that tribal women's empowerment requires culturally sensitive, multidimensional, and community-based development strategies for sustainable social transformation.

Keywords: Tribal Women, Empowerment, Socio-Economic Status, Political Participation, Telangana

Introduction

Women's empowerment has undergone a profound transformation in both academic discourse and policy frameworks over the last several decades. Initially conceptualized within a welfare-oriented paradigm, empowerment was often understood as the provision of protective measures, basic welfare services, and remedial interventions aimed at alleviating

the vulnerabilities of women. Welfare programs primarily focused on health, nutrition, and small-scale economic assistance, reflecting a perspective that viewed women as passive beneficiaries of development rather than active agents of change. Over time, however, scholarship and policy shifted toward a rights-based and capability-driven understanding of empowerment, emphasizing women's agency, autonomy, decision-making capacity, and the expansion of substantive freedoms. Empowerment is now understood as multidimensional, encompassing not only economic independence but also education, political participation, social recognition, health, and the ability to negotiate one's life choices effectively. This framework moves beyond mere welfare provision to consider structural and cultural constraints, recognizing that empowerment is context-specific and deeply intertwined with broader social, political, and economic structures.

For tribal women in India, the need for a rights- and capability-oriented approach is particularly acute. Tribal women occupy a unique intersection of social disadvantages, resulting from a combination of ethnicity, gender, geographical isolation, and chronic economic marginalization. Unlike women in urban or mainstream rural populations, tribal women contend with constraints embedded in their socio-cultural and ecological contexts. Many live in remote forested or hilly areas, where access to educational institutions, healthcare facilities, markets, and administrative support is severely limited. Traditional gender norms, though sometimes more flexible than in mainstream patriarchal settings, coexist with economic dependence, lack of property rights, and limited participation in formal decision-making processes. These intersecting disadvantages compound each other, creating structural vulnerabilities that cannot be addressed by singular interventions or generalized welfare programs. Consequently, empowerment of tribal women requires a multidimensional, culturally sensitive, and locally informed approach, one that simultaneously addresses economic, educational, social, political, and health-related dimensions.

The state of Telangana, carved out of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, provides an instructive context for examining tribal women's empowerment. The state has a significant tribal population, concentrated largely in rural and forested districts such as Khammam, Warangal, and Bhadradi Kothagudem. These communities are constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and are entitled to special protections and affirmative action under various national and state-level policies. Despite these provisions, tribal communities in Telangana continue to face systemic challenges, including limited access to quality education, healthcare, and employment opportunities; insecure land and forest tenure; and

marginalization from mainstream economic development. Within these communities, women experience compounded disadvantages they carry substantial labour responsibilities, often in subsistence agriculture, forest produce collection, and household management, while simultaneously confronting barriers to financial independence, political representation, and social recognition.

Among the districts of Telangana, Khammam stands out as a particularly relevant site for investigating tribal women's empowerment. Located in the eastern part of the state, Khammam is characterized by forested terrains, hilly topography, and extensive agrarian and forest-based livelihoods. The district is home to several prominent tribal groups, including the Lambada (Banjara), Koya, Gond, Konda Reddi, and Yerukala communities. Each of these groups exhibits distinct cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics, yet they share common developmental challenges: economic marginalization, lack of infrastructure, limited market integration, and uneven access to government welfare schemes. Tribal women in these communities play critical roles in both productive and reproductive labour, participating in agriculture, livestock management, forest product collection, and household management, yet their contributions are often undervalued or unrecognized within formal institutional and policy frameworks.

Women Empowerment:

Women empowerment refers to the process of enabling women to gain control over their own lives, make independent choices, and access opportunities in all spheres — social, economic, political, and cultural. It is about removing the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit women's rights, agency, and participation in society. Empowerment is not just equality in numbers; it focuses on enhancing women's capabilities, confidence, and freedom to live meaningful lives.

Key Dimensions of Women Empowerment:

1. Economic Empowerment:

Economic empowerment enables women to earn their own income, own property, and access financial services such as credit, loans, and savings accounts. It promotes financial independence, reducing reliance on family or spouses for economic decisions. This empowerment also encourages women to develop skills, pursue entrepreneurship, and participate actively in the economy, which benefits both families and society.

2. Social Empowerment

Social empowerment focuses on providing women with education, healthcare, and opportunities to participate in social and community life. It addresses social barriers such as discrimination, patriarchal norms, and restrictive cultural practices that limit women's

mobility or voice. Social empowerment enables women to take part in family and community decision-making, enhancing their social status and overall well-being.

3. Political Empowerment:

Political empowerment gives women the ability to vote, contest elections, and hold leadership positions at local, regional, and national levels. It ensures that women's perspectives and issues are represented in policy-making and governance. This form of empowerment strengthens democracy by promoting inclusivity and fair representation in political and administrative processes.

4. Psychological Empowerment:

Psychological empowerment builds women's self-confidence, self-esteem, and assertiveness, allowing them to make informed choices about their personal, professional, and social lives. It helps women overcome internalized stereotypes, fear, and social pressures, enabling them to claim their rights and actively pursue goals they value.

5. Legal Empowerment:

Legal empowerment ensures that women are aware of their rights and have access to legal protections. This includes rights related to inheritance, property, marriage, labour, and protection from violence. Legal empowerment strengthens women's ability to seek justice, demand accountability, and assert their rights, which is essential for achieving meaningful and lasting empowerment.

Review of Literature:

1. Chandrika and Singh (2017) examined the impact of **education on the social empowerment** of tribal women. Their study emphasized that education fosters **self-confidence, mobility, and awareness of rights**, enabling women to actively participate in community decision-making. Educated tribal women were more likely to **challenge traditional restrictions** and advocate for their personal and familial welfare, demonstrating that education serves as a **key driver of both social and economic empowerment**.
2. Suresh Lal (2018) examined the economic empowerment of tribal women in Telangana, focusing on their participation in **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**. The study concluded that engagement in SHGs enhances income levels, strengthens decision-making capabilities within households, and improves social recognition among tribal women. Despite these gains, the research highlighted persistent challenges, such as **low literacy, poverty, and limited access to institutional support**, which constrain the full potential of empowerment. The study underscores the importance of structured economic programs combined with education and institutional facilitation to achieve meaningful empowerment outcomes for tribal women.

3. Baburao and Mangilal (2018) highlighted the critical role of tribal women in sustaining household economies through activities such as **forest produce collection, agriculture, and artisanal work**. Despite their substantial contributions, the study found that tribal women continue to face **marginalization due to structural barriers, illiteracy, and socio-economic deprivation**. The authors emphasized the importance of integrating **culturally and gender-sensitive approaches** in empowerment initiatives to ensure that programs are both effective and respectful of tribal women's traditional knowledge and social roles.
4. Janardhan and Radha Krishna (2016) conducted a **micro-level empirical study on tribal women in the agency areas of Khammam district**. They found that tribal women face **poverty, illiteracy, limited access to healthcare, and inadequate civic facilities**, all of which significantly hinder their empowerment. The study emphasized that **administrative interventions and targeted development programs** are critical to improving living conditions and fostering **socio-economic growth** among tribal communities. The research provides a foundational understanding of the structural barriers faced by tribal women in Khammam, highlighting the need for **multi-dimensional empowerment strategies**.

Objectives:

1. To study the socio-economic empowerment of tribal women in a selected Village of Khammam District.
2. To study the Political empowerment of tribal women in a selected village of Khammam District.
3. To Identify the impact of government initiatives on tribal women empowerment.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted in 2 thandas of Khammam rural mandal of Khammam District. Totally 50 women was selected randomly on first come first serve basis. Structured interview schedule was utilized for the study. The data will be analysed based on descriptive statistics (percentages, averages).

Data Analysis and Interpretation:**1. Age Distribution:**

Age Group	Number	Percentage
20-40 Years	21	42%
41-60 Years	26	52%
60 Years and above	03	06%
TOTAL	50	100%

The age distribution of the respondents shows that the majority, **26 (52%)**, are in the **41–60 years** age group, indicating most respondents are middle-aged. The **20–40 years** group includes **21 (42%)** respondents, showing a good number of younger adults, while only **3 (6%)** are **60 years and above**, representing very few elderly respondents.

2. Marital Status:

Marital Status	Number	Percentage
Married	37	74%
Widow	13	26%
Unmarried	00	-
TOTAL	50	100%

Most of the women respondents, **37 (74%)**, are **married**, which shows that the majority have family responsibilities and roles that may influence their daily life and decisions. **13 (26%)** are **widows**, indicating a smaller group of women who may face different social and economic challenges. There are **no unmarried women** in the study.

3. Literacy Status :

Response	Number	Percentage
Literate	19	38%
Illiterate	31	62%
TOTAL	50	100%

The literacy data shows that **31 (62%)** of the women respondents are **illiterate**, while **19 (38%)** are **literate**. This indicates that most of the women in the study do not have formal education, which may affect their ability to access information, participate in decision-making, or take advantage of opportunities for social and economic empowerment. The smaller proportion of literate women suggests that education initiatives are important for improving women's overall development and independence.

4. Occupation:

Occupation	Number	Percentage
Agriculture	15	30%
Wage Labour	27	54%
Forest Goods Collection	02	04%
Small Business	06	12%
TOTAL	50	100%

The occupation data shows that the majority of women respondents, **27 (54%)**, are engaged in **wage labour**, indicating that most of them work for daily wages and may have

limited job security and financial stability. **15 (30%)** are involved in **agriculture**, participating in farming activities that often require physical effort and long hours. Only **6 (12%)** of the women run **small businesses**, showing a smaller portion have independent income sources or entrepreneurial opportunities. A very few, **2 (4%)**, are involved in **forest goods collection**, which represents minimal participation in natural resource-based work.

5. Any Agriculture land in the name of women

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	11	22%
No	39	78%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only **11 (22%)** of the women respondents have **agricultural land in their name**, while the majority, **39 (78%)**, do **not** own any land. This indicates that most women lack property ownership, which limits their economic independence and decision-making power. Land ownership is an important factor in women’s **empowerment**, as it provides security, income opportunities, and social recognition. The low percentage of women landowners highlights the need for policies and programs that promote **property rights and equal access to land** for women.

6. Membership in SHGs

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	37	74%
No	13	26%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that a majority of women respondents, **37 (74%)**, are **members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**, while **13 (26%)** are not. This indicates that most women are actively participating in group-based activities that promote **financial inclusion, skill development, and social networking**. SHG membership can help women gain **confidence, access loans, improve income opportunities, and strengthen decision-making skills**. The high participation suggests that these groups are playing an important role in **women’s empowerment and community development** in the area.

7. Facing Any Discrimination in the family

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	29	58%

No	21	42%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that **29 (58%)** of the women respondents reported **facing discrimination in their family**, while **21 (42%)** said they do not face any discrimination. This indicates that a significant number of women experience **unequal treatment, restrictions, or bias** within their households, which can affect their confidence, decision-making, and overall empowerment. The presence of family discrimination highlights the need for **awareness programs, social support, and community interventions** to ensure women’s rights and equality within families.

8. Casting Vote on Regular Basis

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	48	96%
No	02	04%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that almost all women respondents, **48 (96%)**, **cast their vote regularly**, while only **2 (4%)** do not. This indicates a very high level of **political participation** among the women, showing that they are aware of their **voting rights** and actively take part in democratic processes. Regular voting reflects women’s **engagement in civic duties** and their potential influence on governance and decision-making in the community.

9. Participated in any elections

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	05	10%
No	45	90%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only **5 (10%)** of the women respondents have **(actively participated in elections)**, while the majority, **45 (90%)**, have not. This indicates that while most women are aware of their **voting rights** and cast votes regularly, very few take part in **leadership roles or decision-making positions**. The low participation in elections highlights the need to encourage women to **engage in political leadership and governance**, which is an important aspect of empowerment and community influence.

10. Participation in Grama Sabha Meetings

Age Group	Number	Percentage
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Often	09	18%
Sometimes	14	28%
Never	27	54%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only **9 (18%)** women respondents participate in Grama Sabha meetings **often**, while **14 (28%)** attend **sometimes**, and the majority, **27 (54%)**, **never participate**. This indicates that more than half of the women are **not involved in local governance discussions**, which limits their voice in community decision-making. Low participation may be due to **lack of awareness, social or cultural restrictions, or household responsibilities**. Increasing women's engagement in Grama Sabha meetings is important for **enhancing their empowerment, decision-making ability, and representation in local governance**.

11. Casting Vote independently

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	17	34%
No	33	66%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only **17 (34%)** of the women respondents **cast their vote independently**, while the majority, **33 (66%)**, do **not vote independently**. This suggests that many women may be influenced by family members, societal pressure, or lack the confidence to make voting decisions on their own. Although most women participate in voting, the low rate of independent voting indicates a **need to promote awareness, confidence, and decision-making power**, which are key aspects of women's political empowerment.

12. Financial Independence

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	12	24%
No	38	76%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only 12 (24%) of the women respondents are financially independent, while the majority, 38 (76%), are not financially independent. This indicates that most women rely on others for money, which limits their decision-making power, personal freedom, and ability to contribute to household or community decisions. The low level of

financial independence highlights the importance of income-generating opportunities, skill development, and access to resources to empower women economically and socially.

13. Involved in Family Decisions

Response	Number	Percentage
Actively involved	09	18%
Sometimes involved	13	26%
Not Involved	28	56%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only 9 (18%) women are actively involved in family decisions, while 13 (26%) are sometimes involved. The majority, 28 (56%), are not involved at all in family decision-making. This indicates that most women have limited participation in decisions related to household matters, finances, or family planning. Limited involvement may reduce their confidence and sense of agency. Increasing women's participation in family decisions is important for their empowerment, self-reliance, and overall social and economic development.

14. Awareness on Women Rights

Response	Number	Percentage
Fully Aware	05	10%
Partially Aware	16	32%
Not Aware	29	58%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only 5 (10%) of the women respondents are fully aware of their rights, while 16 (32%) are partially aware. The majority, 29 (58%), are not aware of their rights at all. This indicates that most women lack proper knowledge about legal protections, entitlements, and opportunities available to them, which limits their ability to assert themselves and participate fully in social, economic, and political life. Increasing awareness through education, workshops, and community programs is essential to empower women and promote equality.

15. Participated any women awareness campaigns

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	08	16%
No	42	84%
TOTAL	50	100%

The data shows that only 8 (16%) of the women respondents have participated in women awareness campaigns, while the majority, 42 (84%), have not. This indicates that most women have limited exposure to programs or activities aimed at increasing knowledge about women's rights, health, education, and empowerment. Low participation suggests the need for more **accessible, inclusive, and community-based campaigns** to engage women, raise awareness, and strengthen their confidence and social participation.

Key Findings:

1. **Marital Status:** Most respondents are married (37, 74%), while 13 (26%) are widows. The sample largely consists of women with family responsibilities, which may impact their social participation, decision-making, and independence. It is also noted that the widow rate is also high among the tribes.
2. **Literacy Status:** A significant portion of the women (31, 62%) are illiterate, and only 19 (38%) are literate. Low literacy levels may limit women's access to information, participation in community activities, understanding of rights, and economic opportunities.
3. **Occupation and Economic Participation:** Most women work in wage labour (27, 54%) or agriculture (15, 30%), with few involved in small businesses (6, 12%) or forest goods collection (2, 4%). Only 12 (24%) are financially independent, and just 11 (22%) own agricultural land. This indicates that women are largely dependent on labor-intensive work and have limited control over resources, income, and property.
4. **Social Participation and Empowerment:** A majority of women (37, 74%) are members of Self-Help Groups, showing active engagement in community and financial activities. However, only 9 (18%) are actively involved in family decisions, and 27 (54%) never participate in Grama Sabha meetings. Many women also face family discrimination (29, 58%), which restricts their social and personal agency.
5. **Political Participation:** While most women (48, 96%) vote regularly, only 17 (34%) cast their vote independently, and just 5 (10%) have participated actively in elections. This suggests high awareness of voting rights but low engagement in leadership or decision-making roles at the political level.
6. **Awareness and Advocacy:** Awareness of women's rights is low, with only 5 (10%) fully aware and 16 (32%) partially aware, while 29 (58%) are not aware at all.

Participation in women awareness campaigns is also minimal (8, 16%), indicating limited exposure to programs that promote empowerment, legal knowledge, or social development.

Suggestions:

1. **Promote Education and Literacy:** Adult literacy programs and workshops should be organized to help women improve reading, writing, and numeracy skills. Encouraging girls' education is also important to ensure that future generations of women are better equipped to participate in social, economic, and political activities.
2. **Enhance Economic Opportunities:** Women should be provided with skill development and vocational training in areas like tailoring, handicrafts, small-scale businesses, and digital skills. Access to microcredit, loans, and financial services should be facilitated to promote financial independence. Programs to encourage women's ownership of property and land are also essential.
3. **Strengthen Social Participation:** Women should be encouraged to join community organizations and Self-Help Groups, which help build confidence, networking, and leadership skills. Awareness programs should address family discrimination and social barriers to promote equality within households.
4. **Promote Political Awareness and Participation:** Workshops on civic rights, leadership, and independent decision-making can help women participate actively in elections, local governance, and Grama Sabha meetings. This will strengthen their role in political decision-making and community development.
5. **Increase Awareness of Rights and Legal Protections:** Women should be educated about their legal rights, including protections against domestic violence, property rights, and employment laws. Collaboration with local NGOs and government agencies can ensure that this information reaches women in an accessible and understandable way.
6. **Support Health and Well-being:** Health camps, counseling, and awareness sessions should be organized to address women's physical and mental health. Programs related to maternal health, family planning, and nutrition can improve overall well-being and empowerment.
7. **Encourage Participation in Awareness Campaigns:** Community-based women awareness campaigns should be promoted, covering topics like empowerment, education, health, and governance. Campaigns should be inclusive, accessible, and culturally sensitive to engage more women effectively.

Conclusion:

The study of tribal women in Khammam district reveals a mixed picture of empowerment. While many women participate actively in Self-Help Groups and exercise their right to vote, the majority face challenges such as low literacy, limited financial independence, and minimal involvement in family and community decision-making. Ownership of land, engagement in political leadership, and awareness of legal rights remain low, reflecting structural, social, and cultural barriers. Family discrimination and limited exposure to awareness programs further constrain women's agency. These findings highlight that tribal women's empowerment is multidimensional, requiring sustained efforts in education, economic opportunities, social inclusion, political participation, and legal awareness. Culturally sensitive and locally relevant interventions are essential to strengthen women's capabilities, confidence, and decision-making power. Enhancing these areas will not only improve the lives of tribal women but also contribute to the broader social and economic development of their communities.

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