

Assessment of Rural Women Empowerment Level and its Relation with Demographic and Structural Factors in Kermanshah, Iran, 2012

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Abstract: Recent studies have indicated that reaching to a sustainable development without active contribution of women in all areas is not possible. The present study aims to evaluate the empowerment dimensions of rural women based on empowerment theory in Kermanshah. In this cross-sectional study 400 rural women, aged 20 to 50 years old, during June to September 2012, in Kermanshah, Iran were selected. All subjects were asked to fill the demographic questionnaire and women's empowerment questionnaire. A total of 396 questionnaires were returned from all subjects and used for further analyses. The data were analyzed by SPSS-18 using the statistical tests including: regression analysis, Pearson correlation, ANOVA and t-test. Mean age of respondents was 32.92 ± 8.97 years. The average score of women's overall empowerment was 67.96 ± 11.13 . Among empowerment subscales the mean score of their "economic empowerment", "socio-political empowerment", "psychological empowerment" and "family and inter-individual empowerment" were 0.75 ± 1.30 , 21.30 ± 5.16 , 32.23 ± 6.47 and 13.60 ± 3.58 respectively. The relationship between rural development level with overall, socio-political and economic empowerment were significant ($p < 0.05$). The regression analysis showed that "education level" and "employment status" variables explain 28.4% of overall empowerment variance changes. The research findings, and similar literatures, showed that the empowerment of women is a multilayer process, requiring focusing on social, economic, psychological and familial aspects of rural women empowerment. Focusing on educational level of women as well as providing the official and unofficial (home jobs) employment, is crucial to help with rural women's empowerment.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, in the context of new approaches on development, the necessity of considering the increasing general opportunities and the role playing of different social groups should be considered besides increasing of economic growth indicators. In fact, sustainable development of a society comes from the cooperation of all members of it. This cooperation can be achieved if there be some special attention to the needs, requirements and capabilities of the community (Chant, 1997; Sanni, 2006). Recent studies of social theorists have indicated that reaching to a sustainable development without active contribution of women in all areas, including family, society and economy is not possible. However, women's participation needs to they be empowered. In this regard some investigations on the women's participation have shown that the social and cultural factors as well as the community's different expectations of man and woman are important impediments for women's empowerment and participation (Ketabi, Yazd-khasti, & Farokhi-rastabi, 2003). The statistics indicate that still no acceptable equilibrium have been established for optimal

participation of women, especially rural ones, due to cultural, economic and social reasons in Iran (Pasban, 2009). Therefore, there is a special need to pay attention to the women's empowerment.

There are various definitions about empowerment in the literature that equals it with independence, power, status, and agency (Lee-Rife, 2010). According to Malhotra and Schuler (2005), empowerment is a process during which women become powerful for organizing themselves, promote their self-confidence and use their rights regarding free election and resource supervision (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). At this process, women reinforce their courage for achieving objectives, and they attain necessary abilities for achieving their wishes. In other words, the empowerment means that people should achieve a level of personal development that enables them to choose based on their wishes (Shaditalab, 2002). Empowerment is not a personal state (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998), but presupposed an intense, dynamic and democratic change in understanding women and their expectations in society. Helping the women to attain economic independence has first priority for reaching such change (Kumar, 2002).

During recent decades, empowerment has been addressed as a mechanism for improving the women's personal and working quality of life (Gholipour, Rahimian, & Mirzamani, 2008). Supporting the poor groups of society based on empowerment approach may lead to the promotion of individuals' competences and capabilities. One of these poor groups is women, especially rural ones. Paying attention to the rural women as one of the potential sources of development has a special important. As Salehin (2003) and karimi (2009) in their studies confirms this issue as well as considering the productivity of rural women and their important position regarding human development in rural area (Karami, Agahi, & Papzan, 2009; Salehin, 2003).

Global statistics regarding women provide a painful and inappropriate image of women's poverty, high working hours, low percentages of assets registrations and legal ownerships, low levels of education and employment and ever lowering social status (Khalvati, 2009), to the extent that in the new development approaches some discussion have been centered on the womanly poverty, referring to the quantitative increase in the percentage of poor women and the grow of its broad aspects, especially in rural areas (Buvinić & Gupta, 1997; Goldberg & Kremen, 1990). Women empowerment will largely increase their role in vital and significant affairs of the society. Therefore, UN has established various programs in different regions of the world, to empowering women by reinforcing their self-confidence and then using it as an element for improving their lives. These programs in some countries such as Ethiopia increased women's confidence and self-esteem in various fields (World Bank., 1995).

Mahmud et al. (2012) in a study on women's empowerment in Bangladesh rural areas showed that the education years have a significant relationship with self-esteem and freedom in mobility and activities of rural women (Mahmud, Shah, & Becker, 2012). Ombila (2007) through a research in Ghana showed that despite the poverty reduction in recent decades, the intensity of vulnerability and deprivation has increased among some groups including women (Sharifi, Hosseini, & Alibeigi, 2011). Ellis and Freeman (2004) in a research in four African countries concluded that the economic self-reliance is a prerequisite for economic empowerment (Ellis & Freeman, 2004). Research results regarding women's empowerment in Iran indicate that women's empowerment level in different groups like housewives (Khalvati, 2009), female-headed households (Shaditalab & Geraei nejad, 2004; Shakouri, Rafat-jah, & Jafari, 2007) and rural carpet weavers (Sa'di, Shabanali- fami, & Latifi, 2012) is at

a low level. Moreover, the results of a study conducted in the west of Iran show that only 23.9 percent of rural women have economic power (Sharifi, et al., 2011). Accordingly, regarding the empowerment approach in Iran, and the absence of studies about rural women's empowerment in the general population (majority of studies has been done on housewives and other groups have not yet been considered.). It is essentially required to examine the empowerment level of Iranian rural women to identify the empowerment level of women as a half of effective population in rural areas. Therefore, through recognizing the influential factors on rural women empowerment, it can be possible to determine and explicate a number of needed strategies to empowering them. The aim of study was assessment of rural women empowerment level and its relation with demographic and structural factors in Kermanshah, Iran, 2012.

2. Material and Methods

This cross-sectional study was done on rural women population, aged between 20 and 50 (sample size= 400), during June to September 2012, in Kermanshah, Iran. The subjects were randomly selected based on multi-stage cluster sampling method. After removing unanswered questionnaires, only 396 ones went under study. The research tools were a demographic checklist (age, household dimension, marital status, employment status, technical and professional skills, health status and legal ownership) and a researcher built questionnaire containing 31 items for assessing empowerment.

Considering the theoretical concepts and using of some references and other similar questionnaires, a multi-dimensional questionnaire was prepared under the inspiration of interdisciplinary study of Malhotra & Schuler, (2005) (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005) including: psychological empowerment, family & inter-individual empowerment, socio-political, and economic empowerment. Reliability and validity of the questionnaire were confirmed by a pilot study conducted on a sample of rural women (n=40). Each question was ranked in a range between zero and 4. Face validity of questionnaire was received through the evaluation of sociologists and psychologists. Furthermore, Cornbrash's Alpha measure was used to assess internal consistency ($\alpha=0.75$). By computing the total score of women's empowerment using 31 items, total score of each individual could be between 0 and 124.

Psychological empowerment was evaluated according to the self-esteem questionnaire proposed by Cooper Smith (1967) (Shakouri, et al., 2007; Sharifi, et al., 2011), as well as self-efficiency questionnaire of Sherer and Madox (1982).

Psychological empowerment was determined using 13 items and its score was between 0 and 4. Therefore, each individual would have a number between 0 and 52. In a pilot study, the consistency of psychological empowerment was estimated at an acceptable level with 8% resulted from Cronbach's alpha measure. The score of family and inter-individual empowerment under the interdisciplinary idea of Malhotra (2002) as well as using 6 items was a number between 0 and 4. Therefore, each individual will obtain a score ranged 0 to 24. Cronbach's alpha assessment showed the 74% of Reliability for this dimension was estimated acceptably, through Social and political capabilities have been defined by the variables of "attitude towards women's role and participation in social affairs" and "population-oriented and willingness to be present in public places" (Shakouri, et al., 2007). In addition to women's social empowerment, their political empowerment was also determined, through their contribution in the election, voting rights, interest in politics and political knowledge. This variable was assessed using 12 items, resulted in the score range of 0 to 48 for each individual. Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed a consistency of 7.1% for this variable that ranges 0 to 48. Economic empowerment of women was assessed based on their personal income. This variable contained a five-item question, in which each item received a score from 0 (very low) to 4 (very high).

Rural socio-economic development level was considered as structural variable (macro) (Chalabi & Amirkafi, 2004). This variable was obtained through "Numerical Taxonomy Method", using available data from National Center of Statistics, Agriculture Jihad Organization and Health Center of Kermanshah. After analyzing data, villages were categorized into three groups as developed, semi-developed and none-developed. Among 20 villages under study, 4 villages were developed, 10 ones semi-developed and 6 ones none-developed. It should be noted that some organizational variables are listed below structural variable. These variables include monetary aid from supportive organizations, using low-interest loans and credits and health insurances.

The SPSS 16, the descriptive and inferential statistics like ANOVA, the correlation coefficient of Pearson and multi-variables regression were used to analyze data.

3. Results

The average age of respondents was 32.92 ± 8.97 . The study results about educational level of women showed that 50.3% of women were at preliminary level. 5.1% of women were heads of households and 13.8% were single. About 91% of

women were housewives and only 9% of them were employed. Detailed reviews indicated that 4% of working women were in agriculture sector, about 1.8% involved in hairdressing and tailoring jobs, 8% of them were government staff and the rest had been engaged in various occupations. 30.2% of respondents have a professional skill (hairdressing, carpet-weaving, tailoring, etc.). 6.6% of respondents have said they are receiving monetary aids from supportive organizations (Welfare Organization and relief and services committees). 20.4% of rural women have said that they have personally received loans and financial credits from banks and credit institutes. 77.2% of respondents have said that they are covered by health insurances. The standard deviation and average years of using health insurance service was 6.58 ± 5.26 . 73.1% have said that they do not have any income. In response to a question about legal ownership, 81.9% told that they do not own any property (real estate, bank account, jewelry, automobile and agriculture equipment's). Also, in response to the question of "Are you suffering from a specific disease?" 30.35% stated that they were suffering from an acute or chronic disease, and the rest said that they are healthy (Table 1).

The relationship between education levels with overall, socio-political and psychological empowerment were significant ($p < 0.001$), but it were not significant with economic and family and inter-individual empowerment ($p > 0.05$). The results showed that there is no significant relationship between marital status and overall empowerment and its subscales ($p > 0.05$). Furthermore, it was found that the score of total empowerment of women among single ones is more than married, divorced and widowed. No significant relation was observed between being the head of household and the subscales of women's empowerment ($p > 0.05$).

Also there was a significant relationship between having professional skills with overall empowerment ($p < 0.001$), socio-political ($p = 0.001$), family and inter-individual ($p = 0.002$) and psychological empowerment ($p < 0.001$). This relation with economic empowerment was not significant ($p > 0.05$).

The relationship between employment status with economic ($p < 0.001$) and family and inter-individual empowerment ($p = 0.035$) were significant, but with overall empowerment was not significant ($p = 0.077$). Having legal ownerships had a significant relationship with socio-political and economic empowerment ($p < 0.05$). Also the score of overall empowerment of those women who have legal ownership was more than others who did not (Table 1).

Table 1- Rural women empowerment subscales and relationship with demographic variables

		Rural women empowerment subscales				
		Economic	Psychological	Family & inter-individual	Socio-political	Overall empowerment
Total sample		0.75±1.30	32.23±6.47	13.60±3.58	21.30±5.16	67.96±11.13
Marriage status	Single	0.94±1.48	33.02±5.71	13.13±3.49	21.02±4.75	68.11±9.29
	Married	0.71±1.28	32.19±6.66	13.67±3.62	19.74±5	66.30±11.22
	Widow	0.76±1.09	30.35±5.80	13.88±3.62	18.94±3.1	63.94±10.06
	p-value	0.462	0.331	0.570	0.149	0.335
Education level	Illiterate	0.70±1.18	30.41±6.67	12.92±4.37	19.23±5.31	62.25±12.42
	Primary. S	0.87±1.37	31.58±5.61	13.40±3.20	19.26±4.40	65.10±9.0
	Guidance. S	0.50±1.08	32.28±7.54	14.45±3.53	20.72±5.43	68.95±12.31
	Diploma	0.70±1.41	34.88±6.85	14.16±3.70	20.8/0±4.78	70.54±11.20
	Educated	0.60±1.40	36.47±5.75	14.24±3.91	23.93±4.92	75.26±10.52
	p-value	0.386	<0.001	0.083	0.001	<0.001
Head of household	Yes	0.80±1.05	29.90±6.06	14.20±3.15	20.75±4.05	65.65±9.78
	No	0.74±1.31	32.40±6.37	13.57±3.60	19.85±4.93	66.55±10.77
	p-value	0.848	0.088	0.442	0.422	0.715
professional skills	Yes	0.82±1.35	34.34±6.40	14.48±3.63	21.20±4.83	70.83±10.63
	No	0.79±1.29	31.30±6.23	13.23±3.51	19.28±4.81	64.54±10.42
	p-value	0.550	<0.001	0.002	<0.001	<0.001
Employment status	Housewife	0.55±1.13	32.15±6.47	13.53±3.62	19.96±4.95	66.20±10.94
	employed	2.54±1.46	33.17±6.91	14.71±3	19.29±4.29	69.71±10.93
	p-value	<0.001	0.379	0.035	0.385	0.077
legal ownerships	Yes	0.65±1.19	32.05±6.55	13.48±3.55	20.07±5.03	66.24±11.7
	No	1.26±1.68	31.58±6.01	13.90±3.47	18.97±3.91	65.70±9.91
	p-value	<0.001	0.742	0.601	0.013	0.563
Health status	Ill	0.77±1.26	31.22±6.98	13.60±3.84	19.16±4.51	64.74±11.61
	Healthy	0.75±1.34	32.83±6.13	13.64±3.41	20.18±4.98	67.39±10.36
	p-value	0.754	0.050	0.048	0.203	0.226

The relationship between age and overall empowerment showed that there was a negative but no significant relationship ($p=0.09$). Moreover, results indicated that a negative and significant relationship exists between age and psychological empowerment ($p=0.012$). No significant relation was observed between age and other subscales of empowerment ($p>0.05$). The results of Pearson correlation test showed that there is a negative and significant relation between the number of households and psychological empowerment ($p=0.008$), although there had a positive and significant relationship with economic empowerment.

There was no significant relationship between using monetary aids from supportive organizations with overall empowerment ($p>0.05$). But, getting low-interest loans and financial credits from banks and financial institutes had a significant relation with the women's overall empowerment and economic subscale ($P<0.05$). Also, the relationship between

using health insurance with socio-political ($P<0.05$) and economic empowerment ($P<0.001$) was significant. Also results showed that there was a significant relationship between rural socio-economic development level and economic ($p=0.000$), socio-political ($p=0.003$) and overall empowerment ($p=0.000$). Also there was no significant relationship between rural socio-economic development level with family & inter-individual and psychological empowerment ($p>0.05$) (table2).

With respect to the performed correlation analysis, and the presence of strong correlation between dependent and independent variables, linear regression analysis (stepwise method) was done (Table 3).

Also, Table 4 demonstrates the coefficients of variables, t statistics and significant level. In the final regression model, Durbin Watson statistics ($D.W=1.93$) showed that no overall linear relationship between the independence variables.

Table 2- the relationship between structural factors with rural women empowerment subscales

	Rural women empowerment subscales				
	Economic	Psychological	Family & inter-individual	Socio-political	Overall empowerment
Rural socio-economic development*	<0.001	0.331	0.099	0.016	<0.001
organizational supports**	0.711	0.312	0.665	0.499	0.969
getting low-interest loans**	0.050	0.516	0.153	0.132	0.029
Health insurance**	<0.001	0.929	0.764	0.005	0.062

* ANOVA test

** Independent t test

Table 3- ANOVA table of regression model

Model	Change resource	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1	1404.797	15.003	.000a
	Residual	48	4494.423		
	Total	49	5899.220		
2	Regression	2	1845.128	10.695	.000b
	Residual	47	4054.092		
	Total	49	5899.220		

1. Predictors: (Constant), Education

2. Predictors: (Constant), Education, employment

Table 4- Multiple regression on rural women empowerment

Dependent variable	Predictors	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
women empowerment	Constant	50.159	4.535	-	11.060	.000
	Education	4.413	1.369	.407	3.222	.002
	employment	7.475	3.308	.285	2.259	.029

In the final model, R, R Square and Adjusted R Square (R^2_{ad}) were 0.559, 0.331 and 284, respectively.

The performed analysis of variance in this state explains the significance of F quantity in the level 0.000. Thus, it can be said that 28.4% of rural women's empowerment variance can be explained through a linear combination of education level and employment status variables.

4. Discussions

The findings of this study which has been done to examine the empowerment levels of rural women in general population, indicate that the women's overall empowerment is at mediocre level. Among rural women empowerment subscales, their economic empowerment was between low and very low and socio-political empowerment of them was below average. Other subscales, like overall empowerment, are placed at mediocre level. In similar studies that were done in heads of households women (Shaditalab & Geraei nejad, 2004; Shakouri, et al., 2007) or housewives (Khalvati, 2009) showed that women's

empowerment level were low. This difference may be because of this issue that our finding resulted from general population of women not heads of households or housewives.

The results of our study showed that by increasing age, the overall empowerment level of women decreased. Reduced physical capacity due to increasing age can be a reasonable justify for this result. Because aged women have a decreased power comparing younger women for doing physical activities.

Furthermore, there was a reverse and significant relation between age and psychological empowerment, which confirmed the findings of studies performed by Shakoori et al (2007) and Mohammadi (2008) (Mohammadi, 2008; Shakouri, et al., 2007).

Also there was no significant relationship between marital status and overall empowerment and its subscales. In this respect Moradi (2010) and Mohammadi (2008) had similar results.

The results of this research showed that there is a significant relationship between the education level

with the overall empowerment, psychological empowerment and social empowerment, which is similar to the findings of Shakoori et al (2007), Orsi et al (2009) and also Mahmud et al (2012) in Bangladesh – they found that there is a significant relationship between years of education and self-esteem (psychological empowerment indicator) and freedom (social empowerment indicator) –(Mahmud, et al., 2012; Saie-arasi & Valipour, 2010; Shakouri, et al., 2007). Also our findings are different from the result of Moradi research (2010)(Moradi, 2010).

Moreover, observing insignificant relationship between education level and economic empowerment is in contrast with the Sharifi et al (2010) findings (Sharifi, et al., 2011). In this regard, Gholipour (2008) says that the education, employment and income-creation will increase the women's economic independence, so they are effective tools that should be applied to realize the women's empowerment (Gholipour, et al., 2008). Knowledge is power, and absence of it may cause poverty; therefore, knowledge is the main factor to free the women from poverty. According to researches, education and capacity building are the key features of empowering process (Spreitzer, 1996). In other words, education is one of the important tools in the development of human resources (Rajabi Gilan et al., 2012).

Our findings demonstrated that there is no significant relationship between the overall empowerment of women and the female-headed households. Total score of women who were the head of households was mediocre, which is in contrast with the similar findings in which the level of female-headed households was low (Shaditalab & Geraei nejad, 2004). Although it should be noted that low number of female-headed households in this research (20 households) could have had an effect on our result.

There was no significant relationship between employment status and overall empowerment, which was in contrast with the similar studies (Shakouri, et al., 2007). There was a significant relationship between women's employment status with economic and psychological empowerment, whereas it had no significant relationship with social empowerment. This result confirmed the findings of Shakoori et al (2007) and Gholipour et al (2008) (Gholipour, et al., 2008; Shakouri, et al., 2007).

Additionally, our study did not show any significant difference between legal ownership and rural women's empowerment, which is against the findings of Ketabi et al (2003) (Ketabi, et al., 2003).

There was a significant relationship between health with psychological empowerment and family and inter-individual empowerment, which confirmed the results of Ketabi et al (2003) and Mohammadi

(2007) (Ketabi, et al., 2003; Mohammadi, 2008). About the relationship between professional skills with overall empowerment and its subscales, it should be said that there is a significant relationship between rural women empowerment and having professional skills, except economic power subscales. This finding, in some case is parallel with the study of Shakoori et al (2008), but in other cases is not (Shakouri, et al., 2007). The meaningless relation of economic empowerment with the professional skills may exist because of this fact that there are not yet any suitable platforms and requirements for transforming the human capitals (skill, teaching, etc.) into the economic capitals, or if it is, they would be faced with cultural and social obstacles.

Also, our findings showed that there was a significant relationship between rural socioeconomic development level with the economic empowerment, social empowerment and family and inter-individual empowerment subscales. This result confirms the findings of Sharifi et al (2010), in which they found a significant relationship between the village development level and the economic empowerment of female-headed households in Kurdistan (Sharifi, et al., 2011).

Our data revealed that between the women who enjoy certain organizational supports and the other ones, there has not been any significant difference in none of the subscales of empowerment and overall empowerment. This issue indicates that possibly supportive policies could not identify the actual needs of at risk women. Our findings also showed that there is a significant relationship between the getting low-interest loans and overall empowerment, which is in accordance with the studies of Gholipour et al (2009), Shakoori et al (2007) and Rahmani (2008) (Gholipour & Rahimian, 2011; Rahmani. M., Zand-razavi, Rabbani, & Adibi, 2009; Shakouri, et al., 2007). In this regard, Gholipour (2011) believes that giving grant-aids or low-interest loans, if implemented properly, can be an effective help in removing the most important problems of women (Gholipour & Rahimian, 2011).

Regarding the impact of health insurance on the economic empowerment, it should be noted that the result of our study are not aligned with the similar findings related to the rural women (Sharifi, et al., 2011).

According to the results of regression analysis, two variables of education level and employment status explain 0.284 of women's overall empowerment changes. Similarly, Gholipour et al (2008) pointed out to the effective roles of these two variables in empowering women, as the 61% of empowerment level of heading household's women was explicated through these two variables

(Gholipour, et al., 2008). In our study, moreover, education variable, with standard coefficient of 0.407, had a more significant role in explaining the women empowerment than employment status variable with standard coefficient of 0.285, whereas in the Gholipour (2008) study, the role of employment status was more important than education role (Gholipour, et al., 2008). Of reasons to justify this difference, we can point to the two different environments of studies (city/village) and also the study population (general population of women/women heading households). Although, education and employment can empower the women but we cannot ignore the role of culture in this area. For instance, powerful patriarchal norms can neuter women empowerment programs. Social norms can, directly or indirectly, restrict the level of women empowerment.

The research findings, and similar literatures, showed that the empowerment of women is a multilayer process, requiring focusing on social, economic, psychological and familial aspects of rural women empowerment. Focusing on educational level of women as well as providing the official and unofficial (home jobs) employment, is crucial to help with rural women's empowerment.

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