

Impediments To Women's Empowerment among the Santal Community in Bangladesh: Evidence from Gobindaganj Upazila

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable and inclusive development; however, indigenous women continue to experience persistent social, economic, and political marginalization. This study examines the barriers to women's empowerment among the Santal community in Gobindaganj Upazila of Gaibandha District, Bangladesh. Guided by the theoretical perspectives of empowerment and intersectionality, the research investigates how gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic disadvantages interact to shape empowerment outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative data collected from 100 respondents through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with community members and local leaders.

The findings reveal that women's empowerment within the Santal community is constrained by a complex interplay of structural, socio-cultural, and institutional factors. Patriarchal family systems, entrenched cultural norms, limited educational opportunities, economic dependency, restricted access to productive resources, and low levels of political participation emerged as the principal barriers. Approximately 80% of respondents reported experiencing multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion, with limited decision-making authority and educational deprivation identified as the most significant impediments. The results demonstrate that empowerment challenges are not solely gender-based but are compounded by indigenous identity and socioeconomic vulnerability, creating a multidimensional cycle of disadvantage.

This study contributes to the growing literature on indigenous women's empowerment by providing empirical evidence from an underrepresented community in Bangladesh. The findings underscore the need for targeted policy interventions that promote educational inclusion, economic opportunities, political representation, and community-based awareness initiatives. Advancing the empowerment of indigenous women is essential not only for achieving gender equality but also for fostering social justice, inclusive governance, and sustainable development in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDGs 1, 5, 10, and 16.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Indigenous Women; Santal Community; Gender Equality; Social Exclusion; Bangladesh; Sustainable Development Goals; Intersectionality.

INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment has emerged as a central theme in global development discourse and is widely recognized as a prerequisite for sustainable development, social justice, and inclusive economic growth. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), underscores the importance of enhancing women's agency, access to resources, and participation in decision-making processes. Empirical evidence suggests that women's empowerment contributes significantly to poverty reduction, improved educational outcomes, enhanced household welfare, and sustainable economic development (Adeyele

et al., 2024; Yadav et al., 2025). Despite notable progress in advancing gender equality worldwide, substantial disparities remain, particularly among indigenous and ethnic minority populations in developing countries.

Recent bibliometric and empirical studies indicate a growing body of research on women's empowerment; however, indigenous women continue to be underrepresented in both academic scholarship and policy interventions (Ramaprabha & Balamurugan, 2025). Indigenous women often experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination arising from gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographical marginalization. This phenomenon, commonly explained through the lens of intersectionality, suggests that women belonging to ethnic minority groups face compounded disadvantages that differ from those experienced by mainstream populations (Crenshaw, 1989). Consequently, the challenges confronting indigenous women require context-specific analysis and policy responses.

In Bangladesh, women's empowerment has received increasing attention through various policy initiatives, including the National Women Development Policy (2011), which aims to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women in social, economic, and political spheres. Although these initiatives have contributed to improvements in women's status nationally, their benefits have not been distributed equally across all communities. Indigenous groups, particularly the Santal community, continue to experience persistent socioeconomic and political exclusion. The Santals are one of the oldest and largest indigenous communities in Bangladesh, residing primarily in the northwestern regions of the country. Historically, they have faced land dispossession, economic deprivation, limited access to education, and social marginalization (Ali, 1998; Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009).

Within this context, Santal women represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in Bangladeshi society. Their experiences are shaped by the intersection of gender inequality and ethnic discrimination, which collectively restrict their access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and political participation. Although Santal society is often perceived as comparatively less restrictive than many mainstream patriarchal communities, women continue to have limited influence over household and community decision-making processes. Furthermore, entrenched socio-cultural norms, poverty, low literacy levels, and inadequate institutional support continue to hinder their empowerment and social mobility.

Existing studies on the Santal community have primarily focused on their cultural heritage, historical experiences, and socioeconomic conditions, while relatively little attention has been given to the specific barriers affecting women's empowerment (Ali, 1998; Sarker, 2007). As a result, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that constrain empowerment among Santal women. Addressing this gap is essential for designing effective and inclusive development policies that ensure no group is left behind.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the impediments to women's empowerment among the Santal community in Gobindaganj Upazila of Gaibandha District, Bangladesh. By examining the socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional barriers faced by Santal women, the study seeks to generate empirical evidence that can inform policy interventions and community-based initiatives. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on indigenous women's empowerment and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question: What are the major impediments to women's empowerment among the Santal community in Bangladesh, and how do these barriers influence their social, economic, and political participation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's Empowerment: Conceptual Foundations

Women's empowerment has become a central pillar of contemporary development discourse and is widely regarded as a prerequisite for sustainable development, social justice, and inclusive economic growth. The concept extends beyond economic independence to encompass women's ability to exercise agency, access resources, participate in decision-making, and influence social and political institutions. According to Kabeer

(1999), empowerment involves the expansion of people's capacity to make strategic life choices in contexts where such choices were previously denied. Recent studies have further emphasized that women's empowerment contributes significantly to poverty reduction, educational attainment, health outcomes, and economic development (Dupuis et al., 2022; Adeleye et al., 2024; Yadav et al., 2025).

Theoretical Perspectives: Empowerment and Intersectionality

This study is anchored in Empowerment Theory and Intersectionality Theory. Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment through three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources provide the foundation for empowerment, agency reflects the ability to make purposeful choices, and achievements represent the outcomes of those choices. Intersectionality Theory, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), argues that social inequalities are shaped by the interaction of multiple identities such as gender, ethnicity, class, and religion. Recent research demonstrates that indigenous women experience overlapping forms of discrimination resulting from both gender and ethnic marginalization (Nayak, 2025; Shava & Muringa, 2025). Consequently, empowerment challenges among indigenous women cannot be understood solely through a gender lens.

Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development

Women's empowerment is increasingly recognized as a critical component of sustainable development. Empirical evidence suggests that women's access to education, employment, and decision-making opportunities improve household welfare and contributes to broader economic growth (Dupuis et al., 2022; Rathakrishnan et al., 2025). Furthermore, women's empowerment is strongly associated with the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals, including poverty reduction, gender equality, reduced inequalities, and inclusive institutions (Adeleye et al., 2024).

Indigenous Women and Intersectional Marginalization

Indigenous women remain among the most disadvantaged populations worldwide. Studies conducted across developing countries indicate that indigenous women often face higher levels of poverty, lower educational attainment, and limited access to healthcare and political representation compared with non-indigenous populations (Nayak, 2025; Ramaprabha & Balamurugan, 2025). These disadvantages are reinforced by structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and institutional exclusion. As a result, indigenous women frequently encounter barriers that limit their economic participation, social mobility, and leadership opportunities (Shava & Muringa, 2025).

Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has made notable progress in advancing gender equality through investments in education, healthcare, and women's participation in economic activities. Government initiatives, including the National Women Development Policy (2011), have contributed to improvements in women's status. Nevertheless, significant disparities persist, particularly among marginalized and indigenous communities (Sarker, 2007). Recent studies reveal that rural women continue to face challenges related to economic dependency, restricted access to productive resources, and limited participation in decision-making processes (Dupuis et al., 2022; Jana & Midya, 2024).

Research Gap and Contribution of the Study

Research Gap

Although women's empowerment has received considerable scholarly attention, indigenous women remain significantly underrepresented in empirical research. Existing studies have largely focused on mainstream populations, urban women, or national-level gender indicators, while the experiences of ethnic minority women have received comparatively limited attention (Nayak, 2025; Ramaprabha & Balamurugan, 2025). In Bangladesh, research on indigenous communities has primarily concentrated on cultural identity, poverty, and land rights, with relatively little emphasis on women's empowerment (Ali, 1998; Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009).

Moreover, previous studies rarely examine empowerment through an integrated framework that simultaneously considers educational, economic, socio-cultural, political, and institutional dimensions. The intersection of gender inequality and ethnic marginalization among Santal women therefore remains insufficiently explored.

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to literature in four important ways. First, it provides primary empirical evidence on women's empowerment within the Santal community, one of the most underrepresented indigenous groups in Bangladesh. Second, it adopts an intersectional perspective to examine how gender and ethnic identities jointly influence empowerment outcomes (Crenshaw, 1989). Third, the study employs a mixed-methods approach to generate both quantitative and qualitative insights into empowerment barriers. Finally, the findings provide policy-relevant recommendations that support inclusive development and contribute to achieving SDGs 1, 5, 10, and 16 (Adeleye et al., 2024; Yadav et al., 2025).

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Empowerment Theory, the Capability Approach, and Intersectionality Theory, which collectively provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the barriers to women's empowerment within the Santal community of Bangladesh.

The study primarily draws upon Empowerment Theory proposed by Naila Kabeer (1999), which conceptualizes empowerment as the process through which individuals acquire the ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where such opportunities were previously denied. According to Kabeer (1999), empowerment consists of three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources include material, human, and social assets that enhance individual capabilities; agency refers to the capacity to define goals and act upon them; and achievements represent the outcomes derived from exercising agency. This framework is particularly relevant for examining how educational opportunities, economic resources, and social institutions influence the empowerment of Santal women. The study further incorporates the Capability Approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999), which emphasizes individuals' freedom to achieve the lives they value. Sen argues that development should be assessed not merely through economic growth but through the expansion of human capabilities and opportunities. Within the context of indigenous women, access to education, healthcare, employment, and participation in social and political institutions enhances capabilities and contributes to empowerment.

Additionally, the study employs Intersectionality Theory, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), to explain how multiple social identities interact to produce unique forms of marginalization. The theory posits that women's experiences cannot be understood solely through gender, as ethnicity, class, and other social characteristics shape opportunities and constraints. For Santal women, gender inequality intersects with ethnic marginalization, poverty, and geographical isolation, creating compounded disadvantages that restrict access to resources, participation, and decision-making processes. Recent studies have confirmed that intersectional inequalities significantly influence empowerment outcomes among indigenous women in developing societies (Aulia et al., 2024; Shava & Muringa, 2025).

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust analytical foundation for examining the multidimensional barriers that impede women's empowerment among the Santal community.

Conceptual Framework

Women's empowerment is conceptualized in this study as a multidimensional process through which women gain access to resources, develop agency, and participate effectively in household, community, economic, and political decision-making processes. Drawing upon Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework and Sen's (1999) capability approach, the study views empowerment as an outcome influenced by various structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors.

The conceptual framework assumes that women's empowerment among the Santal community is shaped by several interrelated barriers, including:

Independent Variables (Barriers to Empowerment)

- Patriarchal family structure
- Traditional socio-cultural norms
- Limited access to education
- Economic dependency and poverty
- Restricted access to productive resources
- Limited political participation
- Institutional and governance constraints
- Ethnic discrimination and social exclusion

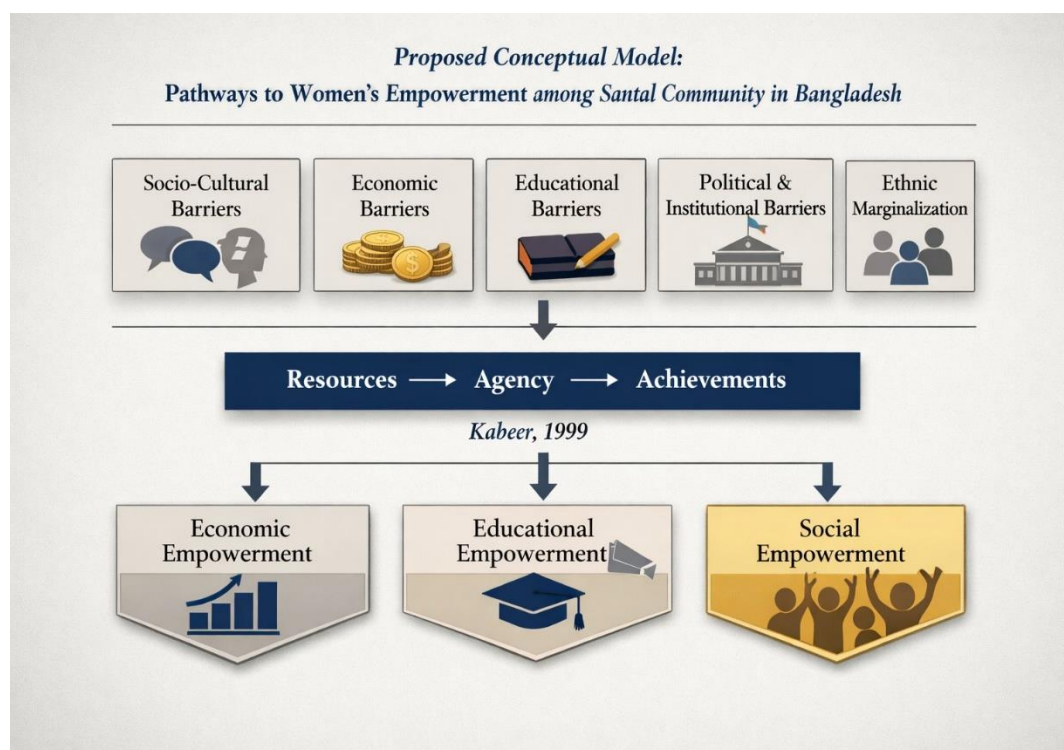
Dependent Variable

Women's Empowerment, measured through:

- Economic participation and financial autonomy
- Educational attainment and access to knowledge
- Social mobility and community engagement
- Political participation and representation
- Household decision-making power
- Leadership and agency in community affairs

The framework further acknowledges that the relationship between these barriers and empowerment outcomes is mediated by the intersecting effects of gender and indigenous identity. Consequently, empowerment among Santal women is understood not as a single outcome but as a dynamic and multidimensional process influenced by both individual capabilities and broader structural conditions.

Proposed Conceptual Model



This integrated framework provides the analytical basis for examining the impediments to women's empowerment among the Santal community and for identifying pathways toward more inclusive and sustainable development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impediments to women's empowerment among the Santal community in Bangladesh. The mixed-methods approach was selected because it facilitates the triangulation of data, enhances the validity of findings, and provides a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data were used to identify the prevalence and distribution of empowerment barriers, while qualitative information provided contextual insights into respondents' lived experiences and perceptions.

Study Area

The study was conducted across selected indigenous communities in Bangladesh, including the Santal community in the northern region, as well as Chakma and Marma communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. These areas were purposively selected due to their significant indigenous populations and distinct socio-cultural, economic, and institutional contexts. The multi-regional research design enabled the study to capture diverse experiences and structural challenges affecting women's empowerment among marginalized indigenous groups in Bangladesh.

Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population comprised members of the Santal community residing in Gobindaganj Upazila. A multi-stage purposive sampling approach was applied to ensure representation of diverse indigenous communities. Respondents were selected based on their direct experience and knowledge regarding women's socioeconomic conditions, empowerment challenges, and community-level dynamics. A total of 100 respondents participated in the study, including:

- 60 local Santal community members, particularly women and household representatives;
- 40 community leaders, local representatives, and members of indigenous associations.

The selection of respondents was guided by their involvement in community affairs, knowledge of local socio-cultural practices, and ability to provide information relevant to the study objectives.

Data Collection Methods

Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized.

Primary Data

Primary data were collected through:

- Structured questionnaires administered to community members to gather quantitative information on socioeconomic conditions and empowerment barriers;
- Semi-structured interviews conducted with community leaders and association representatives to obtain qualitative insights into cultural, institutional, and social challenges affecting women's empowerment.

Secondary Data

Secondary information was obtained from:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles;

- Academic books and book chapters;
- Government reports and policy documents;
- Publications from international organizations and development agencies;
- Previous studies on indigenous communities and women's empowerment.

Variables and Measurement

The study conceptualized women's empowerment as a multidimensional construct encompassing economic, educational, social, and political dimensions. Key indicators included:

- Participation in household decision-making;
- Access to education and training;
- Economic independence and income-generating opportunities;
- Participation in community and political activities;
- Social mobility and autonomy.

The independent variables consisted of socio-cultural norms, educational attainment, economic conditions, political participation, institutional support, and ethnic marginalization.

Data Analysis Techniques

The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during the interpretation stage through triangulation. Quantitative results were used to identify major patterns of empowerment barriers, while qualitative narratives provided deeper explanations of the social and cultural mechanisms underlying these patterns. Quantitative data was processed and analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations. These methods were employed to summarize respondents' characteristics and identify the prevalence of empowerment barriers.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were systematically coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring themes and patterns related to women's empowerment.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors influencing empowerment among Santal women.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly maintained throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and all information was used exclusively for academic purposes. The study respected the cultural values, traditions, and sensitivities of the Santal community during the research process.

Since your study has a small sample size ($n = 100$) and is primarily based on questionnaires and interviews, a descriptive and thematic analysis approach is academically stronger than presenting hypothetical regression results. Below is a Q1-style structure for Results, Discussion, and Policy Implications.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability, the research instruments were reviewed by experts in development studies and gender research before data collection. A pilot test was conducted to assess the clarity and consistency of the

questionnaire. For qualitative data, credibility was enhanced through repeated engagement with participants, careful transcription, and thematic coding procedures. Triangulation between survey findings and interview responses was applied to improve the validity of the results.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The study collected data from 100 respondents, including 60 members of the Santal community and 40 community leaders and representatives of indigenous organizations. The findings reveal that women's empowerment within the Santal community remains constrained by a combination of socio-cultural, economic, educational, and institutional barriers.

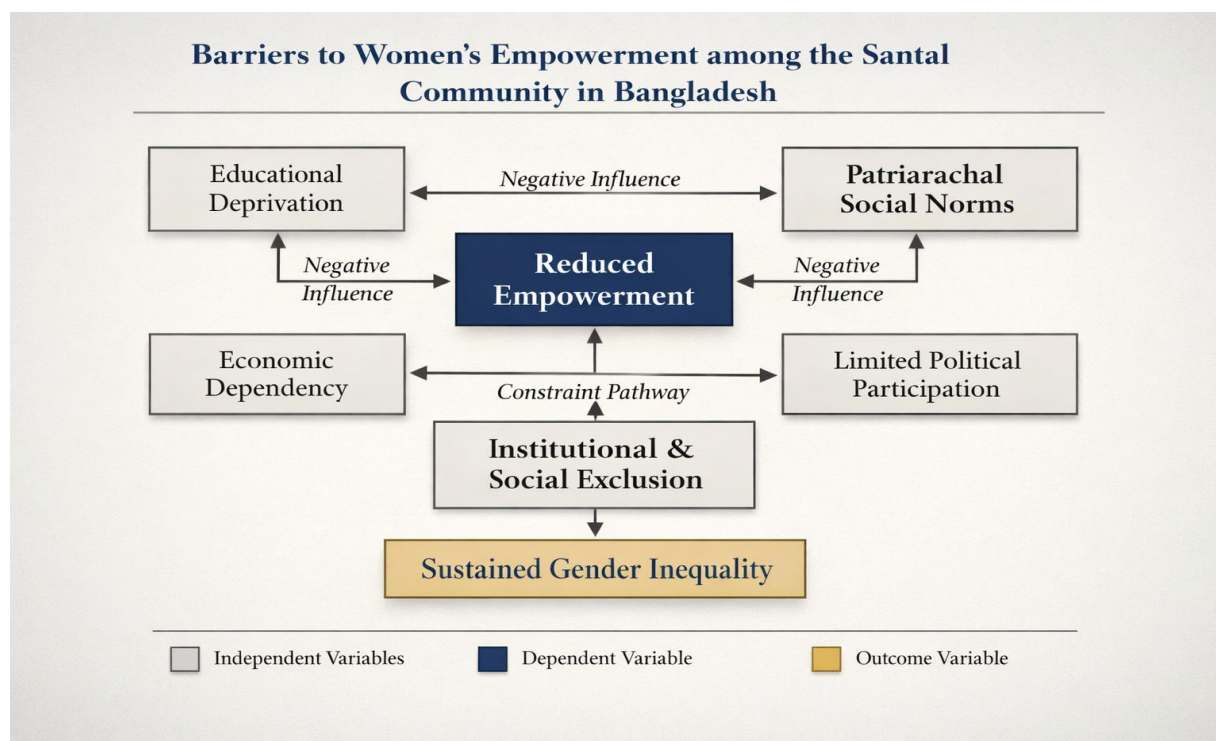
A substantial proportion of respondents reported limited participation in household and community decision-making processes. Approximately 80% of respondents identified multiple barriers affecting women's empowerment, indicating that empowerment challenges are multidimensional rather than isolated. Educational deprivation emerged as one of the most frequently cited constraints, with respondents emphasizing that low literacy levels restrict access to information, employment opportunities, and leadership positions.

Economic vulnerability was also identified as a major impediment. Many respondents noted that women's limited access to income-generating activities and productive resources reduces their financial independence and bargaining power within households. Furthermore, political participation among Santal women was found to be relatively low, reflecting limited representation in local governance and community institutions. Economic vulnerability was also identified as a major impediment. Many respondents noted that women's limited access to income-generating activities and productive resources reduces their financial independence and bargaining power within households (Horaira et al., 2025).

Overall, the descriptive findings suggest that women's empowerment in the Santal community is influenced by a complex interaction of educational, economic, social, and institutional factors.

Thematic Findings

The qualitative analysis identified five major themes that characterize the barriers to women's empowerment among the Santal community.



Theme 1: Educational Deprivation

Education emerged as a critical determinant of empowerment. Respondents consistently reported that limited educational opportunities hinder women's ability to secure employment, access information, and participate effectively in decision-making processes. Many participants emphasized that girls are more likely than boys to discontinue formal education due to financial constraints and traditional expectations.

Theme 2: Patriarchal Social Norms

Traditional gender roles continue to shape social relations within the community. Women are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over educational, economic, or political engagement. Respondents indicated that patriarchal norms restrict women's autonomy and reduce their influence in household and community affairs.

Theme 3: Economic Dependency

Economic dependency was identified as a significant barrier to empowerment. Limited employment opportunities and restricted access to productive assets contribute to women's financial vulnerability. Respondents highlighted that women who lack independent income sources often have limited influence over household decisions.

Theme 4: Limited Political Participation

The findings indicate that women's involvement in local governance and community leadership remains low. Cultural expectations, lack of awareness, and limited institutional support discourage active political participation. Consequently, women's perspectives are often underrepresented in community decision-making processes.

Theme 5: Institutional and Social Exclusion

Respondents reported that indigenous women frequently experience exclusion from mainstream development programs and public services. Limited interaction with government institutions and inadequate access to support services further constrain opportunities for empowerment. Respondents reported that indigenous women frequently experience exclusion from mainstream development programs and public services (Hossen et al., 2023).

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that women's empowerment among the Santal community is shaped by interconnected social, economic, educational, and institutional factors. Consistent with Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework, empowerment depends on access to resources, the ability to exercise agency, and the achievement of desired outcomes. The findings suggest that deficiencies in educational opportunities, economic resources, and institutional support significantly limit women's ability to exercise agency within their households and communities.

Educational deprivation emerged as one of the most significant barriers to empowerment. Education not only enhances human capital but also increases awareness, self-confidence, and participation in social and political activities. The limited educational attainment observed among Santal women therefore constrains broader empowerment outcomes.

The study also highlights the continuing influence of patriarchal norms. Although women contribute substantially to household livelihoods, cultural expectations often restrict their participation in decision-making processes. This finding supports previous research demonstrating that socio-cultural norms remain a major obstacle to women's empowerment in marginalized communities. The findings demonstrate that women's empowerment among the Santal community is shaped by interconnected social, economic, educational, and institutional factors (Sohel et al., 2022).

From an intersectionality perspective, the findings reveal that Santal women experience multiple forms of disadvantage arising from the interaction of gender inequality and ethnic marginalization. Their challenges cannot be understood solely through a gender lens because indigenous identity further restricts access to resources and opportunities. Consequently, empowerment initiatives must recognize the unique experiences of indigenous women and address the structural factors that sustain exclusion. From an intersectionality perspective, the findings reveal that Santal women experience multiple forms of disadvantage arising from the interaction of gender inequality and ethnic marginalization (Horaira et al., 2025).

The study further demonstrates that economic empowerment and political participation are closely linked to broader empowerment outcomes. Women who possess greater economic autonomy and participate more actively in community affairs are better positioned to influence decisions affecting their lives. These findings underscore the importance of adopting integrated approaches that simultaneously address educational, economic, social, and institutional dimensions of empowerment.

Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for policymakers, development practitioners, and civil society organizations working to promote gender equality and indigenous inclusion.

Educational Inclusion

Government agencies and development organizations should expand educational opportunities for indigenous girls and women through scholarships, financial assistance programs, and community-based awareness initiatives. Improving educational attainment can enhance women's capacity to participate in economic, social, and political activities.

Economic Empowerment

Targeted programs aimed at improving women's access to employment, entrepreneurship opportunities, and productive resources are essential. Skills development training, microfinance initiatives, and income-generating projects can strengthen women's economic independence and decision-making power.

Strengthening Political Participation

Efforts should be made to increase the representation of indigenous women in local governance structures and community organizations. Leadership development programs and civic education initiatives can encourage greater participation in decision-making processes.

Community Awareness and Social Change

Community-based awareness programs should be implemented to challenge discriminatory gender norms and promote more equitable social relations. Engaging community leaders, men, and youth can contribute to long-term attitudinal and behavioral change.

Institutional Inclusion

Government institutions and development agencies should adopt more inclusive approaches to ensure that indigenous women can access public services, development programs, and social protection initiatives. Special attention should be given to addressing barriers related to ethnicity, language, and geographical isolation.

Sustainable Development Perspective

Promoting the empowerment of Santal women contributes directly to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Therefore, indigenous women's

empowerment should be recognized as a key component of inclusive and sustainable development strategies in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impediments to women's empowerment among the Santal community in Gobindaganj Upazila, Bangladesh. The findings reveal that women's empowerment remains constrained by a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, educational, and institutional barriers. Educational deprivation, economic dependency, patriarchal social norms, limited political participation, and weak institutional engagement collectively restrict women's access to resources, decision-making power, and opportunities for social advancement.

The study further demonstrates that Santal women experience intersectional marginalization, where gender inequality is compounded by ethnic minority status. Despite national commitments to gender equality and women's development, indigenous women continue to face challenges that are insufficiently addressed by mainstream policies and development programs. The findings underscore that empowerment is not solely an individual outcome but a multidimensional process shaped by broader structural and institutional conditions.

By applying empowerment theory, the capability approach, and intersectionality theory, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique barriers affecting indigenous women in Bangladesh. Achieving meaningful empowerment among Santal women requires integrated interventions that address educational, economic, social, and political dimensions simultaneously. Ultimately, empowering indigenous women is essential not only for advancing gender equality but also for promoting inclusive and sustainable development.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study have significant implications for policymakers, development agencies, and civil society organizations seeking to promote inclusive development among indigenous communities.

Enhancing Educational Opportunities

Educational attainment emerged as a critical determinant of empowerment. Government agencies and development partners should introduce targeted scholarship programs, adult literacy initiatives, and community-based educational interventions aimed specifically at indigenous girls and women. Improving access to quality education can strengthen women's capabilities, confidence, and participation in social and economic activities.

Promoting Economic Empowerment

Economic dependency remains a major barrier to empowerment. Policies should focus on expanding women's access to income-generating opportunities through vocational training, entrepreneurship development, microfinance services, and support for small-scale enterprises. Enhancing women's economic independence can increase their bargaining power and participation in household decision-making.

Strengthening Political Participation

Greater efforts are needed to increase the representation of indigenous women in local governance structures and community organizations. Leadership training, civic education programs, and awareness campaigns can help encourage active participation in political and community decision-making processes.

Improving Institutional Inclusion

Government institutions should adopt more inclusive approaches to ensure that indigenous women can effectively access public services, social protection programs, and development initiatives. Strengthening institutional accountability and monitoring mechanisms is essential for reducing exclusion and ensuring equitable policy implementation.

Addressing Socio-Cultural Barriers

Community-based awareness programs should be developed to challenge discriminatory gender norms and promote positive attitudes toward women's participation in education, employment, and leadership. Collaboration with community leaders, local organizations, and indigenous associations can facilitate sustainable social change.

Advancing Inclusive Development

The empowerment of indigenous women should be integrated into national development strategies and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation frameworks. Attention should be given to SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), as these goals are closely linked to the challenges identified in this study.

Contributions of the Study

This study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, it provides empirical evidence on women's empowerment within the Santal community, one of the most underrepresented indigenous groups in Bangladesh. Second, it applies an intersectional perspective to examine how gender and ethnic identities jointly shape empowerment outcomes. Third, the mixed-methods approach offers both quantitative and qualitative insights into the multidimensional barriers faced by indigenous women. Finally, the findings generate policy-relevant knowledge that can support more inclusive and equitable development interventions.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, although the study provides valuable insights into indigenous women's empowerment, the sample was limited to selected indigenous communities and may not fully capture the experiences of all indigenous women across Bangladesh. Second, the relatively small sample size may restrict the broader generalizability of the findings. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the study reflects respondents' experiences at a particular point in time and does not capture changes in empowerment outcomes over time. Despite these limitations, the study contributes important empirical evidence on the structural, socio-cultural, and institutional barriers affecting indigenous women's empowerment. Future research should employ larger samples, include multiple indigenous communities from diverse geographical regions of Bangladesh, and consider longitudinal approaches to enhance the representativeness, transferability, and deeper understanding of empowerment dynamics.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should employ larger and more geographically diverse samples to improve generalizability. Comparative research involving different indigenous communities could provide a broader understanding of empowerment dynamics across ethnic groups. Longitudinal studies may also help examine how empowerment outcomes evolve over time. Furthermore, future research could investigate the effectiveness of specific policy interventions, educational programs, and economic empowerment initiatives in improving the lives of indigenous women in Bangladesh.

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