



Empowering rural women through education: A case study of Bankura District

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Abstract

Education is a fundamental driver of empowerment and socio-economic development, particularly for rural women. This study examines the role of education as a key indicator of development for rural women in the Bankura district of West Bengal, India. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research explores the levels of educational attainment among rural women, the socio-economic benefits of education, and the barriers they face in accessing it. The findings highlight significant disparities in literacy and education levels, with marginalized groups facing the greatest challenges. Educated women exhibit improved economic independence, health awareness, and participation in community decision-making, underscoring the transformative potential of education. However, entrenched socio-cultural norms, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure remain persistent obstacles. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted policies, infrastructure improvements, and community awareness programs to promote inclusive education and empower rural women. This case study emphasizes that addressing educational disparities is crucial for the holistic development of rural communities in Bankura district.

Keywords: Education, empowerment, literacy rate, rural women, socio-economic condition

Introduction

On International Women's Day, celebrated on March 8, many individuals and organizations highlighted education as a cornerstone of women's empowerment. Education equips women with the tools to advance in various sectors, including government, business, healthcare, and other crucial areas of society. As societal progress continues, women's roles expand, largely due to access to quality education.

Education enables women to recognize their value and assert their roles in society. It instills a sense of self-worth and resilience against societal limitations. However, in some cultures, women are still viewed as second-class citizens with restricted voices. Well-educated women can challenge these perceptions by advocating for equal rights and empowering others to assert their voices.

Access to quality education helps women understand that they have the same opportunities as men. It enables them to become active, productive members of society. Education also enhances women's participation in the labor force, leading to higher incomes and informed decisions about health, family, and community well-being. According to UNESCO, education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development and gender equality.

Despite global progress, significant challenges remain, particularly in countries like India, where women face numerous obstacles in accessing quality education. Gender disparities persist, especially in rural areas and marginalized communities. Barriers such as deep-rooted cultural norms, early marriage, poverty, safety concerns, and limited access to educational resources hinder girls' education. The digital divide further exacerbates these inequalities, with women in remote areas often lacking access to online learning platforms.

The educational status of women in Bankura district exemplifies these challenges. Literacy rates among rural women remain lower than those of men and urban women. Limited access to secondary and higher education is common due to factors such as poverty, early marriage,

entrenched gender norms, and inadequate educational infrastructure. Marginalized communities face even steeper barriers. Nonetheless, government initiatives and local programs are gradually improving educational access, though much work remains to ensure equal and widespread educational opportunities for women in the district.

As women step into the world with increased visibility and influence, balancing professional achievements with caring and nurturing roles remains essential. Education continues to be the key to unlocking women's potential, enabling them to lead meaningful lives while contributing to a more equitable and prosperous society.

Objectives:

- 1. Assessing the educational status:** To analyze the current levels of education among rural women in Bankura district.
- 2. Understanding socio-economic impact:** To evaluate the correlation between education and socio-economic indicators such as income, health, and participation in community activities.
- 3. Exploring barriers:** To identify challenges faced by rural women in accessing education, including socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and infrastructural issues.
- 4. Promoting empowerment:** To explore how education contributes to the empowerment of rural women in decision-making processes both within their households and in the community.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data collected from government records and surveys with qualitative insights from interviews and focus group discussions. A purposive sampling method is used to

ensure representation across different socio-economic and cultural groups within the district.

Study area

The district Bankura of West Bengal has been selected as a study area. It is situated between 22° 38' and 23° 38' north latitude and between 86° 36' and 87° 46' east longitude. It has an area of 6,882 squarekilometres (2,657 sq mi). There are 22 blocks in the district. On the north and north-east the district is bounded by Bardhaman district, from which it is separated mostly by the Damodar River. On the south-east it is bounded by Hooghly district, on the south by Paschim Medinipur district and on the west by Purulia district. Bankura district has been described as the “connecting link between the plains of Bengal on the east and Chota Nagpur plateau on the west.” The areas to the east and north-east are low lying alluvial plains, similar to predominating rice lands of Bengal. To the west the surface gradually rises, giving way to undulating country, interspersed with rocky hillocks. Much of the country is covered with jungles. The western part of the district has poor, ferruginous soil and hard beds of laterite with scrub jungles and sal woods. Long broken ridges with irregular patches of more recent alluvium have marks of seasonal cultivation. During the long dry season large extents of red soil with hardly any trees lend the country a scorched and dreary appearance. In the eastern part the eye constantly rests on wide expanses of rice fields, green in the rains but parched and dry in summer.

Table 1: Changing Literacy Rate in the District (1901-2011)

Year	Literacy rate (%)	Male literacy rate (%)	Female literacy rate (%)	Gender gap (%)
1901	9.29	18.3	0.55	17.75
1911	9.43	18.36	0.71	17.65
1921	11.13	21.3	0.99	20.31
1931	8.51	15.93	1.06	14.87
1941	12.49	20.95	3.84	17.11
1951	14.12	21.22	6.58	14.64
1961	23.08	36.17	9.78	26.39
1971	29.14	46.93	10.69	36.24
1981	38.33	51.92	24.24	27.68
1991	52.04	66.75	30.43	36.32
2001	63.84	76.76	49.43	27.33
2011	70.26	80.05	60.05	20

Source: District Census Handbook, Bankura

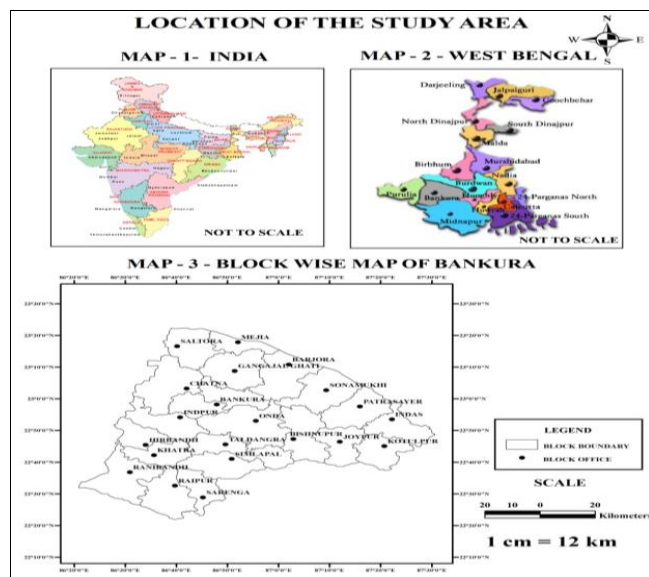
The literacy rate of Bankura has increased from 52.04% in 1991 to 63.84% in 2001 and 70.95% in 2011. In the rural areas of Bankura the literacy rate has increased from 50.01% in 1991 to 62.24% in 2001 to 69.60% in 2011. Saltora, Hirbandh, Patrasayer etc block are mainly dominated by Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population and has low literacy rate. Among all the blocks bankura district kotulpur block ranks first in terms of total literacy rate, male literacy rate and female literacy rate. In this block the percentage of total, male and female literacy are 78.01%, 85% and 70.70% (Census 2011). This is because of nearness to Hugli district, good accessibility and connectivity of the block. Beside Kotulpur literacy rate is high in Sarenga and Bankura-II block. The literacy rate is lowest in the block Saltora which is only 61.45%. The male literacy rate is lowest in Patrasayer block (73.45%) followed by Saltora block (73.83%). The female literacy rate is lowest in Saltora block (48.45%) followed by Hirbandh block (49.86%). Literacy rate is low in these blocks because these blocks are mainly dominated by Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations.

Female literacy status

Bankura scores low on the female literacy side. Although the level of literacy has increased in the study area, the gender bias against female education continues to exist resulting in lower literacy rate among females. The female Literacy rate has increased from 30.43% in 1991 to 49.43% in 2001 and 60.05% in 2011. The male Literacy rate has increased from 66.75% in 1991 to 76.76% in 2001 and 80.05% in 2011. The gender gap in Literacy rate decreased significantly during the last three decades but still lagging behind other districts of the state. From the Census data of 2011 it is clear that among the blocks of district gender gap is worst in case of Hirbandh Block (27.94%) followed by Saltora and Ranibandh. Incidentally these are also blocks which score low on the standard of living.

Recommendations:

- 1. Policy Interventions:** Implement targeted educational schemes for rural women, including financial incentives and vocational training programs.
- 2. Infrastructure development:** Improve accessibility to schools and educational resources in remote areas.



Literacy status of the district

The status of women’s education in Bankura district reflects significant challenges and disparities. Literacy rates among rural women remain lower compared to men and urban counterparts, with many women unable to access secondary or higher education. Factors such as poverty, early marriage, gender norms, and inadequate educational infrastructure contribute to this gap. Marginalized communities face even greater barriers. Despite these challenges, government schemes and local initiatives are gradually improving access to education, though much work remains to achieve equitable and widespread educational attainment for women in the district.

3. **Awareness campaigns:** Conduct community outreach programs to challenge societal norms restricting women's education.
4. **Support systems:** Strengthen support mechanisms, such as self-help groups and women's organizations, to encourage continued education and skill development.
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Key Findings:

1. **Educational inequities:** Rural women, particularly those from marginalized communities, experience low literacy rates and limited access to higher education.
2. **Economic empowerment:** Women with better education levels demonstrate higher income potential and financial independence.
3. **Improved health awareness:** Educated women show enhanced knowledge of healthcare practices and access to welfare schemes.
4. **Systemic challenges:** Issues such as poverty, early marriage, inadequate infrastructure, and traditional gender roles remain significant barriers to education.
5. **Community engagement:** Education enables women to actively participate in local governance and community initiatives.

Conclusion

Education is a vital tool for empowering rural women and improving their socio-economic status. Addressing educational disparities and removing barriers can lead to transformative change in the lives of women in Bankura district. By fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment, the district can achieve sustainable development and gender equity in rural communities.

Education is not only a fundamental right but also a key indicator of development for rural women. By addressing the barriers and fostering an inclusive educational framework, the socio-economic landscape of Bankura district can be significantly transformed, leading to the empowerment of women and the holistic development of rural communities.

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