

Empowerment of Tharu Farm Women: An Analysis of Socio-Economic and Personal Determinants

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ABSTRACT

The empowerment of Tharu farm women is crucial for achieving inclusive rural development. As primary contributors to agricultural labour, their socio-economic status, education, and decision-making capacity significantly influence household welfare and community progress. The present study was conducted to explore the socio-economic and personal characteristics of Tharu farm women and examine their relationship with empowerment indicators. Data were collected from a sample size of 200 Tharu women farmers using a structured interview schedule. The findings revealed that most of the respondents belonged to the middle-aged group (54%), while 31% were young and 15% were older. Educational attainment varied, with 21.5 % graduates and 15% illiterate. Most women were married (65.5%) and lived in nuclear families (58.5%), with medium-sized families being the most common (44 %). A significant majority were marginal farmers (65.5%), indicating limited landholding capacity. Material possession was found to be a medium for 47.5 % of the respondents, and social participation was predominantly at a medium level (84 %). In terms of family roles, 44 % were dependent on their husbands, while 32.5 % served as heads of their households. Income levels showed that 36 per cent fell into the semi-medium category. Most respondents reported medium use of information sources (49.5 %) and medium access to marketing facilities (52.5 %). A high level of value orientation was observed in 54.5 per cent of the women, and farm activity participation was mostly at a medium level (60.5%). Notably, a dominant 88 per cent exhibited a high level of decision-making power. Statistical analysis using the Chi-square test revealed significant associations between empowerment and several variables like age ($p=0.007$), education ($p=0.003$), marital status ($p=0.040$), family size ($p=0.016$), social participation ($p=0.001$), position in the family ($p=0.000$), annual family income ($p=0.004$), source of information ($p=0.004$), value orientation ($p=0.000$), farm activities ($p=0.004$), and decision-making patterns ($p=0.038$). These findings emphasize that empowerment among Tharu farm women is influenced by a combination of educational, economic, and social factors.

Keywords: Tharu women, Empowerment, Socio-economic characteristics, Farm women, Rural development, Decision-making, Social participation

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment as a concept was introduced at the International Women's Conference in 1985 in Nairobi, which defined it as the redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. Mass illiteracy, unemployment, ill health and limited access to economic assets mark the situation of women in India. Therefore, women's empowerment in India principally aims at enhancing their social functioning by a quantitative and qualitative change, particularly in the fields of education, health and employment. Redistribution of social power and a change in the control of resources in favour of women in any society is not possible unless they are healthy, educated and

provided with some gainful employment opportunities. Human development is impossible without gender equality. Women's empowerment is envisaged as an aid to help women achieve equality with men or at least to reduce the gender gap considerably. Gender inequality exists in almost all sectors, but is more so in agriculture. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that should enable women or a group of women to realise their full identity and power in all spheres of life (Surekharao and Rajamanamma, 1999). Women's empowerment, especially in rural societies, is an important measure of social development and sustainable growth. In India, farm women are a major part of the agricultural labour

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force, but they tend to be marginalized when it comes to access to resources, decision-making, and social status (FAO, 2011). Among them, the Tharu community—an indigenous people living predominantly in the Terai region—have a significant contribution to subsistence agriculture and rural livelihoods. Although they are actively engaged in farming activities, Tharu farm women encounter various socio-economic and cultural obstacles that prevent their empowerment. Empowerment means the capacity of women to make strategic life decisions, engage in economic activities, gain access to education and information, and have an impact on household and community-level decisions (Kabeer, 1999). Earlier research has highlighted that economic status, social participation, educational attainment, and resource control are powerful predictors of women's empowerment (Malhotra et al., 2002). Empowerment of Tharu farm women is critical to promoting participatory rural development and increasing agricultural productivity. As major stakeholders in agrarian economies, their participation involves not just labour but also decision-making, management of resources, and knowledge dissemination. (Chaudhary et al. 2022). Furthermore, decision-making processes among Tharu families demonstrate a multifaceted interaction of traditional beliefs and changing gender roles. Tharu women are engaged in numerous farming activities, but they are still underrepresented in important decision-making processes because of deep-rooted socio-cultural determinants. This imbalance highlights the importance of focused interventions to support women's autonomy and leadership within agricultural communities. With these challenges in mind, efforts have been made to improve the capacities of Tharu women farmers (Bam, 2023). Structured capacity-building activities to bring in scientific farming practices among the Tharu tribal farmers, specifically with major emphasis on women. These programs help to fill knowledge gaps and foster sustainable livelihoods. (ICAR, 2022). Empowerment is a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations. These relations operate in different spheres of life (e.g. economic, social, and political) and at different levels (e.g. individual, household, community, market, institutional). Empowerment is a process of negotiation where the subjects of the empowerment process define the main priorities and strategies. This process of negotiation, however, requires an appropriate forum and information to enable women to fully consider the possible options and potential consequences of their choices. It is also likely to require explicit promotion of women's interests at the macro-level to widen the scope of choice (PRADAN, 2000).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in the state of Uttarakhand, which comprises 13 districts. Among these, Udham Singh Nagar and Champawat districts were selected purposively due to the researcher's familiarity with the local culture, language, and social customs, which facilitated effective communication,

and these districts also have the highest concentration of the Tharu population, making them ideal for the study. A total of 200 Tharu farm women were selected using a multistage cum random sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured interview schedule designed to gather information on socio-economic and personal characteristics, along with indicators of empowerment. The present study employed a descriptive research design. The Chi-square (χ^2) test was used to examine the association between empowerment and selected independent variables. Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16.0. The test was applied at a 0.05 level of significance. The chi-square test, originally introduced by Karl Pearson in 1900, is one of the most widely used non-parametric statistical tools for examining relationships between categorical variables. The formula for calculating the Chi-square (χ^2) statistic is given as:

$$\chi^2 = \frac{\sum(f_o - f_e)^2}{f_e}$$

Here,

o = frequency of occurrence of observed or experimentally determined facts.

e = expected frequency, f_o occurrence on independent hypothesis

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Economic and Personal Characteristics of Tharu Farm Women

The Socio-Economic and Personal Characteristics of Tharu Farm Women refers to the basic information about age, education, marital status, family type, family Size, land holding, material possession, social participation, Position in the family, source of Information utilized, marketing facility, value orientation, farm Activities performed, decision making pattern, annual income. The findings related to the profile of Tharu Farm Women have been presented in Table 1. The majority of respondents are in the middle age category (54%), followed by young (31%) and old (15%) age groups. Thus, it may be concluded that the majority of Tharu farm women belonged to the age group of 31 to 50 years. All the Tharu farm women were middle-aged. The study findings were consistent with a previous study conducted by (Nayak et al. 2021). The findings revealed that the majority (21.50%) of Tharu farm women highest educational qualification level up to graduation level, followed by high school (20.50%) illiterate (15%), Intermediate and middle level (12.5 %), primary level (8 %), functionally literate (6 %) and masters level (4 %). Thus, it may be concluded that the education levels among respondents indicate a positive trend towards literacy, albeit with significant variations in educational attainment. The majority (65.5 %) of respondents were married, followed by separated (24%), widowed (7.5%) and unmarried (3%). This result is in line with Sarada (2001). A majority (58.5 per cent) of respondents belonged to a nuclear family, and 41.5 per cent of respondents belonged to a joint family. Due to urbanization, people would prefer to live in a nuclear family for the sake of

close contact, satisfaction of basic needs and also a realization of the advantages of nuclear families in terms of running the family and responsibilities, etc. The findings of the present study are in line with the findings of (Nayak et al. 2021). The majority (44 per cent) of respondents had medium family size, followed by large family size (31.3 per cent), small family (15.5 per cent) and very large family size (9 per cent). Most of the respondents had a small or medium family. Very few belong to the large family. This might be due to the practice of small family norms, their awareness regarding the increased cost of living and difficulties in the maintenance of the big family. They might have found it beneficial to have small families to lead a better and comfortable life. The distribution shows that the majority are marginal farmers (65.50%), followed by small farmers (25.50%) and semi-medium farmers (9%). Most of the respondents are either marginal farmers or small farmers. No respondent was a medium or big landholder. This was the reason to force the women to work on other land as labourers. Similar results have been reported by (Nayak et al. 2021). A significant proportion of respondents possess materials at medium levels (47.50%), followed by high (34%) and low (18.50%) levels. The findings are in line with (Nayak et al. 2021). Most of the respondents exhibit medium levels of social participation (84%), with smaller percentages at high (12.50%) and low (3.50%) levels. A substantial number of respondents were dependent on their husbands (44%), followed by those who were heads of the family (32.50%) and dependent on in-laws/parents (23.50%). The distribution of annual family income varies across categories, with semi-medium income (36%) being the highest, followed by medium (27.5%), high (19.5%), and low (17%) incomes. The poor literacy rate of women, poor social participation may be the reason behind this. As most respondents had small and medium land holdings, it might be a big reason that respondents had a medium family income. These results are in line with the findings of Kaur and Sharma (2019), who reported that limited land ownership and low education levels were significantly associated with lower income among rural women. Similarly, Rani and Lal (2020) found that women with smaller landholdings and minimal social involvement were less likely to access income-generating opportunities and agricultural resources. Meena et al. (2018) also emphasized that farm women from smallholder households often face multiple socio-economic constraints that limit their economic empowerment. Most of the respondents were using information at high (39.5%) and medium (49.5%) levels, with a lesser portion at low (11%) levels. It is possible, despite the low literacy rate among women that this trend indicates that personal interest, word-of-mouth knowledge dissemination, and the efficiency of extension services are important in increasing information utilization. This emphasizes that access to and utilization of agricultural information is not just a matter of formal schooling but are also determined by motivation, networks in the community, and the usefulness of the information being presented. These results are aligned with Yadav et al. (2017), Mittal and Mehar (2016), Singh and Kaur (2016), and Kumari et al. (2018) who have likewise

indicated that women in rural communities tend to adopt alternative learning mechanisms and interpersonal mediums to remain up-to-date and involved in farm activities. The majority (52.5%) of the respondents were experiencing a medium level of marketing Facility, followed by high (22%), while 25.5 per cent of the respondents were experiencing low levels of marketing experience. The majority of respondents had a high level of value orientation (54.5 per cent), followed by medium (38 per cent) and low value orientation (7.5 per cent) respectively. The majority (60.5%) of the respondents were engaged in medium levels of farm activities, while 39.5 percent of the respondents were engaged at high levels of farm activities. The majority (88%) of respondents exhibit high levels of decision-making, followed by medium (11%) and low decision-making patterns (1%), respectively. The findings are in line with Tiwari et al. (2019)

Table 1: Distribution of Socio-Economic and Personal Characteristics of Tharu Farm Women
(n=200)

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Young (up to 30 years)	62	31
	Middle (31 to 50)	108	54
	Old (above 50 years)	30	15
Education	Illiterate	30	15
	Functionally literate	12	06
	Primary School	16	08
	Middle School	25	12.50
	High School	41	20.50
	Intermediate	25	12.50
	Graduation	43	21.50
	Masters	08	04
Marital Status	Married	131	65.50
	Unmarried	06	3.00
	Widowed	15	7.50
	Separated	48	24
Type of Family	Nuclear family	117	58.50
	Joint family	83	41.50
Size of Family	Small (2-3 members)	31	15.50
	Medium (4-6 members)	88	44.00
	Large (6-9 members)	63	31.50
	Very Large (above 9 members)	18	9.00

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Land Holding	Marginal farmers	131	65.50
	Small farmers	51	25.50
	Semi-Medium	18	09.00
	Medium	00	00.00
	Big	00	00.00
Materials Possession	High	68	34.00
	Medium	95	47.50
	Low	37	18.50
Social Participation	High	25	12.50
	Medium	168	84
	Low	7	3.50
Position in the family	Head	65	32.50
	Dependent on Husband	88	44.00
	Dependent on in-laws/parents	47	23.50
Annual Family Income	High	39	19.5
	Semi-medium	72	36
	Medium	55	27.5
	Low	34	17
Source of Information Utilised	High	79	39.5
	Medium	99	49.5
	Low	22	11
Marketing Facility	High	44	22
	Medium	105	52.5
	Low	51	25.5
Value orientation	High	109	54.5
	Medium	76	38
	Low	15	7.5
Farm Activities performed	High	79	39.5
	Medium	121	60.5
	Low	0	0
Decision-Making Pattern	High	176	88
	Medium	22	11
	Low	2	1

Empowerment of Tharu Farm Women on selected independent Socio-Economic and Personal Characteristics

The findings revealed that in Table 2, a significant association was observed between age (0.007) and education (0.003) with empowerment, both significant at the 1% level. These findings are consistent with earlier studies (Meena et al., 2012; Devi and Reddy, 2019), which indicate that younger and more educated women tend to be more actively involved in farm-related decision-making, have greater access to information, and exhibit higher levels of autonomy. Marital status (0.040) and family size (0.016) were also found to be statistically significant at the 5% level, suggesting that familial structure and responsibilities influence empowerment outcomes. Women from smaller families or those in stable marital relationships were more likely to report greater decision-making authority, corroborating the findings of Rani and Lal (2020). Furthermore, strong associations were noted for social participation (0.001) and position within the family (0.000), implying that women who are household heads or who actively engage in community organizations exhibit higher empowerment levels. These results align with prior studies by (Bharad et al. 2015; Tiwari et al. 2019). Some other variables-annual family income (0.004), source of information utilized (0.004), value orientation (0.000), farm activities performed (0.004), and decision-making pattern (0.038) also demonstrated significant associations with empowerment. These findings highlight the critical roles played by both economic and cognitive dimensions in enhancing women's empowerment, as supported by Mittal and Mehar (2016) and Kumari et al. (2018). On the other hand, the type of family, landholding size, material possession, and marketing facility did not show a significant relationship with empowerment (0.05), implying that while these may impact livelihood, they are not necessarily determinants of empowerment in the context of Tharu women. Similar observations were reported by Deshmukh and Rathod (2013).

Table 2: Relationship between empowerment of tharu farm women and their socio-economic and personal characteristics

S. No.	Independent Variables	Pearson Chi-Square		
		Calculated Value	Degree of freedom	P-Value
1.	Age	13.877	4	0.007**
2.	Education	15.670	4	0.003**
3.	Marital status	12.887	6	0.040*
4.	Type of Family	1.319	4	0.851
5.	Size of Family	12.139	4	0.016*
6.	Land Holding	3.550	4	0.470
7.	Materials Possession	5.440	4	0.244
8.	Social Participation	18.365	4	0.001**
9.	Position in the family	29.744	4	0.000**

S. No.	Independent Variables	Pearson Chi-Square		
		Calculated Value	Degree of freedom	P-Value
10.	Annual Family Income	18.790	6	0.004**
11.	Source of Information Utilized	15.220	4	0.004**
12.	Marketing Facility	6.750	4	0.149
13.	Value orientation	32.821	4	0.000**
14.	Farm Activities performed	15.140	4	0.004**
15.	Decision-Making Pattern	10.09	4	0.038*

** : Significant at 1% level of probability

* : Significant at 5% level of probability

CONCLUSIONS

The study found that empowerment among Tharu farm women is greatly affected by characteristics like age, education, marital status, household size, social participation, family position, annual income, source of information, value orientation, farming activity, and decision-making style. Women who were young and educated, in stable marriages, and women living in households or with active social participation were those who were more empowered. Economic and intellectual factors, i.e., income and access to information, were equally important. However, the size of the landholding, family type, material possessions, and availability of marketing facilities had no role to play in associating them with empowerment. These results identify that empowerment of Tharu farm women does not hinge only on material resources but is dominated by educational, social, and economic processes. Strategies to advance their empowerment need to aim at strengthening education, access to information, and active social and decision-making participation to facilitate sustainable rural development.

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