

# Poverty Eradication as a Gendered Solution: A Case Study of Mirik, West Bengal

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## Abstract

*This study explores the gendered dimensions of poverty eradication in Mirik, West Bengal, focusing on employment, literacy, socio-economic conditions, and marital status. Using a case study approach, the research highlights the challenges faced by women in the region, particularly in the tea garden sector, and examines the impact of migration, education, and globalization on their livelihoods. The findings underscore the need for sustainable development strategies that integrate gender equality and address systemic barriers to women's empowerment.*

**Keywords** – Mirik, Gender Equality; Poverty Eradication; Rural Employment; Migration Patterns; Sustainable Development

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## I. Introduction

Poverty eradication remains one of the most pressing challenges globally, particularly in developing nations like India, where socio-economic disparities are deeply entrenched. Within this context, gender plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of poverty and its solutions. Women, who constitute more than half of the labor force, often face systemic barriers that limit their access to education, employment, and economic opportunities. This study focuses on Mirik, a subdivision in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, to explore how poverty eradication strategies can be gendered to address the unique challenges faced by women.

Mirik, known for its tea gardens and scenic beauty, presents a paradoxical socio-economic landscape. While women are integral to the labor-intensive tea industry, they often work under precarious conditions with limited access to permanent employment benefits. Migration, both internal and cross-border, further complicates the situation, exposing women to vulnerabilities such as exploitation and trafficking. Despite these challenges, there are signs of progress, such as rising female literacy rates and the emergence of women in higher education and soft-skill industries. This study aims to analyze these dynamics through a case study approach, focusing on four key factors: literacy rates, working conditions, socio-economic situations, and the correlation between marital status and job opportunities.

By examining these factors, the study seeks to provide insights into how gendered solutions can contribute to poverty eradication and sustainable development. The findings are expected to inform policy recommendations that address the intersection of gender, poverty, and employment in rural India.

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1 Defining Poverty

Poverty is a multidimensional concept that encompasses not only economic deprivation but also social exclusion, lack of access to basic services, and limited opportunities for upward mobility. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), poverty is defined as the inability to achieve a minimum standard of living, which includes access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities (UNDP, 2019). Amartya Sen (1999) emphasizes the importance of capabilities in defining poverty, arguing that poverty is not merely the lack of income but the deprivation of essential freedoms and opportunities to lead a fulfilling life. In rural areas like Mirik, poverty is often exacerbated by limited infrastructure, inadequate health facilities, and restricted access to education, which disproportionately affect women.

### 2.2 Women and Gender

Gender inequality is a pervasive issue that intersects with poverty, particularly in developing countries. Women often face systemic barriers such as unequal access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, which perpetuate cycles of poverty. Naila Kabeer (1999) highlights the concept of "gendered poverty," emphasizing that women experience poverty differently due to societal norms and expectations that

limit their agency. In India, traditional customs often assign domestic responsibilities exclusively to women, even as globalization creates dual-income standards for households (Chant, 2006). This dual burden restricts women's ability to participate fully in the workforce and achieve economic independence. The gender division of labor further exacerbates inequalities, with women often relegated to informal and low-paying sectors (ILO, 2018).

### **2.3 Women and Employment**

Employment is a critical pathway for poverty alleviation, yet women face significant challenges in accessing and sustaining employment opportunities. Globally, women are overrepresented in informal sectors, which lack job security, benefits, and fair wages (UN Women, 2020). In India, rural women often work in agriculture and labor-intensive industries like tea gardens, where they are subjected to contractual employment without benefits (Chatterjee, 2015). Migration for better-paying jobs is common among women, but it exposes them to vulnerabilities such as exploitation and trafficking (Deshingkar & Grimm, 2005). Education plays a pivotal role in improving women's employment prospects, as higher literacy rates correlate with better job opportunities. However, access to higher education remains limited in rural areas like Mirik, where infrastructural and financial barriers persist. Skill development programs and vocational training are essential for empowering women and enabling them to negotiate better terms in the labor market (World Bank, 2019).

## **III. Research Methodology**

This study employs a case study approach to analyze the gendered dimensions of poverty eradication in Mirik. Data collection involved diachronic surveys of employment figures, literacy rates, and socio-economic conditions. Participant observation and interviews with tea garden workers, local businesses, and educational institutions provided qualitative insights. Statistical data from government reports and census records were used to correlate literacy rates with employment opportunities. The study focused on Phuguri, a remote area in Darjeeling district, to ensure a localized understanding of the issues.

## **IV. Findings**

### **4.1. Literacy Rates**

The literacy rates among women in Mirik have shown significant improvement over the past decade. According to census data, the female literacy rate increased from 65.67% in 2001 to 76.79% in 2011, outpacing the growth in male literacy rates. This trend indicates a growing awareness among women about the importance of education in accessing better job opportunities. Higher education institutions like Mirik Degree College have played a crucial role in this transformation, with female students outnumbering male students. However, the quality of education remains a concern, as many women employed in tea gardens have only basic qualifications, limiting their prospects for higher-paying jobs.

### **4.2. Employment and Working Conditions**

The tea gardens in Mirik are the primary source of employment, with women constituting a significant portion of the workforce. For instance, the Phuguri Tea Estate employs 141 women compared to 61 men. Despite their numerical dominance, women often face exploitative conditions, including contractual employment without benefits. The shift from permanent to contractual jobs has increased economic insecurity, forcing many women to migrate in search of better opportunities. While some women have found employment in soft-skill industries like nursing and hospitality, others remain trapped in the gig economy, which offers little stability or protection.

### **4.3. Migration Patterns**

Migration is a prominent feature of the socio-economic landscape in Mirik, driven by limited local opportunities and economic pressures. Women who migrate often face vulnerabilities such as exploitation, trafficking, and precarious working conditions. The lack of developed training facilities and affordable transportation further exacerbates the situation, as women struggle to access higher education and skill development programs. Remittances from migrant workers contribute to family well-being, but the social costs of migration, including the breakdown of traditional family structures, cannot be ignored.

### **4.4. Socio-Economic Situations**

Traditional customs and globalization have created a dual burden for women in Mirik. While globalization has opened up new opportunities, it has also reinforced domestic responsibilities, making it difficult for women to balance work and family life. The rise of local businesses in horticulture, floriculture, and tourism has provided some relief, allowing women to work from home. However, the lack of political representation and inadequate health facilities remain significant barriers to socio-economic progress.

#### 4.5. Marital Status and Job Scopes

Marital status plays a crucial role in shaping women's employment opportunities. In Mirik, a little more than 50% of the population is married, while 45% is unmarried. The sex ratio in both categories is relatively balanced, reflecting the demographic dividend in the region. Married women often face additional challenges, including societal expectations and domestic responsibilities, which limit their participation in the workforce. On the other hand, unmarried women are more likely to migrate in search of better opportunities, contributing to the region's external remittances.

### V. Discussion

The findings highlight the complex interplay between gender, poverty, and employment in Mirik. Literacy rates among women have improved significantly, but the quality of education remains a concern. While women dominate the workforce in tea gardens, their employment conditions are far from ideal, with contractual jobs offering little security. Migration, driven by economic pressures and limited local opportunities, exposes women to vulnerabilities that undermine their socio-economic progress. The dual burden of domestic responsibilities and workforce participation reflects the challenges posed by traditional customs and globalization. Women in Mirik are increasingly participating in soft-skill industries and local businesses, but the lack of political representation and inadequate health facilities remain significant barriers. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that integrates gender equality with sustainable development. Policy interventions should focus on improving education and skill development, enhancing working conditions, and creating new employment opportunities in industries like tea tourism. Greater political representation and improved health infrastructure are also essential for empowering women and ensuring their socio-economic well-being. By addressing these issues, poverty eradication strategies can become more inclusive and effective, benefiting not only women but the entire community.

### VI. Conclusion

Poverty eradication in Mirik requires integrated strategies that address gender inequality and systemic barriers. Enhancing health facilities, expanding educational opportunities, and investing in skill development are essential for empowering women and ensuring sustainable development. The study underscores the importance of localized research in understanding and addressing gendered dimensions of poverty eradication. Future research should focus on innovative solutions such as tea tourism and value-added industries to create sustainable employment opportunities for women.

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