

An Appraisal of Status of Women in a Squatter Settlement of Kolkata, West Bengal

Suhel Sen¹, Sanchari Chakraborty², Dr. Ajit Kumar Sil³

1. Guest Faculty, Department of Geography, Bhairab Ganguly College, Belgharia.

2. Ex- student, Department of Geography, Bhairab Ganguly College, Belgharia.

3. Associate Professor, Department of Geography, BhairabGanguly College, Belgharia.

Abstract:

Women have always been considered as a weaker section of the society in the third world. In Indian society, women have always been a subject to exploitation and disparity both from the physical and mental point of view. The issue becomes even more serious in slums and squatter settlements where women are facing various problems. Owing to prevalence of illiteracy, they do not have proper jobs in hand and thus there is large scale dependency on their male counterparts in each and every aspect of life. The situation is same in the squatter settlement in Baghbazar in Kolkata. Women in that squatter settlement are living in a degraded environment which has severely affected their physical health. Most of them are underweight and naturally having a low Body Mass Index (BMI). An attempt has been made in the paper to analyze the health of the girl children and socio economic condition of the women population of the squatter settlement, to identify their problems in daily life and to make suitable recommendations for their solution and to devise strategies to bring about women empowerment. The study reveals that most of girl children taken as sample population suffer from the problem of underweight and illiteracy, and unemployment are the major problems of the women in the squatter settlement.

Keywords: Illiteracy, Dependency, Squatter settlement, Underweight, Body Mass Index, Unemployment.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of women empowerment has become a matter of concern for the present Indian society. Since medieval times, women in Indian society are always looked down upon. Women were the victims of many superstitious beliefs of social system of India like witchcraft and child marriage. In rural areas of India, women are socially segregated, deprived of all privileges or even killed if they are suspected to be witches who they believe possess supernatural powers. As a result, the issues of gender discrimination and incidences of violence on women have increased with time (Roy, 2020). In a male dominated society like India, women empowerment is the most indispensable weapon to bring about an end to all forms of gender inequality and to bring about an improvement in the quality of life enjoyed by the women. This goal can be achieved through provision of proper education, proper nutrition and equal opportunity to the women. Women living in the squatter settlement by the side of the Pran Krishna Mukherjee Road in Baghbazar, Kolkata are also suffering from different physical and social problems that have largely affected the well-being of women. All these problems can be solved by implementing strategies that can bring about women empowerment.

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objectives of the work are as followed: -

1. To identify the health condition of the girl children of the squatter settlement.
2. To analyze the socio-economic condition of the adult women of the squatter settlement.
3. To have an insight about the problems faced by the women in their everyday life.
4. To make suitable recommendations that can bring about women empowerment so that the women of the squatter settlement can come out of the problems faced by them in their daily life.

The entire work has been divided into three stages namely- Pre Field, Field and Post Field.

- **Pre Field-** In the pre field work, literature review was done in detail to have an idea about the problems faced by women in slums and squatter settlements. Study was also carried out on women empowerment. Based on the literature survey, a research design was prepared, the study area was identified and the methodology was

adopted. The squatter settlement by the side of the Pran Krishna Mukherjee Road in Baghbazar, Kolkata was selected as the study area (Figure 1). A squatter settlement is a settlement which is occupied by its inhabitants without valid legal document and they live in extreme unhygienic and degraded environment (Khullar, 2014). Squatter is mainly occupied by lower income group.

- **Field Survey-** A field survey was carried out in the squatter settlement by the side of Pran Krishna Mukherjee Road in Baghbazar, Kolkata. Height and weight data was collected from 45 girl children of different age groups to identify the status of Body Mass Index. About 50 women were surveyed to have an idea about their education, occupational status and monthly income status. A perception study was also carried out to identify the problems of the women in the squatter settlement in their daily life.
- **Post Field-** The post field study mainly involved tabulation and analysis of the data collected through primary survey. Graphs were prepared in MS Excel and location map was prepared using GIS. Weighted score technique adopted by Aristidis K Nicolopoulous was also used to statistically identify the degree of problem. Higher the value of weighted score, more severe is the problem. Finally, the graphs prepared were analyzed and interpreted to arrive at the necessary results.

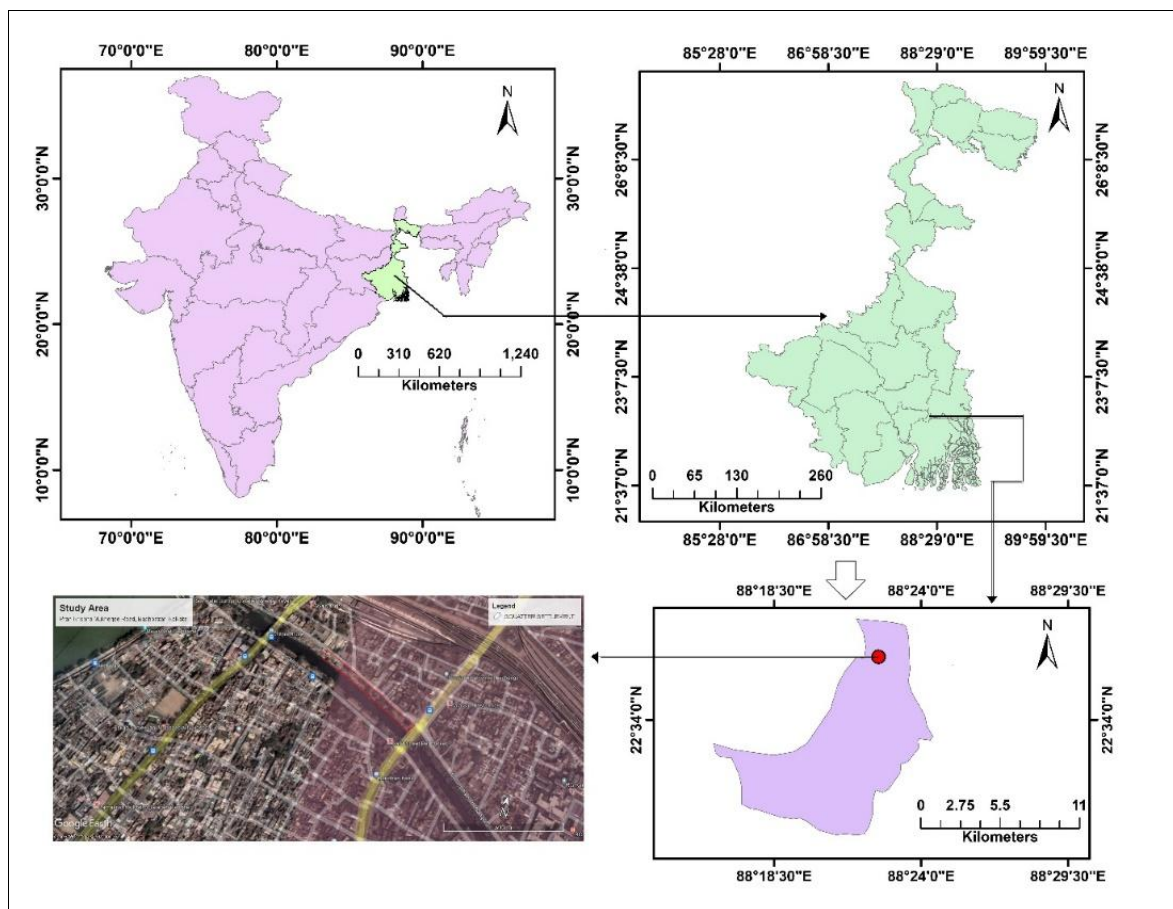


Figure 1: Location Map of the Study Area

III. ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEMS CONCERNING SOCIAL WELL BEING

Analysis of Weight of samples taken for study:

Weight is one of the major key indicators that gives the status of human health. Out of the total girls surveyed, most of the girls are having the weight of more than 25 kg and it accounts for about 33% of the samples (Figure 2). About 27% of girls being surveyed are having the weight of 15 to 20 kg (Figure 2). About 20% girls being surveyed are having the weight ranging from 20-25 kg, 16% girls surveyed are having the weight ranging from 10-15 kg and 4% of girls surveyed are having the weight below 5 kg (Figure 2). Hence, from the analysis of the data it can be seen that problem of underweight is one of the major problems of the girls of the study area.

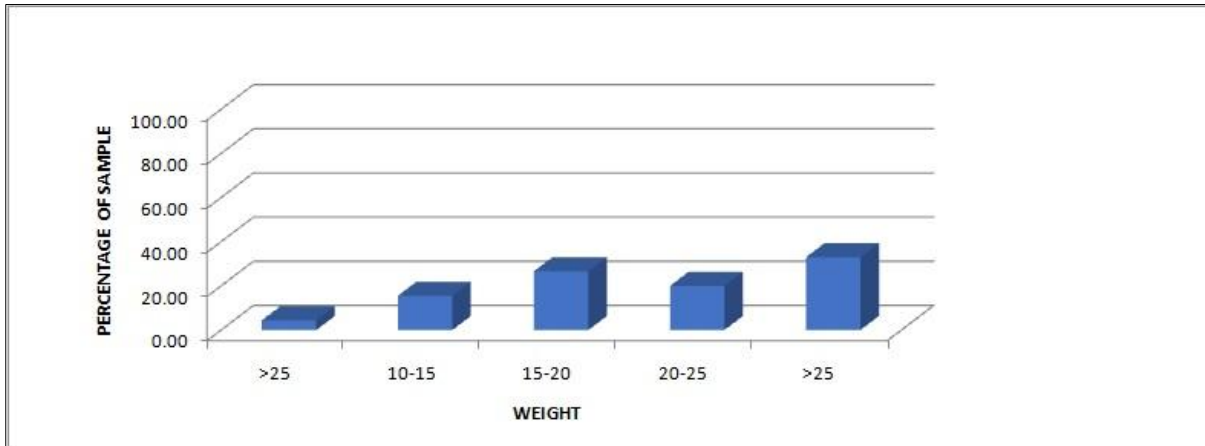


Figure 2: Scenario of weight of girls in the Study Area (Source: Primary Survey)

Analysis of Height of samples taken for study:

Like weight, height is also another component that determines health of a human being. The primary survey revealed that out of 45 girls being taken for study, 69% girls surveyed have the height of more than 100 cm whereas the remaining 31% girls surveyed are having the height of less than 100 cm (Figure 3).

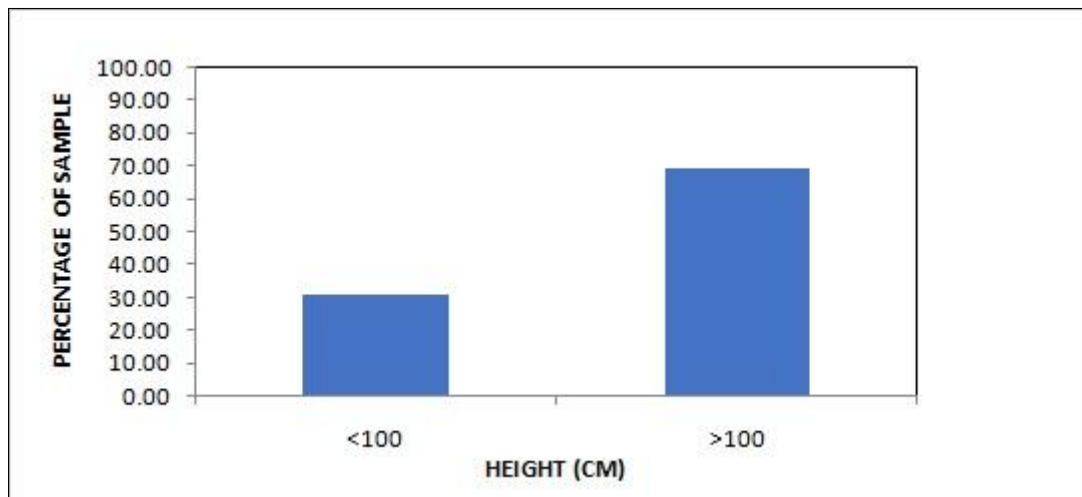


Figure 3: Scenario of height of girls in the Study Area (Source: Primary Survey)

Analysis of Body Mass Index (BMI) of the samples taken for Study:

Body Mass Index is a scale which helps us to determine whether a person is underweight, overweight or is normal weight. Hence, it is one of the key factors that determines the degree of healthiness of human body. BMI is calculated by dividing the weight of an individual measured in kg with the square of height measured in meters. Through the analysis of BMI data, it was revealed that most of the girl children were underweight. Out of 45 girl children, 69% were underweight, 27% were having normal weights while 4% were overweight (Figure 4). Dominance of underweight girl children has been noticed and the reason behind this is lack of availability proper nutrition of their mothers. The mothers of these children are also weak physically and their stature clearly portrays the existence of malnutrition. Besides, these mothers also did not get proper medical assistance and care from their families during the process of childbirth. As there were also female population who have become mothers at a young age, incidences of high birth rate were also common. As a result, this have also imparted a negative impact not only on the health of the mother but also on the health of the child she has given birth.

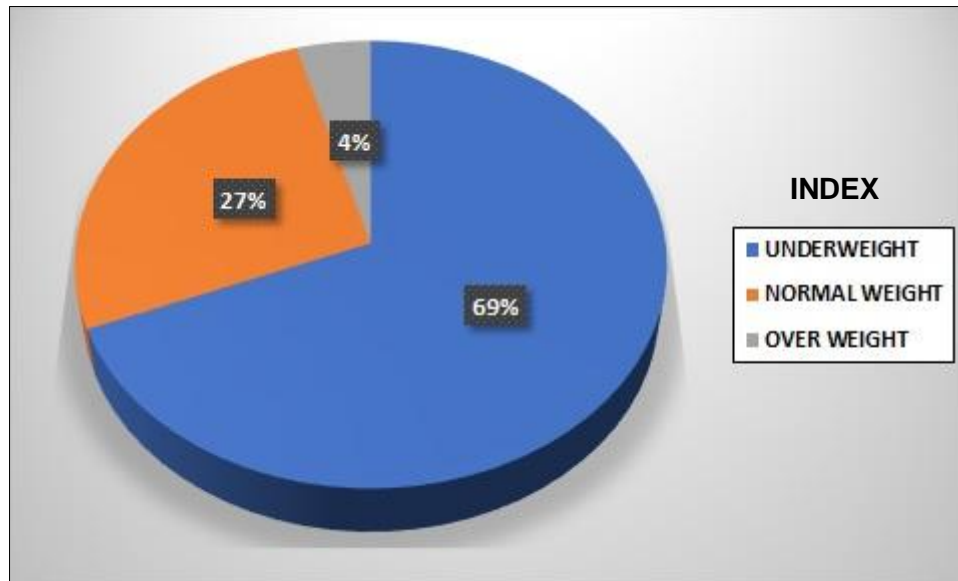


Figure 4: Scenario of Body Mass Index of girls in the Study Area (Source: Primary Survey)

Analysis of Educational Scenario of Women population of the Study Area:

A separate survey was conducted on 50 adult women to portray the socio-economic lifestyle of the women in the squatter settlement. Education is one of the indispensable weapon that can bring about women empowerment. The study revealed that out of 50 women surveyed, most of the women are illiterate. About 64% of the total adult women sample is illiterate (Figure 5). 22% women taken as sample are literate in the sense that they can only sign their names (Figure 5). But they have not gone to school. 6% of the sample have studied up to class 4 while only 8% of the sample have studied till class five or more (Figure 5). Hence, it is seen from the discussion that most of the women are illiterate. This is due to intense poverty of the families. Parents are not able to send their girls to school even if they desire to do so. Some families being surveyed stated that the girls of their families go to the workplace of their mothers in order to act as a helping hand. They often accompany their mothers who work as domestic helpers or labour at construction sites. Another important problem is that since most of the parents are illiterate, they themselves do not understand the value of education in the life of their daughters and are not ready to send their daughters to school. They prefer their daughters to act as a helping hand in their workplace. It is also seen that the literacy rate of women in India is much below the women literacy rate of West Bengal. According to census 2011, women literacy rate of West Bengal is 70.54% while in the squatter settlement the literacy rate of the surveyed population is only 36%.

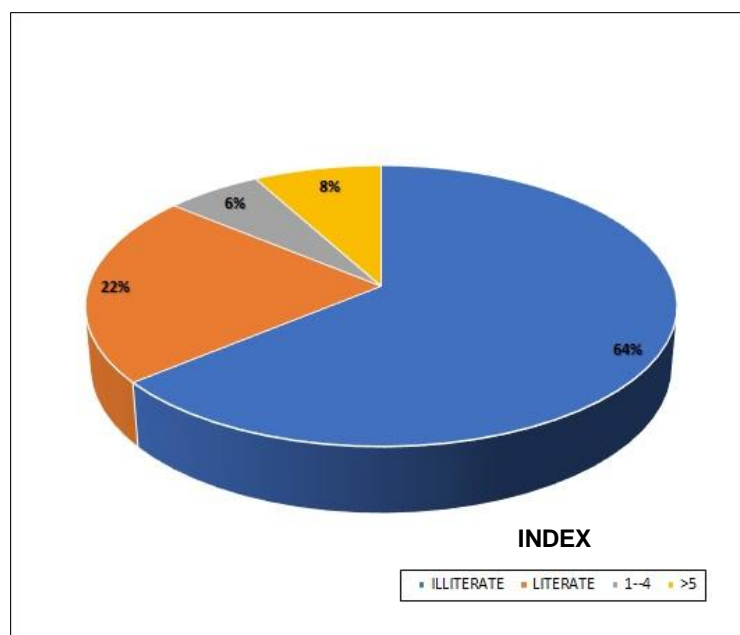


Figure 5: Scenario of Education of Women in the Study Area (Source: Primary Survey)

Analysis of Occupational Status of the Women in the Study area:

Having an occupation in hand is a key indicator of women empowerment. If a woman has a job in hand, then it makes her self-reliant and self-independent. It also reduces her degree of dependency on her male counterpart which may be her husband, her father, her brother or any other earning male member of the family. In the study area, it has been observed that out of 50 women being surveyed, 50% of the sample are engaged as domestic workers, 44% are housewife who are not at all engaged in any job and are dependent on their husband for the fulfillment of their daily needs (Figure 6). They are mainly engaged in taking care of the household and looking after children. 4% are engaged in rag picking activities (Figure 6). These women opined that every day they collect the garbage and sell the plastic items to the mediators at a meagre price. Only 2% of the sample work as a labour in construction site (Figure 6). However, she stated that her work is seasonal in nature as she gets the scope to work only when her contractor gets any assignment. Other times, when she has no work, she often sits idle at home taking care of her family and households. If compared with the female work participation data of West Bengal, it is seen that the rate of women participation in workforce is much higher in the squatter settlement (56%) than that of the state of West Bengal (18.1% in census 2011) (Biswas, 2018)

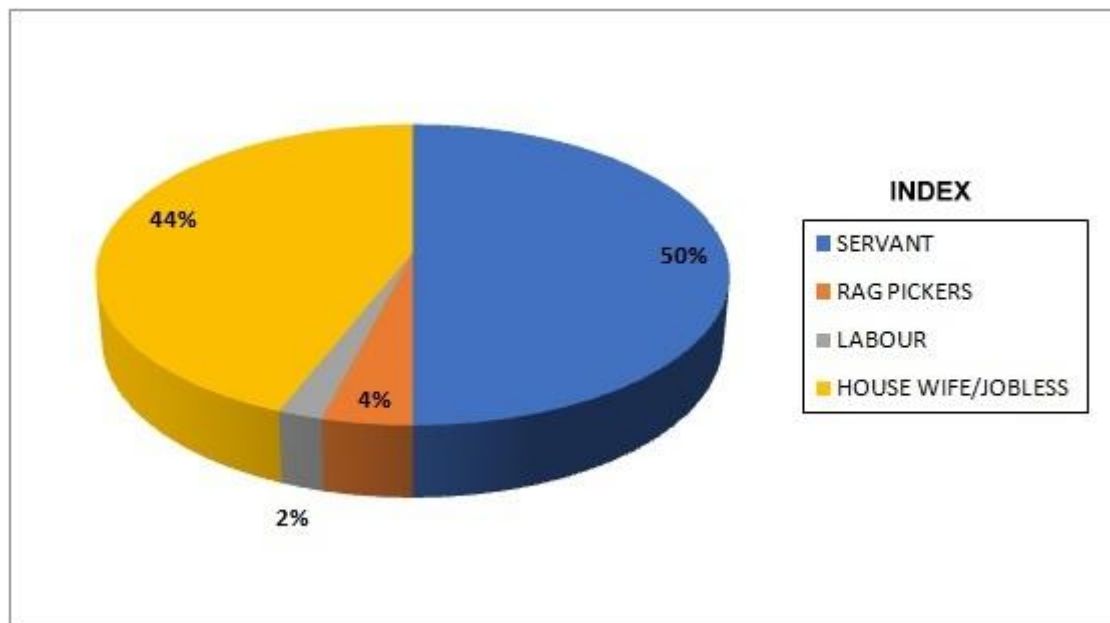


Figure 6: Scenario of Occupation of Women in the Study Area (Source: Primary Survey)

Analysis of monthly income of Women in the Study Area:

Women empowerment is also affected by the monthly income. Women who earns sufficient money become self-dependent and self-confident. It also reduces their degree of dependency on their male counterparts for money. Analysis of monthly income of the women squatter revealed that out of 50 women, 44% are jobless (Figure 7). They are a housewife who sit at home managing households and takes care of children. 30% of the sample earn less than Rs 2000 per month, 18% of the sample earn Rs 2000 to Rs 3000 per month and 8% of the sample earn more than Rs 3000 per month (Figure 7).

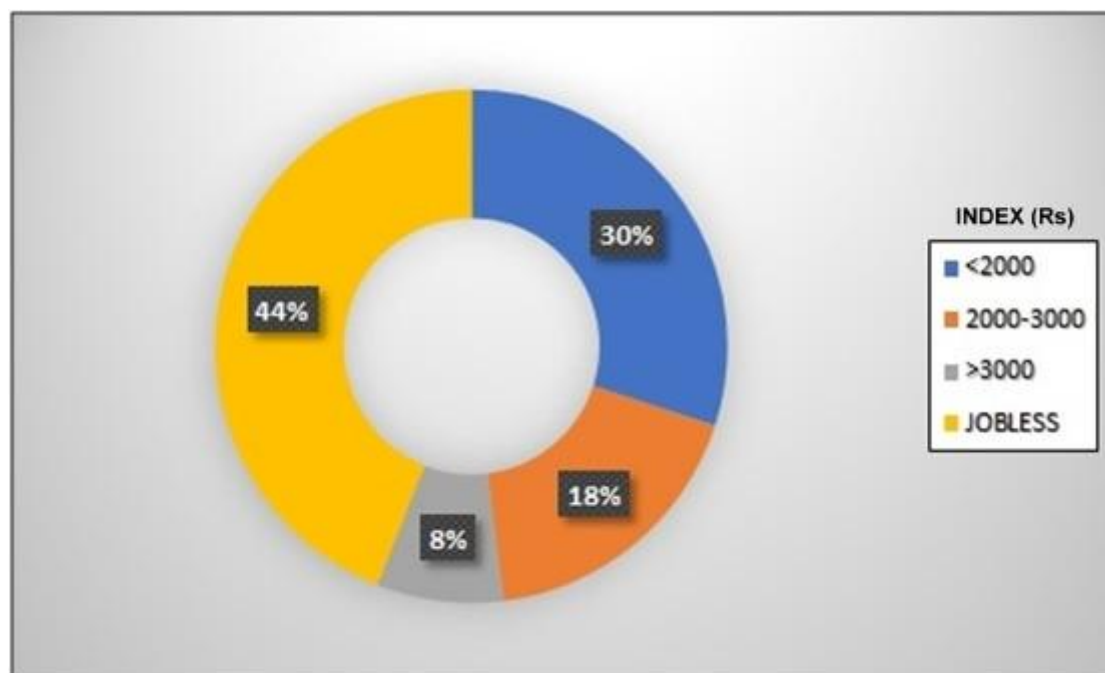


Figure 7: Scenario of monthly income of Women in the Study Area (Source: Primary Survey)

Problems of women in the squatter settlement:

Women living in the squatter settlement are vulnerable to different type social evils and problems.

- **Unhygienic Living Condition-** Women living in the squatter settlement are living under degraded and dilapidated environment. The living condition is very unhygienic. There is no proper place for toilet facility. Under such circumstances, women suffer from different types of diseases and ailments.
- **Lack of privacy and security-** Since the women live in shanties and uncovered huts, there is lack of privacy for women. They also suffer from insecurity problems. As most of the households do not have attached toilet facilities, people goes to open space. Women are also not an exception. Women surveyed in the squatter settlement also stated that they do not have proper covered bathrooms. This problem becomes acute in case of young girls who are at their puberty and needs privacy for the maintenance of their menstrual hygiene. They have to take bath in taps located by the side of the main road. They stated that they often feel embarrassed when they return home in wet cloth after taking bath. Besides, women also stated that the windows and doors of their houses are neither built up of strong material nor they are properly protected. Thus, they feel insecure at night time (Goswami & Sen, 2020).
- **Incidence of Elopement and early marriage ages-** Incidences of elopement are also common among the female population. It is mainly seen among young girls. Since they do not go to school, they elope with their boyfriends and this raises the incidences of child marriage. As the number of children in poor families is higher, poor parents often fail to fulfill the needs of every child equally. Since preferential treatment is given to the son, parents give their daughters marriage at early age with the expectation to provide better opportunities for their son. Marriage at early age also increases the birth rate among young women which lays significant impact on the health of women.
- **Problem of Domestic Violence-** Women living in the squatter are also subject to domestic violence. They are often brutally beaten and tortured by their husbands and in laws. Women and girl children are treated badly by their fathers and husbands most of whom are alcoholic. It is seen that the earning male members spent most of the money in fulfilling their need of alcohol. Thus, they hardly give enough money in the hands of their wives to maintain their families. If the wives ask for more money, they are tortured. Most of the girl children as well as women are undernourished and they suffer from malnutrition.
- **Health problem of pregnant women, young mothers and their child-** Health of pregnant women is also affected owing to malnutrition for which they give birth to undernourished and underweight babies. Even cases of birth of premature babies were also noted. One women surveyed stated that she has lost 3 babies immediately after birth because of extreme anaemia of the newborn. Deaths of mothers during birth are also common.
- **Attitude of Topophilia-** The women of the squatter settlement are also having extreme emotional attachment to their dwelling place (Roy, 2017). In spite of getting some better opportunities of work, they were not ready to leave their dwelling place and their families. Such type of emotional attachment to the place of

dwelling is known as Topophilia (Roy, 2017). Some women in the study area were provided with the opportunity to get training of using sewing machines. Most of them did not accept the offer and preferred working as domestic help and did not accept work for long hours at some other place. Besides, they are also of the opinion that going for the training involved transport cost which they cannot bear. Owing to such attitude and being topophilic in nature, women in the squatter failed to enjoy a good quality of lifestyle.

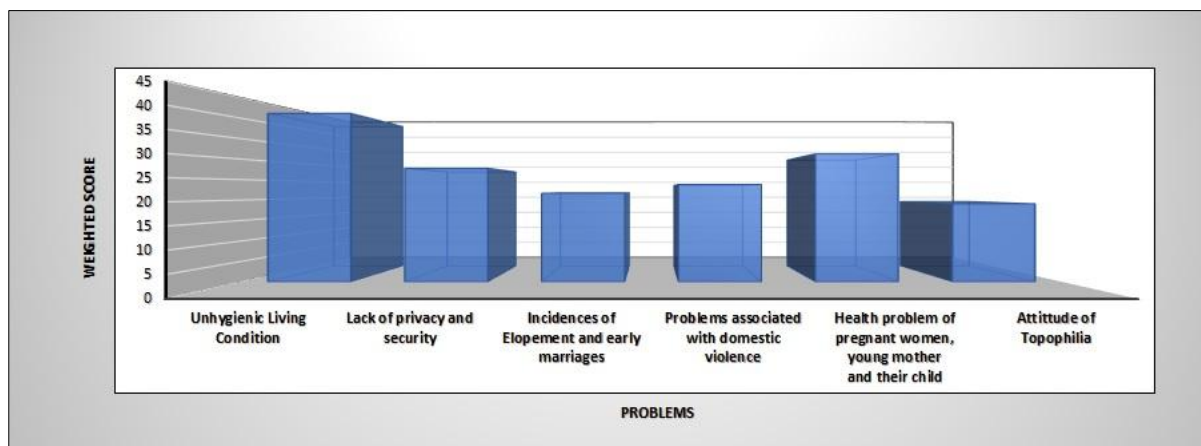


Figure 8: Analysis of problems of women in the Squatter settlement (After Aristidis K Nicolopaulous)

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study clearly revealed that the women of the study area are living in an extreme impoverished and miserable condition. In spite of living under such dilapidated condition, they are bound by traditional feelings of Indian society and a clear picture of gender discrimination has been noticed. Condition of women in the squatter settlement can only be improved by undertaking different strategies of women empowerment.

- Since the women are dwelling in a squatter settlement, they are continuously suffering from the threat of getting evacuated by the Government as they have occupied the area illegally. Steps have to be taken so that they can have a permanent dwelling place. The Government must come forward to solve this problem.
- They must also be provided with documents that proves their identity as citizens as many of the women do not even have voter card, ration card and aadhar card. Once they are provided with these documents they will be able to take privilege of various developmental activities undertaken by Government of West Bengal at present.
- Once they get a permanent address, they will have accessibility to all the municipal services. Regular health checkup of the pregnant mothers and new born babies must be done.
- Women should be encouraged to enroll themselves in different types of vocational training.
- Since women of the study area are also suffering from mental problems, steps have to be taken to bring back their mental strength and stability through psychological counselling (Shettar, 2015).
- If possible, arrangements of night schools can be made to make women educated. Mothers should be encouraged to send their girl children to school.
- Awareness programs about issues like women health, women education, self-dependency must be conducted at regular basis so that not only the women but also their family members become aware about importance of women empowerment.

V. CONCLUSION

Inculcating a burning issue like women empowerment among the illiterate women of the squatter settlement is not an easy task. Women are an important human resource and it is through implementation of different strategies of women empowerment that the problems of the women in the squatter settlement can be resolved. The Government, local club and NGOs must come forward and work in close coordination with each other to make it successful. Women in the squatter settlement have capabilities. It is only through proper education, guidance and training that these inherent sown seed of capability within them has to be nurtured. If it is done, then women in the squatter settlement will not only become self-independent but also will pave the way for building a new and modernized society in the long run.

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