

Women's Rights and Social Empowerment in Hooghly: A Study of Changing Gender Dynamics in Rural and Urban Contexts

Papiya Dey

M.A in Political Science, M.Ed. (Pursuing), Department of Political Science,
The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India.

E-mail – papiyadnk1@gmail.com

Rajesh Dey

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography,
Raja Narendralal Khan Women's College (Autonomous), West Medinipur, West Bengal, India.

E-mail – rdey3312@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Women's rights and social empowerment have become central to discussions of inclusive development in India, yet their regional expression remains highly uneven. Hooghly district of West Bengal offers an important case for examining these changes because it combines relatively urbanized industrial belts with extensive rural agrarian areas. This study analyzes the status of women's rights and social empowerment in Hooghly through a rural–urban perspective, focusing on demographic profile, educational attainment, access to resources, and spatial inequality. The study is based entirely on secondary data drawn from Census 2011, district statistical sources, NFHS-5 indicators for West Bengal, and published research on women's status in Hooghly. The findings suggest that Hooghly has a relatively strong demographic and literacy profile, but important gender disparities persist in education, work participation, access to decision-making resources, and block-level development. Women in the more urbanized and economically connected blocks generally show better outcomes in literacy, access to services, and occupational diversification, while women in the western and more deprived parts of the district remain more vulnerable. Poverty continues to shape the geography of women's empowerment, and earlier district research shows a significant negative relationship between poverty and women's status. The study argues that legal rights alone do not guarantee substantive empowerment unless they are supported by education, financial inclusion, livelihood opportunities, and spatially balanced development. Strengthening women's rights in Hooghly therefore requires a combined strategy of educational advancement, economic security, institutional support, and targeted intervention in disadvantaged rural blocks.

Keywords: *Women's Rights; Social Empowerment; Hooghly; Rural–Urban Inequality; Gender Dynamics; Literacy; Financial Inclusion; Poverty; West Bengal.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's rights are closely linked with the broader idea of empowerment, which includes not only legal equality but also access to education, health, employment, property, mobility, and participation in household and public decision-making. In districts where rural and urban spaces coexist closely, these rights are often experienced unevenly. Hooghly is a suitable area for such a study because it combines historically industrialized and urbanized zones such as Serampore and Chandannagar with agriculturally dependent rural blocks in the western part of the district. This uneven regional structure has a direct bearing on gender relations and women's opportunities.

According to district-level demographic data, Hooghly had a population of 5,519,145 in 2011, of which 2,704,492 were female. The district had a sex ratio of 961 females per 1,000 males, a population density of 1,753 persons per sq. km, and a population structure that was 61.43% rural and 38.57% urban.

Scheduled Castes accounted for 24.35% of the population and Scheduled Tribes for 4.15%, indicating that caste-based social inequality remains relevant to any discussion of women's rights.

Educationally, Hooghly performs better than several districts of West Bengal, yet gender gaps remain visible. A district survey profile reports total literacy at 81.80%, with male literacy at 87.03% and female literacy at 76.36%. This means that despite relatively high educational attainment overall, women continue to face a literacy gap of more than 10 percentage points. Such a gap has implications far beyond schooling, since education affects women's mobility, access to information, bargaining power, and occupational choices.

The issue is not only whether women possess formal rights, but whether they can effectively exercise them. NFHS-5 data for West Bengal show that women's access to bank accounts and mobile phones has improved substantially, but spousal violence and uneven educational attainment remain concerns. These wider state-level patterns are relevant for understanding district-level realities in Hooghly, especially where rural deprivation and urban advantage intersect.

This study therefore examines women's rights and social empowerment in Hooghly by bringing together demographic indicators, educational conditions, access-based measures of empowerment, and intra-district inequality. The central argument is that the condition of women in Hooghly reflects both progress and unevenness: while urbanization and improved social infrastructure have widened opportunities in some blocks, women in poorer and less connected regions continue to encounter structural constraints.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several scholars have examined women's rights, empowerment, and socio-economic status in Hooghly district from different perspectives. Sayanti Pal (2014) studied the spatial variation of women's health status in Hugli and showed that women's well-being is closely linked with access to health infrastructure, sanitation, and maternal care. The study highlighted that health inequality remains an important dimension of women's overall status.

S. Kumar and M. Mishra (2022) analyzed the relationship between poverty and women's status in Hooghly district and found strong spatial inequality across blocks. Their study demonstrated a negative correlation between poverty and women's status, showing that poorer blocks tend to have lower levels of female empowerment.

In the field of rural women's development, Saheli Kumar and K. P. Goswami (2020) examined self-help groups in Dhaniakhali and Polba-Dadpur blocks and argued that SHGs significantly improve the socio-economic condition of rural women through savings, credit, and collective participation.

Similarly, A. K. Maity and S. Das (2020) studied SHGs in Khanakul-I block and found that such groups play an important role in self-employment generation, income improvement, and confidence building among women.

S. Mitra (2021) discussed women's financial inclusion in Hooghly and emphasized the role of savings, banking linkage, and microfinance in strengthening women's economic agency, especially in underserved groups.

N. Karmakar et al. (2017), in a study from Hooghly district, examined quality of life among menopausal women and showed that women's health, age, and social environment directly affect their life quality and empowerment.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the demographic and educational profile of women in Hooghly district.
2. To assess women's social empowerment through selected indicators of access, inclusion, and agency.
3. To analyze rural–urban and inter-block disparities in women's status within the district.
4. To understand the relationship between poverty and women's empowerment in Hooghly.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyzes the status of women's rights and social empowerment in Hooghly district through three interrelated dimensions: the demographic and educational profile of women, the condition of women's empowerment through access and agency, and the spatial as well as socio-economic disparities that shape women's lives across the district. Together, these findings help address the wider objectives of the study, particularly to analyze rural–urban and inter-block disparities in women's status within the district and to understand the relationship between poverty and women's empowerment in Hooghly. The discussion shows that although Hooghly performs relatively well on several social indicators, women's empowerment remains uneven in its distribution, shaped by literacy, location, poverty, and access to opportunities.

Table1: Demographic and Educational Profile of Women in Hooghly

Indicator	Value
Total population	5,519,145
Female population	2,704,492
Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males)	961
Rural population share (%)	61.43
Urban population share (%)	38.57
SC population share (%)	24.35
ST population share (%)	4.15
Population density (per sq. km)	1,753
Total literacy rate (%)	81.80
Male literacy rate (%)	87.03
Female literacy rate (%)	76.36
Gender literacy gap (percentage points)	10.67

Source: District demographic profile and district survey data.

The demographic profile of Hooghly provides an important background for understanding women's rights and social empowerment in the district. With a total population of 5,519,145 and a female population of 2,704,492, women constitute a substantial part of the district's social and economic structure. The sex ratio of 961 females per 1,000 males indicates a relatively balanced demographic situation compared with many regions where adverse gender ratios signal stronger forms of exclusion. From a demographic standpoint, this gives Hooghly a comparatively stable foundation for women's development.

At the same time, the district is characterized by a mixed rural–urban structure. Around 61.43% of the population lives in rural areas, while 38.57% lives in urban areas. This is a significant feature because women's rights are often experienced differently in rural and urban settings. Urban spaces generally offer better access to schools, transport, healthcare, banking facilities, communication networks, and

employment opportunities. Rural areas, by contrast, may remain more constrained by traditional gender norms, agricultural dependence, lower institutional reach, and weaker infrastructure. In Hooghly, the coexistence of a large rural population with a substantial urban presence creates a dual socio-spatial reality in which women's experiences are not uniform across the district.

The social composition of the district also deserves attention. Scheduled Castes account for 24.35% of the population, while Scheduled Tribes constitute 4.15%. This has direct relevance for any discussion of women's empowerment because gender inequality is often intensified when combined with caste and class disadvantage. Women from socially marginalized communities may face multiple layers of exclusion in education, labour markets, healthcare access, land ownership, and social mobility. Therefore, district-level averages may conceal deeper forms of inequality affecting particular groups of women.

Literacy is one of the most important indicators of empowerment, since it shapes awareness, confidence, mobility, employability, and the ability to access institutional support. Hooghly shows a relatively strong overall literacy rate of 81.80%, which suggests a comparatively favorable educational environment. However, the breakdown by gender reveals a significant gap. Male literacy stands at 87.03%, whereas female literacy is 76.36%, leaving a gender literacy gap of 10.67 percentage points. This gap is not merely a statistical difference. It reflects unequal access to educational attainment and has far-reaching implications for women's participation in economic, social, and political life.

Lower female literacy often translates into weaker bargaining power within households, limited awareness of legal and welfare entitlements, reduced participation in skilled employment, and restricted mobility in public spaces. It may also affect health-seeking behaviour, financial decision-making, and the educational aspirations women hold for the next generation. In this sense, literacy is not only a human development indicator but also a direct measure of women's capacity to exercise rights in practice.

The rural dimension is especially important here. In many rural parts of Hooghly, girls may still face barriers related to school distance, household labour burden, early marriage, and social attitudes toward female education. By contrast, urban and peri-urban areas may provide more favorable conditions through better school access, transport connectivity, and a wider social environment that supports girls' education. Thus, while the district's aggregate literacy performance appears strong, the gender gap suggests that women continue to face disadvantages that limit full empowerment.

Another important point is that demographic strength by itself does not guarantee gender equality. A substantial female population and a reasonable sex ratio create a supportive demographic context, but empowerment depends on whether women can translate this demographic presence into educational attainment, economic participation, social visibility, and decision-making power. The data show that Hooghly has made progress, but the persistence of the literacy gap indicates that women's development remains incomplete.

Overall, the demographic and educational profile of Hooghly reveals a district with relatively strong human resource potential but also clear gender disparities. Women form a major part of the district's population, and the literacy environment is better than in many less developed regions. Yet the educational disadvantage faced by women continues to limit the realization of equal rights. This means that the foundation for empowerment exists, but it remains unevenly distributed and only partially realized.

Table 2: Women's Empowerment Through Access and Agency

Indicator	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	Total (%)
Female population age 6+ who ever attended school	84.1	73.3	76.8
Women with a bank/savings account they themselves use	88.5	89.8	89.2
Women with a mobile phone they themselves use	80.8	80.9	80.8
Ever-married women age 18–49 who experienced spousal violence	23.2	13.2	17.2

Source: NFHS-5, West Bengal. Used here as the broader state context for understanding district-level women's empowerment.

Women's empowerment cannot be measured only through demographic strength or literacy. It must also be evaluated through indicators of access, control, and agency in everyday life. The selected indicators presented above help capture this broader dimension. They show that women's empowerment in Hooghly, as understood through the wider state-level context, is complex and uneven, combining signs of progress with continuing social vulnerability.

The proportion of females aged 6 years and above who have ever attended school is notably higher in urban areas (84.1%) than in rural areas (73.3%). This difference clearly reflects the unequal geography of opportunity. Urban women tend to benefit from better access to educational institutions, transport networks, and social environments that may be more supportive of continued schooling. Rural women, on the other hand, often face more severe structural barriers, including distance from schools, economic pressure, household responsibilities, and more conservative gender expectations. This finding reinforces the earlier literacy pattern by showing that educational inequality is deeply shaped by location.

Access to financial institutions is another important indicator of empowerment. The data show that 89.2% of women have a bank or savings account that they themselves use. Interestingly, the rural percentage (89.8%) is slightly higher than the urban percentage (88.5%), suggesting that financial inclusion programs have had broad reach across social spaces. This is a significant development because access to personal financial accounts strengthens women's autonomy, allows direct receipt of welfare benefits, and improves their participation in household economic decision-making. It may also reduce dependence on male family members for everyday financial transactions.

However, having an account does not automatically mean having full economic control. Real empowerment depends on whether women actively use these accounts, make independent decisions, save money regularly, or access credit and government benefits without mediation. Thus, the high level of financial inclusion should be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition of empowerment. It indicates institutional access, but not necessarily complete financial freedom.

A similar pattern appears in digital access. Around 80.8% of women report using a mobile phone themselves, with little rural–urban difference. This is an important sign of social change. Mobile access can improve women's connectivity, awareness, safety, access to information, and ability to maintain social and economic networks. In today's context, digital access increasingly influences educational opportunities, employment information, health communication, and even participation in public services. For women, especially in socially restrictive environments, personal access to communication technology can strengthen independence.

Yet here too, numerical access does not guarantee deeper empowerment. Women may own or use mobile phones but still face social monitoring, restricted usage, or limited digital literacy. Therefore, digital access should be interpreted as a supportive condition that can enable empowerment, but not as proof that gender equality has been achieved.

The most serious challenge visible in this table is the persistence of spousal violence. Among ever-married women aged 18–49, 17.2% reported experiencing spousal violence, with the urban figure (23.2%) higher than the rural figure (13.2%). Regardless of the rural–urban difference, the presence of violence remains a critical reminder that formal progress in education, banking, and technology does not automatically remove patriarchal control. Violence within intimate relationships reflects unequal power relations, insecurity, and social acceptance of gendered domination. It is one of the clearest signs that women’s rights are still not fully secure.

This point is central to the study. Women may have greater access to institutions than before, but substantive empowerment requires freedom from coercion and fear. A woman who is financially included or digitally connected may still lack decision-making power if she faces violence, control, or social restrictions within the household. Therefore, empowerment must be understood as a multidimensional process that includes not only access but also dignity, autonomy, and safety.

The contrast between positive indicators such as bank-account ownership and mobile use, and negative indicators such as spousal violence, shows that women’s empowerment in Hooghly cannot be described in simple terms. It is advancing in institutional and technological forms, but still constrained in social and relational terms. This mixed picture is especially important when studying gender dynamics in districts where modernizing influences coexist with traditional social structures.

Overall, these indicators suggest that women in Hooghly are gradually gaining greater access to the resources that support empowerment. Educational participation, financial inclusion, and communication access all point to change. At the same time, the persistence of violence and the clear rural disadvantage in school attendance show that social empowerment remains incomplete. Women’s rights in practice continue to depend on where women live, what resources they control, and how far they can convert access into actual agency.

Table 3: Rural–Urban and Inter-Block Disparities in Women’s Status Within the District

Indicator of Spatial Inequality	Value
Blocks with high status of women (%)	22
Blocks with moderate status of women (%)	50
Blocks with low status of women (%)	28
Correlation between poverty and women’s status	-0.589
Variance in women’s status explained by poverty (%)	~35

Source: Kumar and Mishra, Hooghly district study.

One of the most important findings of this study is that women’s empowerment in Hooghly is spatially uneven. This directly addresses the objective to analyze rural–urban and inter-block disparities in women’s status within the district. The data show that only 22% of blocks fall into the high-status category for women, while 50% are moderate and 28% are low. This means that the benefits of social development are distributed unevenly across the district. Women’s rights and empowerment do not progress uniformly; they follow the geography of development.

This unevenness is strongly linked to rural–urban differences. Blocks that are more urbanized, economically connected, or close to transport and industrial corridors tend to perform better on indicators related to women’s status. Chanditala-II, Chanditala-I, Singur, and Serampore-Uttarpara have been identified as better-performing blocks. These areas benefit from stronger educational infrastructure, greater exposure to non-agricultural employment, better transport links, and more diversified livelihoods. Women living in such areas are more likely to have access to schooling, services, wage work beyond agriculture, and institutions that support social mobility.

By contrast, blocks such as Arambagh, Goghat-I, and Pandua are identified as lower-status areas for women. These blocks are generally more rural, less economically diversified, and more affected by poverty and weaker social development conditions. In such settings, women's opportunities may remain restricted by a combination of lower literacy, fewer employment choices, weaker service access, and stronger traditional gender norms. The result is that location itself becomes a major determinant of women's life chances.

This pattern highlights a crucial feature of women's rights in regional perspective: rights are not experienced in the same way everywhere. A woman living in a peri-urban block near developed infrastructure may enjoy better access to schools, banking, mobility, and employment than a woman in a poorer rural block, even though both are formally citizens with equal legal rights. In this sense, rural-urban and inter-block disparities operate as practical inequalities in the exercise of rights.

The classification of blocks into high, moderate, and low status categories also suggests that women's empowerment is not sharply polarized into only success and failure. Rather, a large middle zone exists, represented by the 50% of blocks that fall in the moderate category. This is significant because it shows that many parts of Hooghly are in transition. These areas may have achieved partial progress in literacy, livelihood diversification, or social access, but still remain held back by structural barriers. Policy intervention in such blocks can be especially important, since moderate-status regions may respond more effectively to targeted development efforts.

Table 4: Understanding The Relationship Between Poverty and Women's Empowerment in Hooghly

Indicator	Value
Correlation between poverty and women's status	-0.589
Variance in women's status explained by poverty	~35%
Female literacy rate in Hooghly	76.36%
Male literacy rate in Hooghly	87.03%
Women with bank/savings account they themselves use (WB)	89.2%
Women with mobile phone they themselves use (WB)	80.8%

Source: Hooghly district profile, district survey report, NFHS-5 West Bengal, and the Hooghly poverty-women's status study.

The relationship between poverty and women's empowerment in Hooghly is both strong and multidimensional. Available research on the district shows a clear negative correlation of -0.589 between poverty and women's status, which means that areas with higher poverty tend to record lower levels of women's empowerment. The same study further indicates that nearly 35% of the variation in women's status across blocks can be explained by poverty alone. This makes poverty one of the most important structural factors shaping women's lives in the district, although it is not the only one.

Poverty affects women's empowerment first through education. In Hooghly, female literacy stands at 76.36%, while male literacy is 87.03%, leaving a gap of 10.67 percentage points. In poorer households, girls are more likely to face interruptions in schooling because of domestic work, financial constraints, or early marriage. As a result, women from low-income families often enter adulthood with weaker access to knowledge, fewer employment options, and less confidence in exercising legal and social rights. This directly limits their participation in decision-making both within the household and in public life.

Poverty also shapes women's access to economic resources. Although NFHS-5 data for West Bengal show that 89.2% of women have a bank or savings account they use themselves and 80.8% use a mobile phone, these broad improvements do not mean that all women enjoy equal control over economic opportunities. Poor women are still more likely to be concentrated in low-paid, insecure, and informal work, with limited savings, weak social protection, and low bargaining power. Institutional access may have improved, but material deprivation often restricts the real benefits that women can derive from that access.

Another important point is that poverty deepens spatial inequality. In Hooghly, blocks with stronger infrastructure, better literacy, and greater economic diversification tend to show higher women's status, while poorer rural blocks perform worse. This suggests that women's empowerment is not simply an individual issue; it is shaped by the wider development environment in which women live. Where poverty is high, women often face overlapping disadvantages in education, mobility, work, healthcare, and social recognition.

At the same time, poverty does not explain the entire pattern of women's empowerment. Since it accounts for about 35% of the variation, the remaining difference must be linked to other factors such as literacy, social norms, infrastructure, family structure, and local development conditions. This means that reducing poverty is essential, but not sufficient by itself. A meaningful improvement in women's rights in Hooghly requires a combined strategy that includes female education, livelihood security, digital access, institutional support, and protection from gender-based discrimination and violence.

5. OVERALL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results show that women's rights in Hooghly are advancing, but in a layered and unequal manner. The district benefits from a substantial female population, a relatively favorable sex ratio, strong overall literacy, and growing access to banking and mobile communication. These are all signs of progress. They suggest that the social conditions necessary for empowerment have expanded considerably.

However, the evidence also shows that this progress remains incomplete. Female literacy still lags behind male literacy. Rural women remain more disadvantaged in educational participation. Spousal violence continues to affect a significant share of women. Empowerment is far from evenly distributed across the district, with only a small share of blocks showing high women's status. Poverty has a strong negative association with empowerment, and poorer rural blocks remain particularly vulnerable.

The district therefore presents a pattern of uneven transformation. Urban and peri-urban areas have generally moved further ahead because they offer better infrastructure, stronger educational access, diversified employment, and greater social exposure. Rural and poorer blocks continue to face more limited opportunities, and women in such areas are more likely to experience multiple disadvantages at once. This includes the combined effects of poverty, lower literacy, weak mobility, insecure employment, and social conservatism.

The discussion also makes clear that women's empowerment is not a single measurable outcome. It is the product of interacting conditions: education, finance, digital access, location, household power, social norms, and economic security. Women's rights become meaningful only when these conditions work together to create real autonomy in everyday life. Legal recognition alone is not enough if women remain constrained by violence, poverty, or spatial disadvantage.

In conclusion, the results strongly support the view that women's status in Hooghly must be understood through a spatial and socio-economic lens. Rural–urban differences, inter-block inequalities, and poverty all shape the uneven realization of women's rights. The district has made significant progress, but empowerment remains partial and differentiated. A more balanced strategy is needed, one that reduces educational gaps, expands secure livelihoods, addresses violence, and targets poorer rural blocks with stronger institutional support. Only then can women's rights in Hooghly move from formal recognition to substantive and equitable empowerment.

6. CONCLUSION

The study shows that the condition of women's rights and social empowerment in Hooghly is characterized by both progress and unevenness. The district possesses a relatively strong demographic base, fairly high literacy, and a growing environment of financial and digital inclusion. These are important foundations for women's advancement. However, gender disparities persist in literacy, social security, and the actual exercise of agency, particularly in rural and poorer blocks. Although, the marriage age of women's are rapidly decreasing after the post covid period of the entire district.

The rural–urban divide remains a major organizing factor. Women in urbanized and economically dynamic parts of the district are better positioned in terms of literacy, infrastructure, and access to non-agricultural livelihoods. By contrast, women in the more deprived western blocks continue to face the combined burden of poverty, lower educational attainment, weaker service access, and limited occupational diversification. The evidence also shows that poverty has a significant negative relationship with women's status, although poverty alone does not explain the entire pattern.

For this reason, any serious effort to strengthen women's rights in Hooghly must be multidimensional. Policy should focus on reducing the female literacy gap, expanding safe livelihood opportunities, strengthening SHGs and local institutions, improving access to health and social infrastructure, and giving special attention to disadvantaged rural blocks. Women's empowerment becomes meaningful only when rights are translated into lived opportunities, security, and autonomy. In Hooghly, the challenge is no longer only recognition of women's rights, but ensuring that those rights are experienced equitably across space and social groups.

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