

Empowerment and Status of Women in Lepcha Tribal Community: A Household Level Analysis

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Abstract: *Empowerment has been identified as a key constituent element of poverty reduction and as a primary development assistance goal by the World Bank (Malhotra, 2002). The World Bank has also made gender mainstreaming a priority in development assistance. So the issues related to status and empowerment of women attracts the attention of the academicians, political thinkers and social scientists both in developing as well as developed countries. In India, the status of women is said to have been located at two extremes, though the constitution guarantees equality to women and ensures rights of women yet India is one of the few nations of the world where gender related discrimination still persists in forms of dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation. Considering such scenario, the main objective of this discourse is to seek out the status of women in Lepcha tribal community, who are supposed to be the autochthon of Darjeeling and Sikkim. For the analysis and accomplishment of this paper both quantitative and qualitative method based data has been collected during the month of october 2016 from the Lepcha village named Pakang which is located in Gitdubling Gram Panchayat of Kalimpong Sub- division. Four parameters of empowerment namely social, economic, political and familial have been considered for this purpose. Data were collected from 100 respondents including married and unmarried, as well as working and non-working Lepcha women residing in the village based on Interview Schedule Method. Finally an empowerment score has been developed by adding the scores of selected indicators of empowerment.*

The analysis of the empowerment indicators shows that the percentage of female literates is 83.75% which is quite satisfactory but if we check it with the level of education then it is clear that the women have attained only primary and secondary education and there is very high percentage of dropouts which is 74.6%. Economic participation of the surveyed women is 81.2% but due to low levels of education they are engaged as farm labors and the low paying jobs. Only 48% of females take part in family decision making. Percentage of Political participation is 56%. The overall empowerment score is 38 out of 100 which is very low and it indicates that the women are enjoying low levels of empowerment as well as the status. It can be concluded that the major drawback in the level of empowerment among the Lepcha women of Pakang busy is mainly due to the low level of education which is in due to at large affected by the financial constraints, so if such type of drawbacks are taken care properly with adequate solutions then there seems a better scope for enhancing the levels of women empowerment and status which will certainly aid in the overall development of the society.*

Keyword: *Empowerment, Status, Lepcha, Women, Pakang*

**Busty in Nepali means a Village, not to be confused with slum.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Status and empowerment of women is one of the major aspects which reveal the socio-economic status of the country as a whole. So the topic related to status and role of women and related issues, have attracted the attention of the academicians, political thinkers and social scientists both in developing as well as developed countries, partially because of the widely accepted truth that a society built on the inequality of men and women involves wastage of human resources which no country can afford (Kumar and Paul, 2011). The concept of empowerment and equality of women is one of the discussed and disputed topics in India as well. In fact, the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provisions are concerned. But the

implication of such provisions varies widely from one place to another due to uncountable factors. Although Indian women enjoys the right to equality in all respect with men from the constitutional and legal point of view, still the social status of women remains very low, especially in rural India and in some marginalized communities, like the schedule casts and the schedule tribes. This paper is an attempt to see the status of women in Lepcha community, which is one of the tribal communities in India. The Lepchas are found in the state of Sikkim and Gorkhaland Territorial Administration area of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal. This research work is mostly based on primary data conducted for 100 Lepcha females in rural areas of Pakang Busty in Kalimpong sub-division through an interview. A sample of working and non-working as well as married and unmarried women was collected for the study, to understand the aspects of social empowerment, political empowerment, economic empowerment and the autonomy in decision making capacity of the women folk.

2. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this paper is to measure the status of women in Lepcha community with special reference to certain indicators of status and empowerment like education, economic and political participation etc; to examine the educational status of women, their problems and solutions.

- To know the nature and extent of economic participation of the women and right to property and resources.
- To know their status regarding empowerment through political participation, role in social institutions and their decision-making capacity in familial space.

3. DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on the primary sample data collected from the Lepcha dominated village named Pakang busty situated in Git-Dubling gram panchayat of Kalimpong sub-division. Comprehensive structured questionnaire schedules were prepared based on four parameters of empowerment, along with the indicators of empowerment. Data were collected from 100 respondents including married and unmarried, as well as working and non-working Lepcha women residing in the village based on Interview Schedule Method. Finally an empowerment score has been developed by adding the scores of selected indicators of empowerment.

The selected parameters and the indicators of empowerments are as follows:

- **Social:** women's freedom of movement; lack of discrimination against daughters; commitment to educating daughters; technological knowhow.
- **Economic:** economic contribution to the household; service category; economic decision making; control over assets; involvement in S.H.G.s.
- **Political:** knowledge of political process and access to it, support for political engagement, exercising the right to vote.
- **Familial:** participation in domestic decision making process; control over spouse selection.

4. ABOUT STUDY AREA

The lepcha dominated village named Pakang has been selected for this study. The village is situated in Gitdubling Gram Panchayat of Kalimpong Block II of Kalimpong sub-division, which is more than 55 kms from Kalimpong Town. According to census data Gitdubling Gram Panchayat has second highest ST population which is about 53.71% and the Pakang busty has 99% Lepcha population. The main occupation of the village is agriculture and the village lacks good roads, medical dispensaries, etc though it is electrified and has one primary school.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The 100 samples collected from the field survey reveals that 66.2% were married, 28.8% were single and 5% were widowed (Fig1). The cases of divorcee were not found in the sample which validates that fact that the Lepcha community traditionally does not believe in separation and traditional values have still not eroded in the community.

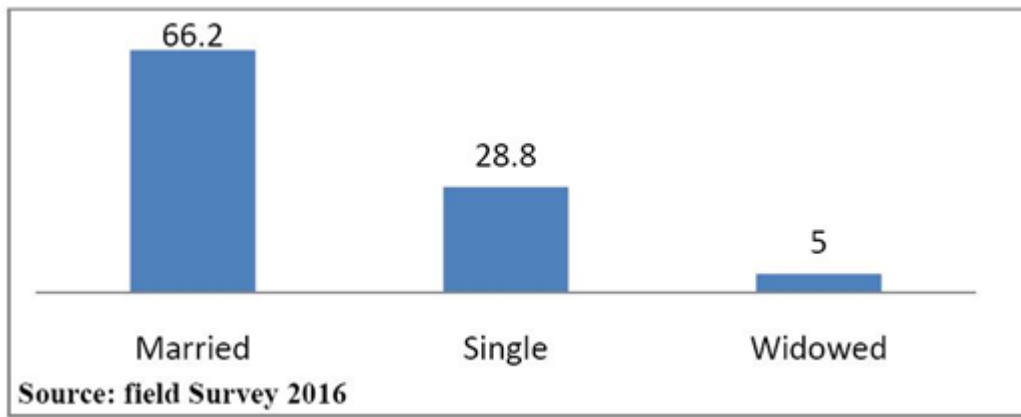


Fig1. Marital Status

5.1. Educational Status

Education is counted as one of the important indicators of status and empowerment. The empirical finding shows that the 83.75% of surveyed women are literate which is quite high and shows a positive sign of their status. But if we check the levels of education, the percentage of women attaining higher education is very low i.e. just 21% for graduation and only 5% for post graduation (fig 2). Most of the women folk seldom study beyond the primary level and high school level. The empirical findings also reveals the fact that the percentage of dropout is also very high, which is 74.6%. Financial constraint is the main cause for such a high percentage of dropouts in the village.

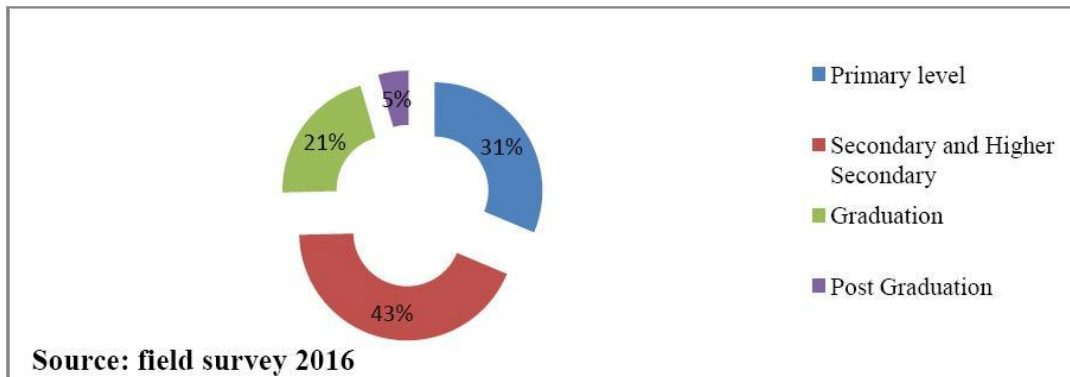


Fig2. Levels of Education

It is found through the survey that the low percentage of education in the higher level is mostly determined by the location of the centers of higher education. It is seen that most of the educational institutions are located outside the village in a faraway distances. Since most of the rural communities depend on subsistence agriculture for their livelihood, therefore it brings an additional burden on their meager income to educate children in the nearby towns of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Siliguri; even when the families do decide to educate the children, the education of the girl child is sacrificed for the sake of the male child even when the parents feel that education for the female child is equally important.

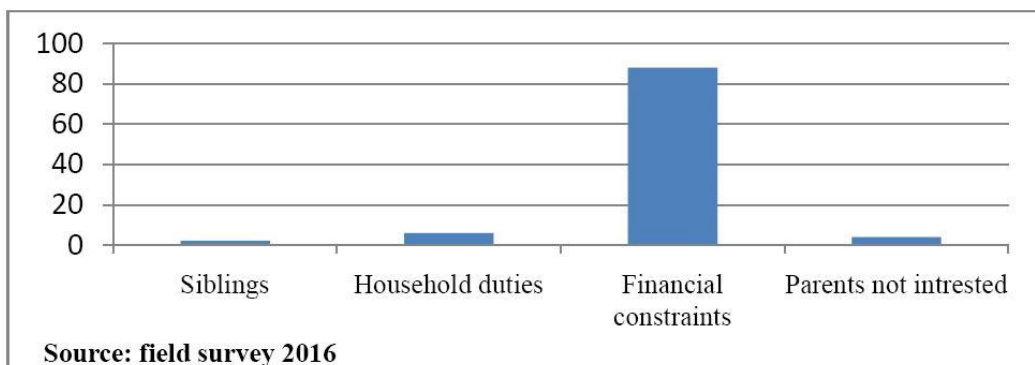


Fig3. Reasons for the Dropping out

5.2. Economic Participation

The analysis of data in relation to economic parameter shows that 81.2% of the sampled females are gainfully employed in different service sectors. But it is also seen that due to low levels of education majority of them are engaged as farm labors and other low paying jobs like shop attendants and only few have managed to secure jobs like teaching, banks etc. the figure below depicts that 35.41% of Lepcha female in the village earns less than 25000 per annum which is very low. It is also known from the survey that even with their meager income the females are compelled to contribute to the household expenditure. It is also clear from the survey that the single working women are free to choose their place of work but the married women are compelled to work inside the village.

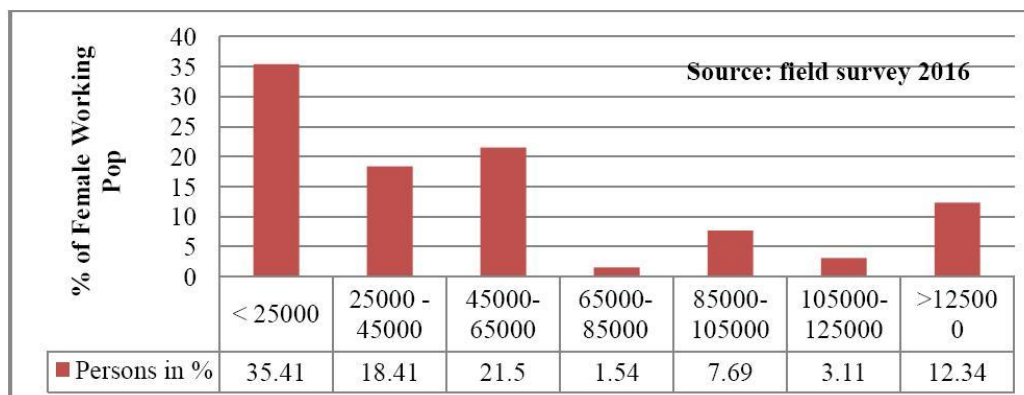


Fig4. Annual Income of the Females

5.3. Self Determination and Control

Only 48% of the female respondents have taken decisions regarding different matters of the family and the majority feel, that the decisions taken by the men folk is suitable as it is more reliable. Which may be due to the fact that the Lepcha community is based on a patriarchal family system and more weightage is given to the men folk in the society even though the traditional lore and mores give equal status to the women folk. The grass root level analysis shows that for the day to day activities of the household the men folk usually impose their decisions on the women and women generally accept those as they feel that they are of the weaker sex, but when it comes to the matters related to the education of the children here it is seen that the women folk take more proactive stance and are involved in decision making process (Fig 5 and 6). One of the positive effects of modernization which is observed among the sample is that 90% of the females are familiar with modern means of communications like mobile phones and television. The access to these means of communication has given them more information to various government sponsored schemes related to health and hygiene, nutrition, education of the girl child, gender equality etc thereby increasing their level of awareness. Since the Lepchas traditionally live in nucleated families the right to husband’s property is automatically bequeathed to the wives, but unmarried daughters and divorcees do not inherit father’s property.

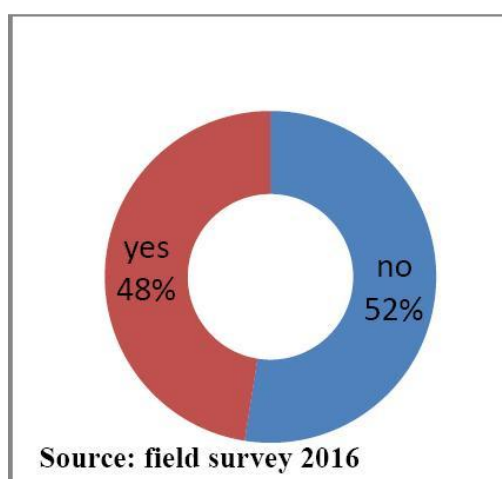


Fig5. Decision at Household Level

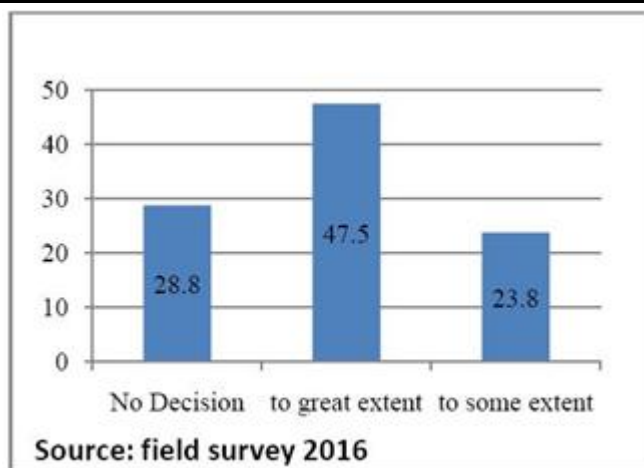


Fig6. Decision for Children's Education

The Self Help Groups (S.H.Gs) in India generally have played an instrumental role in empowering the women of the country, by organizing women in groups and through participation in talks and discussion among the group members and by creation of wealth have increased the confidence among the women folk. It is known from the survey that the Women folk of Pakang Busty are now getting actively engaged in S.H.Gs (fig 7) and creating micro finances through such groups and majority of them are having some kind of savings in the banks (fig 8) which shows a positive impact of S.HGs among these females. This has brought about some kind of economic empowerment and which, over the time will gradually percolate to the non active women folk of the area too and will help in the empowerment of the same.

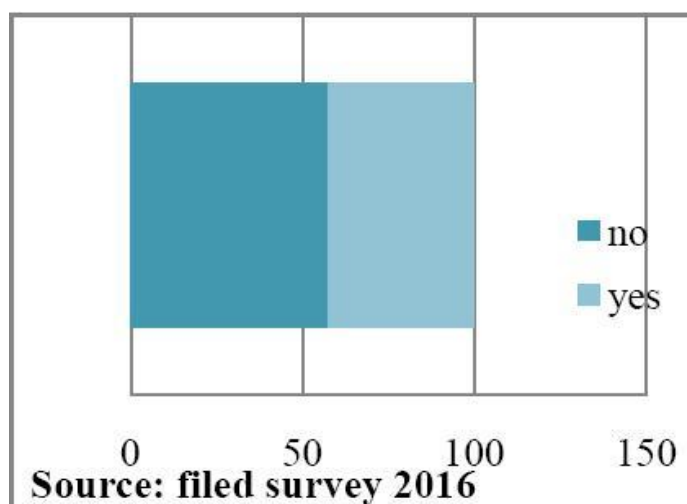


Fig7. Involvement in S.H.G.s

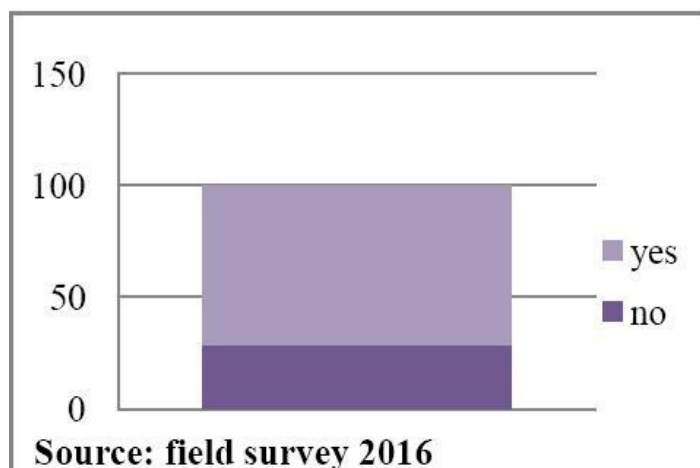


Fig8. Savings

5.4. Political Participation and Representation

As far as the political empowerment is concerned through the participation in voting and in electoral processes, the constitution of India guarantees equality to all irrespective of one's gender, caste or religion and moreover 23% of all the seats are reserved for the women and there are demands to increase the reservation up to 33%, with the Upper House of the Indian Parliament passing it with the majority (the Lower House is still to take decision on that). In this context, all the womenfolk in the study area have exercised their right to vote. Majority of the womenfolk have actively taken part in political rallies and political meetings, but sadly none of them have ever been elected or represented in local level political institutions like the panchayats and as well as in the traditional institutions, like the "Sayjum", which is a village level lepcha organization. The "Sayjum" is the traditional tribal council which takes all the decisions regarding the matters of day to day activities of the village community and demands a great respect from all. Traditionally the "Sayjum" is the council of elders and the head of the "Sayjum" is known as the "Lupon", both Males and Females can become the members of "Sayjum" and can become a "Lupon" or the head, but sadly no women folk have ever become "Lupon" till date, which implies that the women in the Lepcha community is still far from being regarded as "equals" in terms of representation in the decision-making bodies by men.

5.5. Empowerment Score

An empowerment score has been developed to ascertain the level and extent of empowerment of the women folk in the study area. Scores ranging from 1 to 10 were given to 10 selected indicators (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest) and the total score was calculated at the end by adding the respective scores scored from each indicator for each woman folk. The highest score that can ever be achieved is a score of 100 which denotes high level of empowerment and the lowest score is of 10 which indicate very low empowerment level.

Though Lepcha women enjoy equal status to men on the surface level (traditional customs does not discriminate the women in the community) yet after analyzing all the parameters of empowerment along with the indicators it is found that the overall empowerment score is 38 out of the total score of 100 and the average empowerment score for the Lepcha women in the Pakang Busty is just 12.36 which is very low and this score also reveals the fact that the empowerment and status of the Lepcha women in the surveyed village is low and unequal in comparison to men.

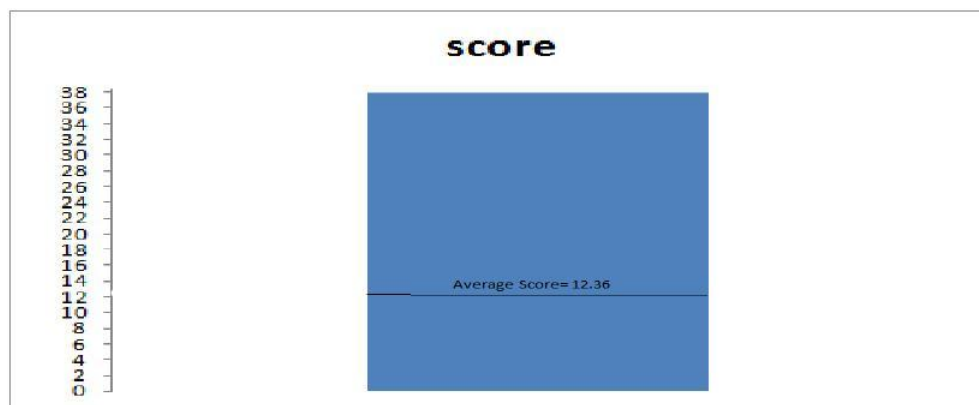


Fig9. Empowerment Score

Source: computed by the authors

6. CONCLUSION

It has been found that education, freedom to choose work place, ability to take household decisions and decisions regarding children's education, use of technology, participation in SHGs and political participation all have positive effect on empowerment of women in general. However, it has been seen that in the study area, women have done remarkably well in certain parameters of empowerment and have equally failed in the others, which has resulted in the low empowerment score. The attainment of low empowerment score makes it clear that the status of Lepcha women in the village is not satisfactory. Thus we can say that, the Lepcha women folk apparently enjoy equal status in respect to men but the detailed study reveals another aspect. The women folk due to financial constraints are not being able to gain access to education which in turn has made them more dependent upon men

though they are gainfully employed and in spite of the fact that the bias free attitude is provided by the Lepcha traditions and customs.

Thus empowerment of the women in the area in particular can be achieved by increasing the access to the educational institutions; the planners need to identify clusters of different villages and high schools and rural colleges can be established to serve those clusters; strengthening of financial security of the women needs to be done by establishing cottage industries and skills of the women folk must be developed by imparting trainings and knowledge whatever needed to run such cottage industries, S.H.Gs. need to play more proactive role and more S.H.Gs to be formed and encouraged, micro-credits need to be provided to the women folk to encourage them to rear pigs, goats, cattle and poultry to uplift their economic conditions; Government agencies must ensure that women's participation in electoral processes, strengthening of decision- making capacity and control over the resources be safeguarded.

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