

# Empowering Women Through Skill-based Education at A Nursing School in India

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Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. -Nelson Mandela  
I've always believed that when you educate a girl, you empower a nation. -Queen Rania of Jordan

## ABSTRACT

The researcher reports the findings from the data collected from a questionnaire survey responded by students who are enrolled in a nurse's aides course in a nursing school of a mission in the state of West Bengal, India. The researcher analyzed data that focused on the views of 20 female students pertaining to their perception of the benefits of studying at the Nursing School. Specifically, this study explores the impact of education in nurturing social and economic empowerment in women at the grass root level. The study reveals the dominant belief of the respondents of the quality and level of empowerment they experienced. The results cannot be generalized to a broader population because of its small sample size. Research implications are discussed and future hypothesis testing is indicated.

**Key words :** Education, Women, India, Nursing, Empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

Social status for women in India changes constantly. In India today, women enjoy the protection and security of rights under the Constitution of India. At present, many women have access to the highest positions in India, but at the same time, many women suffer from various forms of inequality. The critical problem contributing to this situation is that a large number of young Indian women receive little or no formal education. Since 1950, the Constitution of India has made mandatory education compulsory that is to be provided free for all children up to the age of 14.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, British rulers came forward to help Indian social reformers uplift the status of women by changing the law through legislation. One of the noted reformers, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), initiated a social movement to help people in distress and created the Rama Krishna Mission (RKM) in 1897. Later, under the supervision of RKM, the Sri Sarada Mission (SSM) (1954) was established solely for women. SSM became independent in

1959.

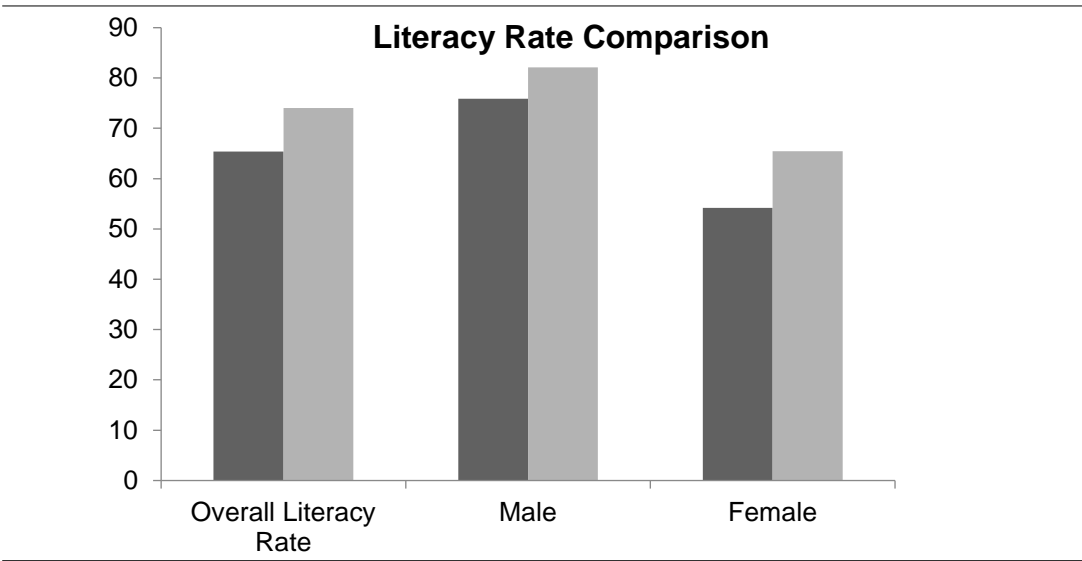
The SSM Hospital Matri Bhavan (MB) was established as a branch of the RKM in 1950. It gained independence in 1961. Initially, it opened with 10 beds, but currently it has grown to the capacity of 64 beds. The hospital's sole purpose is to help and guide underprivileged women to safe practices as they ascertain motherhood and child care. It also oversees and operates training institutions to develop well-educated and well-trained nurses and nurse's aides. Within this paper, the researcher presents the findings of a survey that was conducted at the Nursing School of the SSM Hospital. Students participating in this investigation are studying to be nurse's aides and originate from low socio-economic background in rural areas of West Bengal (WB).

This study strives to demonstrate how the educational program provided by the SSM, MB help to empower young women socially and economically. The researcher hypothesizes that these programs convey changes in the respective communities, thus serving to positively impact these communities socially and economically.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

World attention concentrated on India's growth in Information Technology (IT) in the 1990s (Subramaniam, 2006; Subramaniam, 2004), but as Narayan observes, in India in many cases "time stands still" (1997, p. 50). Particularly in the case of the education levels for girls, this circumstance is apparent. According to the Census of India, the literacy rate in India in 2001 was 65.38 of which 75.85 were male and 54.16 were female. The gender gap was 21.7. By 2011, the overall literacy rate rose to 74.04 of which 82.14 were male and 65.46 were female, showing a general improvement in literacy for all students. While the gap between males and females had improved in 2011 from 2001, there was still a 16.68 point gap between male and female students. See the Census of India Literacy Comparison Table.

Table 1  
*Census of India Literacy Rate Comparison*



The United Nations included education as a basic human right (UN, 1948). At the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), it was declared that the key to women’s empowerment is education and the advancement of literacy for women. Education is “especially significant for girls and women” (WUNRN, 2006). It was reinforced that “Education is one of the most critical areas of empowerment for women,” as it gives them “much greater power” that enables them “to make genuine choices over the kinds of lives they wish to lead” (UNICEF, 1996). Overall, education is the “agent of basic change in the status of women” (Govt. of India, MHRD, 2014-15, p. 200).

Through education women might acquire “the chance of a healthier and happier life” (UNICEF). It is also beneficial for the society as a whole. An educated woman gains the skills, information and self-confidence that make her a better parent, a productive worker and a good citizen. Thus, it “can have ripple effects within the family and across generations” (WUNRN, 2006). An educated woman would marry later and have fewer and healthier children. UNICEF data shows that in India, the infant mortality rate decreased by half when mothers had a primary education compared to the children of the illiterate mothers. Moreover, educated women are more likely to send their children to school (WUNRN, 2006). Research affirms that “one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty” is to invest in girls’ education as they would also be capable of earning personal income for the household, and this income leads to growth in national income (WUNRN, 2006).

Empowerment is the overreaching term that increases the potential for women to have fundamental rights, autonomy, control and respect. It points to the achievement of knowledge, confidence, information and contributing in the society. One of the definitions of women's empowerment is that women can have the knowledge and power "to challenge the fundamental imbalances of power in their lives in the domains of the family and the community" (Subramaniam, 2006, p.7). As Blumberg (1988) observes, unlike social empowerment, economic empowerment links directly to having the ability to earn a living, although it might not be useful unless the woman has the power to control her earnings. In developing countries, women from under-privileged families often receive support from the country, state or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) to have an income, as economic power is often interpreted as or equal to, empowerment (Amin, Ahmed, & Chowdhury, 1994; Sharma & Zeller, 1997).

In their capabilities approach, the framework for assessing human development, Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2003) counted education as an important aspect of human development. Researchers often judge the development of a nation by its economic growth as it is seen "as an indicator of a nation's quality of life" (Nussbaum, 2003, p.33). To improve a country's economic condition, obviously people, as human capital, plays an important role. However, according to Nussbaum (2003), human development actually depends on "what people are actually able to do and to be" (p.33). Sen (1999) also considers the ability "of people to lead the lives they have reason to value" in order to "enhance the real choices they have" is an important factor in human capability (p. 293). Otto (1996) says, "The relations of domination and subordination at the micro, local levels of society make possible the global systems of inequalities in power" (p. 134). The capabilities approach considers educated women's control over and freedom to choose their own ways is as important as having control over their economic situation, which actually might set them free from their "relations of domination and subordination" (Otto, 1996, p. 293).

To improve girls' access to education and keep them at school needs, among other things, community involvement, low-cost or free of cost schooling, less practice of girls being used for household labor, more schools with women teachers, relevant curricula, and quality of basic education (Bernard, 2002; UNICEF, 1998, 2002; Government of India, MHRD, 2014-15). In a suitable environment, women can learn and cope with the problems they face in their lives and try to change and improve the situation and themselves (Batliwala, 1996). Thus, researchers to date suggest that women can be empowered socially, economically and in other ways by means of education. Drawing on these studies, the researcher strove to demonstrate how female students might be empowered through the education they receive at the nursing school of SSM, MB.

## METHODOLOGY

This is an ethnographic study with the focus on a survey in a particular organization. The goal of the study is to understand and estimate the effects of the educational programs of an organization on the society. In this case, the study addresses social empowerment of women in the relevant community through education. It follows the following protocols to complete its goals :

1. Use of capta or secondary sources (strategic documents) from the case study organization.
2. Use of generata or primary sources (questionnaire survey) from the organization.
3. Use of scholarly literature.

First, the research objective and the research questions will be discussed followed by a description of the research site and the participants. The data sources and the data collection procedures will be described thereafter.

### Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are :

1. To select a project of the Mission for survey.
2. To administer the survey for further investigation.
3. To interrogate the relevant literatures for support.
4. To understand what the project beneficiaries might think about the outcome.

To estimate the impact of the investigation and contribution to the society, this study will take into consideration the following :

1. The result of the survey in India
2. The literature review
3. Project beneficiaries in the survey

### The Research Questions

To obtain data for this research, a questionnaire survey was administered to the students. This was deemed the most appropriate way considering the sensitive nature of the mission towards their female students. The research questions are :

1. Who are receiving The Nurses' Aide Course that is conducted at SSM, MB?
2. Why are they taking this course?
3. How does the course help these women empower?
4. What category of empowerment that might be?

### **The Research Site**

SSM, MB has renowned medical services through their own women's hospital and charitable dispensaries together with well reputed nursing schools. Not only free treatment, but free medicine is also distributed depending on the need of the patient. They have an outdoor clinic that does not charge fees, an operation theatre, laboratory, etc. It also has nursing schools. It is recognized by the Indian Nursing Council and the West Bengal Nursing Council. It is a reputable institution for educating and empowering young women.

### **The Participants**

The all-female participants in the study are members of the Nurse's Aide class at the school. There are 20 students enrolled and all of them were present on the day of the survey and all of them responded to the survey. All participants were high school graduates who successfully passed the Higher Secondary Examination of West Bengal Board of Education, and had studied for at least 12 years. The participants ranged in ages 18 to 22 with the exception of one being aged 27.

### **The Data Source**

To gather data for this study, *Questionnaire for Nursing Aide's Students at SSM, MB* was developed by the researcher that was composed of five main components. The first section was to determine basic demographic information of the respondents. Section 2 was designed to gather background information about their connection to the Mission and their level of self-confidence before enrolling in the school. Section 3 was designed to glean information about the impact of study on the students at that school. Part 4 consisted of Likert Scale questions ranked from 1-4 with a rating of 1 being the highest evaluation and 4 being the lowest.

### **The Data Collection Procedure**

The researcher received permission to administer the survey from the school's governing leaders. The questionnaire was written in Bengali as the participating students' ability to read and understand an all-English questionnaire was minimal. The questionnaire was prepared and then submitted to the school's administration for approval. After the center's head, the school principal, and vice-principal checked the questionnaire and all agreed it to be appropriate, a date to administer the questionnaire was decided. The survey was administered during the recess period between two classes that was extended for this purpose. Two teachers were present to

1. help in manual distribution of the questionnaires in the beginning.
2. determine whether the students understood the questions.

### 3. help in collection of the questionnaires at the end.

The survey was administered on March 15th, 2016. A brief explanation was given to the student participants prior to the survey informing them of the purpose and protocol for managing the questionnaire. The researcher made clear to the participants that their involvement was strictly voluntary and would present no risk or cost to them for taking part in the study. At the same time, they were made aware that there would be no direct benefit personally to them either. For the sake of anonymity and confidentiality, the researcher did not ask the names of the participants. Also, names were not included or necessary for determining data validity and subsequent reliability of this study's findings.

## RESULTS

The objective of the study was to determine how the Nurses' Aide's course aided in the development of students' empowerment and to inform the level and type of empowerment that the participants might experience. The objective was accomplished by the means of a questionnaire. Participants were queried about their perceived benefits of the educational courses in which they were enrolled in at SSM, MB. They were also asked why they were taking these courses. The questionnaire also had items seeking to find out what they knew about the mission before they entered the program and what their perceptions were of themselves. Next, participants were asked about their education at the center and the impact of that education in their personal lives. Finally, participants were asked to provide a brief statement explaining their aspirations and goals for their future.

### General Findings

Going forth, the descriptive data gathered from the Questionnaire for Nurses' Aide Students at SSM, MB will be discussed.

**Question 1.** (Q.1) asked for students' basic demographic information, e.g., birth year, the year of high school graduation, what subjects they studied in high school, and place of residence and/or birth. Twenty female high school graduates ranging in ages from 18 to 22, with one 27 year-old female participated in the study. They were mostly coming from remote, rural areas of the state of WB where they went to school, except for two participants, who were from the city of Kolkata.

**Question 2.** (Q.2) was comprised of two parts (a, b). Both parts had four possible options from which participants could choose.

(Q 2a): The question established the level of the student's awareness of the Mission before enrolling there. The resulting responses informed the following: R1), five students knew very well. The second choice R2), only the name, was chosen by two respondents. For the third choice

R3), 12 students responded not much. The fourth choice R4), one student responded absolutely not. (Table 2.)

Table 2

2a) Did You Know about the Mission?

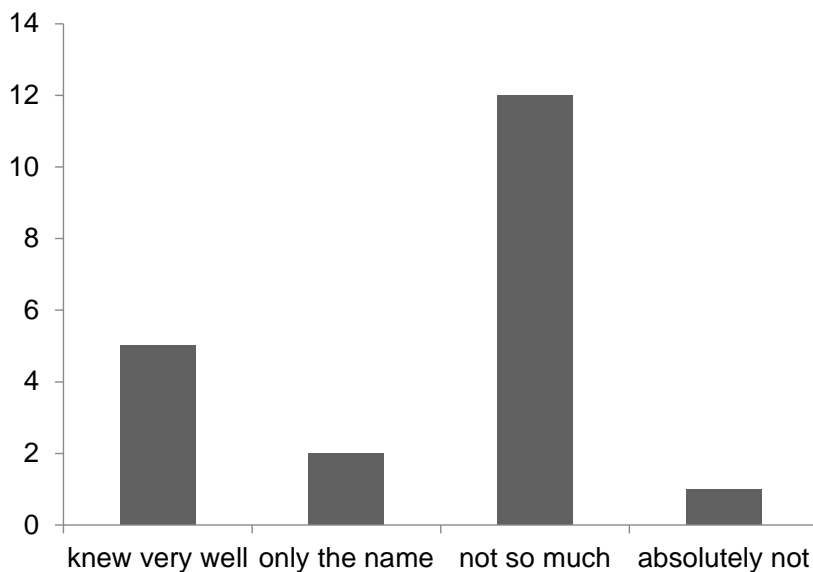
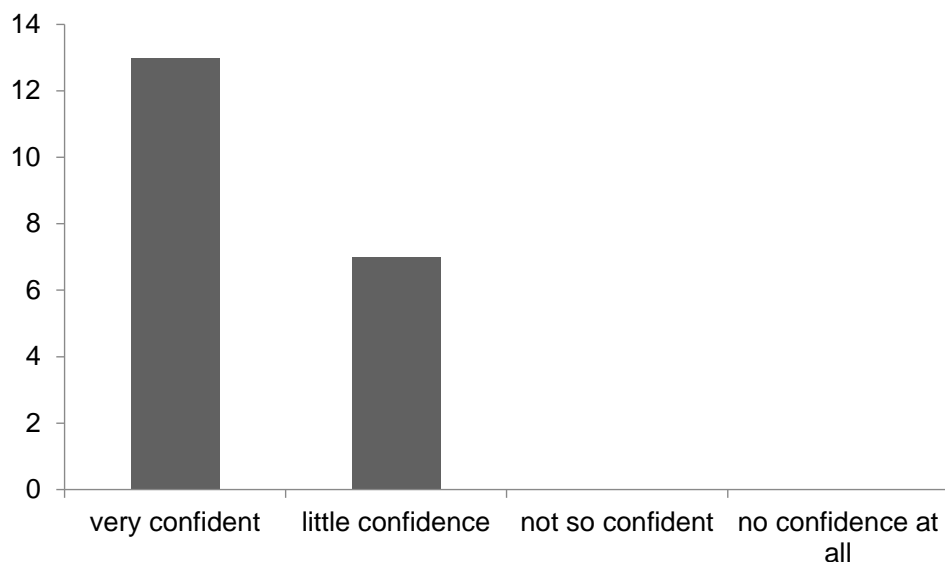


Table 3

2b) What Was Your Perception about Yourself?





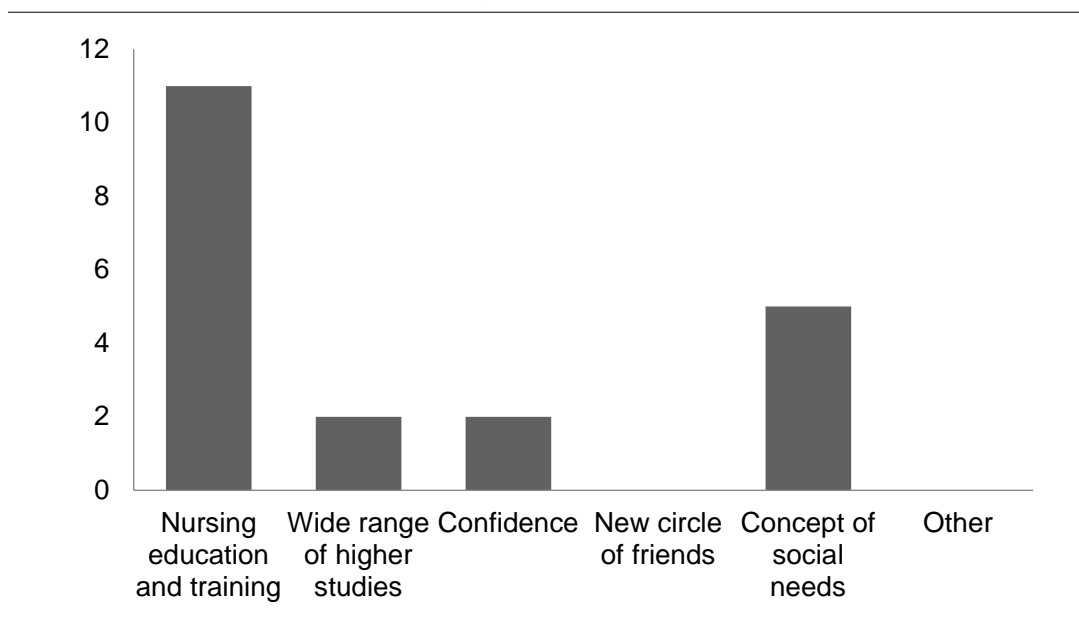
(Q2b): This part of the question asked students about their perceptions about themselves before joining the course at the Mission. Thirteen students responded to the first choice R1), very confident. Seven students responded to the second option R2), little confidence. The remaining responses received no answers from participants, i.e., third one R3), not that confident, fourth one R4), and not confident at all. (Table 3.)

**Question 3.** (Q.3) asks about the type of education students were receiving at the school, and was comprised of two parts (a, b). There were several options for responding.

(Q 3a): The first part (3a) asked students to indicate their primary benefit or achievement as a result of their education at the school. The choices were: R1), nursing education and training, R2) wide range of higher studies, R3) confidence, R4) new friend circle, R5) concept of the social needs and therefore motivated to study enthusiastically; and R6) other. The responses were 11, 2, 2, 0, 5, 0 respectively. (Table 4.)

Table 4

*3a) What Have You Achieved by Studying Here?*



(Q3b): The second part of question three queried participants about how education might empower them, and allowed for 5 choices: 1) physical, 2) psychological, 3) economical, 4) social and, 5) Other. The replies were 3, 3, 2, 11, 0 respectively. (Table 5.)

Table 5

3b) How Will This Education Empower You?

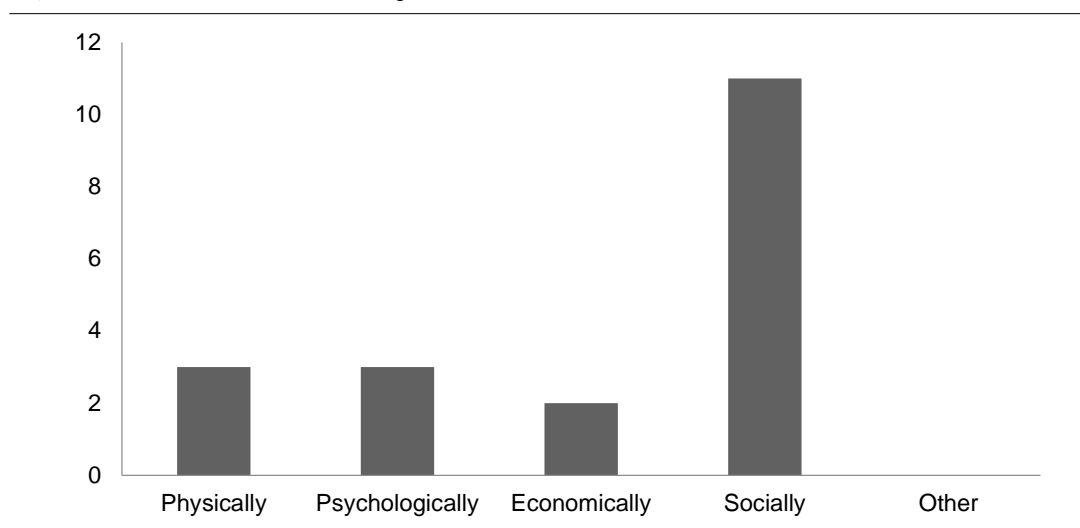


Table 6

Participants' Impression of Their Educational Benefits at SSM, MB

	1. I agree very much	2. I somewhat agree	3. I do not agree very much	4. I do not agree at all
1. Gained nursing knowledge and skills	13	5	0	1
2. Got bigger friend circle	4	13	3	0
3. Became more/confident	13	5	1	1
4. Will become economically independent	5	12	1	1
5. My thoughts and opinions will be accepted in society	9	9	0	1
6. Would like to have a better living standard by myself	11	5	4	0
7. Got broader perspective and higher level of education	7	11	2	0
8. Got connected with various people and organizations	2	14	2	1
9. Feel that my demand has increased in the society	7	9	1	2
10. With specialized knowledge want to help in the society	14	5	0	1
11. Can understand other's thoughts/ideas better	0	14	5	1
12. Want to throw challenge in new fields	8	6	0	4

**Question 4.** (Q 4) had 12 statements with four choices per statement. The respondents were asked to circle the number that best described their feelings about the education they were getting at SSM, MB and its subsequent impact on their lives. Respondents' answer options were : R1) I agree very much, R2) I somewhat agree, R3) I do not agree very much, R4) I do not agree at all. The results are shown in Table 6.

**Question 5** (Q 5) is the last item on the questionnaire and an open-ended question. It required that students elaborate on what they would like to do after graduating from the institute. Each of the participants wrote a few statements. Their replies varied, but informed much about their personal goals and aspirations (Appendix A).

Of the 20 respondents, 17 responded that they would work after graduation, three wanted to work in the village, two participants specifically mentioned SSM, MB as their choice as a future workplace; one student stated that her concern for safety was the reason she had chosen SSM, MB. Fourteen students wanted to help the society and/or people through their work. Three respondents voiced the desire to help their families after graduation while two students said they wanted to be independent by securing a job. Three participants had three different reasons for securing a job, for wanting a better living, and for helping oneself to earn money. Three participants wanted to pursue additional higher education.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

With the participants' level of schooling at the time of this investigation, they could not take a traditional academic nursing course because many of the required course work and curriculum are taught in English, also, several of the tests are conducted in English. Therefore, they did not have the ability to enter a traditional nursing program; to take the course was beyond their learning capacity. Moreover, the participants could not afford the tuition, or other associated educational fees, and the cost of living in the city. At SSM, MB students received many of their educational expenses free of charge. These stipends include boarding and lodging at the SSM, MB dormitory for the nursing students and the tuition fees. Reported to the researcher in an informal conversation with the principal and vice principal of the center, students also received pocket money on a regular basis.

SSM, MB is very well-known in India and the students responses indicate that most of them knew it by name, but did not know much about its operations. Thus, the name might not be a factor of their choice of school. The majority of the participants said that they were very confident before joining the course. This positive response is an interesting finding when considering their humble backgrounds. Many of them were the first member of their family to attend school.

When asked about what they achieved by studying at SSM, MB, most students simply referred to their major, nursing education and training. Though by a low percentage, the concept of the social needs received the second largest number of responses. Most of the participants chose social empowerment when asked about how education might empower them. Nursing courses are very popular among the lower-income groups in India as it is easy to get a well-paid job immediately after graduating from a nursing program. It is also a rewarding and socially accepted job for women. The graduates of SSM, MB are mostly absorbed in the SSM-run hospital and clinics. This directly connects to economic empowerment, but as the majority of participants chose social empowerment, these responses might highlight that in their point of view, basic economic power leads to social empowerment.

As respondents were asked to circle the number that best described their feelings about the education they were getting at SSM, MB and its impact on their life, their responses informed that they placed importance on the training and not on other benefits that can be gained by acquiring an education. The majority of students stated that they gained nursing knowledge and skills. While the majority agreed that gaining nursing knowledge and skills was important, they did not necessarily seem to think that it would give them a broader perspective and higher level of education. Several students did not seem to be aware that they could achieve a higher level of education. The majority of students strongly agreed on becoming more confident. Prior to the investigation, they claimed they were confident before joining the course at SSM, MB. Students placed importance on helping in the society with their newly gained specialized knowledge; they wanted to be challenged in new domains. Generally, students also strongly agreed that their new skills placed emphasis on their existing confidence and the growth of it.

When queried about becoming economically independent, a number of participants chose the second category of somewhat agree, while the majority strongly agreed about making their standard of living better independently. This response might indicate that students expected to secure jobs after graduation, but it might not be enough education to make them totally economically independent. At the same time, this result might be a significant predictor of their confidence of upgrading their standard of living by being qualified to demand a better earning.

Pertaining to the respondents' thoughts and opinions about being accepted in the society, the responses could not inform because there were equal responses between strongly agree and somewhat agree. In response to the item about gaining a bigger friend circle and getting connected with various people and organizations, the majority somewhat agreed. Also, several students somewhat agreed that there would be a greater demand for their skills. Therefore, they felt that they could improve their worth in the society. As the responses are somewhat connected and based on a compilation of the responses, the researcher speculates that overall, students did

not feel they would have more or better connections, and that it did not seem plausible to them that they would be in increased demand in the society.

After graduating from SSM, MB, 17 participants wanted to join in the workforce. Only three respondents wanted to continue on to get a higher education. It is reasonable to assume that most of the students might need a source of income immediately to help their families despite the fact that only three students stated their intent to help their families. The majority of students (14) wanted to help the society and people through their work. This might indicate their broad outlook on society and their propensity for selflessness. Even though the majority of 18 participants came from the village, only three wanted to return to work in the village. A plausible explanation for this opinion held by the participants may be that they have assumed the position that working to help the society and people or the family, is possible from anywhere. Two students wanted to join SSM, MB and one student preferred to stay at SSM, MB out of concerns for her safety. Two students wanted to be independent by securing a job and three others chose three different reasons for having a job : to secure a better living, to help oneself, and to have an earning. Basically, most of the students wanted to work to be able to help others, although in doing so, they also had the potential of having basic economic independence.

## Conclusion

The conclusion summarizes the results of the study and discusses the implications of the findings of this investigation, including considerations of how this study might have an impact on the relevant society, (i.e., by helping empowering socially deprived women in Indian context). The conclusion also explains the limitations of the study and offers recommendations for additional research.

This study attempted to ascertain the views of students of a nursing course at SSM, MB in WB, India. By doing so, it investigated the potential for women's empowerment and the various forms in which it is manifested in an educational setting. The data was gathered through a questionnaire survey. The results demonstrate that the majority of participants strongly agreed that by doing the nurses' aide course at SSM, MB, they had

1. gained nursing knowledge and skills
2. became more confident
3. made their standards of living better by themselves
4. developed the skills to help in the society with specialized knowledge
5. the opportunity to be challenged in new domains.

Conversely, the majority of respondents only somewhat agreed that as a result of their newly acquired education, they

1. secured a bigger circle of friends
2. became economically independent
3. received a broader perspective and higher level of education
4. connected with various people and organizations
5. felt their demand would be increased in the society
6. understood others' thoughts and ideas better.

Participants evenly selected strongly agree and somewhat agree in response to whether their thoughts and opinions would be accepted in the society. Whether the school's curriculum lacked in having strong and positive influence in all of the outcomes, it seemed to be successful in giving the students confidence, certainty of future employment, and the potential for achieving a better living standard and social empowerment. The students did not report anything negative.

### **Scopes and Limitations of the Research**

As to the limitations of the research, the researcher acknowledges that the selection of the organization center for this research has been based on the following considerations :

1. The practicality of access to the place
2. The possibility of getting permission to do the survey.
3. An interest in working on a high profile organization in India.
4. Hope to understand the mindset of the students about empowerment

Secondly, the results of this study are based on the data that was collected :

1. Once only
2. From only one place (SSM, MB)
3. By one single means (Questionnaire Survey)
4. From a small group of participants (20)

Therefore, the results of this study are not generalizable as there might be many other variables affecting the outcome. Yet, this study might still be useful for future investigations in this field as well as, while implementing a plan in the future for women's social and financial empowerment in India or elsewhere.

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## APPENDIX A

### Student Responses

Question No. 5 pertaining to goals and aspirations of the students about what they would like to do after

graduating from the institute. (Translation / Transliteration from Bengali by the researcher)

- In the villages where still there is no education or projects to help people, I want to do that work.
- After achieving education, I would like to help people. I will never ignore or hate anyone. In other words, I would like to be a nurse.
- By receiving this education, I would be a true nurse to help the society and my (by author) family selflessly. I want to help who are troubled, helpless and sick.
- I would like to be helpful to the society, also *my* (by author) family. I want to stand on my own two feet.
- By the education I am getting here, I would like to help everyone. I would show or teach in the village. I will work in the society with it.
- After finishing my studies here, I would like to stand on my own two feet.
- By getting this Nurses' Aide training, I will raise my standard of living.
- After the education here, I will take care of people and help injured people. I will help my (by author) family by earning money.
- After getting the education here, I would like to help and treat people in the village. I will stand by everyone. I will help in the society.
- After my studies here, I will help sick people as much as I can. At any moment (every moment : by author), I will take care of the injured people towards happiness.
- I would like to help people. Also, want to earn an income to help myself and my (by author) family. I like to take care of people, so I like this nursing training.
- After getting an education here, I would like to do a nursing job and want to help poor people by taking care of them. I will respect everyone and will have my demand increased in the society.
- After getting an education here, I would like to stand beside everyone in the society and help everyone. As long as I can, I would like to help people.
- After getting an education here, I would like to stand by the society and my family. I want to help my family by every means.
- After getting an education here, I would like to work at SSM, MB as a nurse, for earning money.
- After getting an education here, I would like to do higher studies (GNM Course=General Nursing and Midwifery : by author), and then want to help.
- After getting an education here, I would like to work here at this SSM, MB, because safety for women is great, can work without fear.
- After getting an education here my self-confidence would increase, therefore, I would like to take GNM training and later would be engaged in taking care of the society.
- After getting an education here, I would like to become a nurse. By being a nurse, I would help everyone. Main purpose of being a nurse is to help the society.
- I will complete my education, next, if I get a chance to do GNM, I will take the training and at the end after getting the training, I surely will help people.