

## **An Analysis of the Perception of Community Members on Women's Mobility in the Rural Areas of Asansol-Durgapur Planning Area (ADPA)**

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*Mobility may be defined as the physical movement that people undertake over geographical space to fulfil their various requirement of life. Mobility plays a significant role to a considerable extent in empowering women as for accessing any service like education, health care, for earning living one needs to go out of their homes. Often the outdoor free movement of women is governed by the judgmental views of the society as it is seen that families often take decisions related to the female members based on the views of the community members. In the rural areas people attach more value to the opinion of the society members with decisions related to women of the family. In the rural areas, the families of the women often place a lot of importance on the role of the society mainly the community members in the context of mobility of women as they feel that free movement of women may pose a threat to the honour code of the women. Hence, the aim of this paper is to understand the perception of the community members of the rural areas of Asansol Durgapur Planning Area, on the context of women's mobility. Qualitative data has been collected mainly through primary survey by conducting in-depth*

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*interviews and questionnaire-based survey. Results reveal that in the rural areas woman face restrictions on their outdoor movements mainly due to their safety and security concerns and also based on the judgmental views of the society families often impose restrictions on their outdoor movement. The restrictions are more rigid on the adolescent girls than on the married women and the old women. Old women mainly face restrictions due to their health concerns. For married women, they are unable to undertake outdoor activities more often as they suffer the most from time-poverty as they are bound to do all the household related works. Relevant suggestions have been forwarded keeping in mind the governmental rules and regulations for improving the status of women's mobility in the study area.*

[**Keywords :** Mobility, Geographical space, Community members, Society, Adolescent girls]

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Concept of Mobility**

The movement that people undertake over geographical space to fulfil their various requirement of life may be termed as mobility (Magdalena, 2006). Mobility, freedom and rights are linked with each other the evidence of which has been found to exist in the Article 13 of United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the year 1948 (Sager, 2008). In the wake of neo-liberal globalization and consumerist lifestyles, the concept of mobility has undergone immense changes since the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kotz, 2000). The connection between freedom and mobility is easily observed as high mobility implies a high level of freedom of choice to travel which is a precondition for self-decision on the types of activities to take part in (Houseman, 1979). Over the years, the concept of mobility has made its presence felt in the context of economics, history, society, culture, travel behaviour and movement in understanding the creation of identities, empowerment and the circulation of all these over space and time. It has been witnessed that differences exist to a considerable extent in terms of physical mobility patterns across class, caste and gender dimensions. Due to certain socio-biological advantages mainly physiological as well as the patriarchal social structure enjoyed by men, traditionally, the male sections of the human societies enjoy a considerably greater mobile life than their women counterparts (Akyelken, 2013).

### **1.2 Gender and Mobility**

Gender-based variation of mobility is a well-established phenomenon across the world and this variation is more pronounced

in the rural areas particularly (Uteng, 2011). In order to achieve social equality by using spatial equality as a mean then equal access to transportation facilities should be treated as a necessity despite the various complexities underlying social inequality (Polk, 1998). Significant gender-based differences in mobilities can be recognized on the basis of various parameters like income, age, household size and structure, marital status, elder and child care responsibilities, employment status, place of residence, education level etc. Some research works also indicate that gendered variable role with regards to sharing of household chores leads to creation of greater time burden on women which in turn leads to the woman suffer from time poverty which is again reflected in the trip purposes, trip behaviour and trip. In the developing areas, specially in the rural areas, free mobility of women is met with a lot of obstructions and in certain circumstances with regards to access to health care facilities also they face restrictions (Khan, 1999). In the rural areas, the families of the women often place a lot of importance on the role of the society mainly the community members in the context of mobility of women as they feel that free movement of women may pose a threat to the honour code of the women.

### **1.3 Role of Perception of Community Members on Women's Mobility in the Rural Areas**

Various social causes play a significant role to a considerable extent in posing restrictions in independent mobility of women. In many families in the rural areas, unmarried girls often face a lot of restrictions as far as their liberty is concerned. In many families, higher education of girls are stopped as a result of social pressure since for acquiring higher education often one needs to go to educational institutions that are located at a distance from their houses. After marriage lot of women are compelled to quit their jobs due to social pressure as they are expected to perform their household chores with utmost significance. Hence, it is very important to analyze the role of the perception of the community members of the rural areas in the context of women's mobility.

### **1.4 Significance of Women's Mobility**

Women's mobility is extremely important for ensuring overall development of a region and also for empowerment of women. For making women independent, education is very important but for

accessing educational facilities one needs to go and attend the educational institutions and if there is no freedom of movement then it becomes very difficult to a great extent to acquire education. Even for accessing basic health care facilities one needs to go out so for being healthy one has to be given the freedom of movement as in many countries it has been observed that in this regard also women often face restrictions. For becoming financially independent any person is required to go out of their house, if freedom of women's mobility is not there then in this aspect also women's independence will be hampered. In a nutshell, for achieving gender equality and women empowerment, women's mobility has quite an important role to play.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Delineation of the Study Area**

The Asansol-Durgapur Planning Area (ADPA) in the state of West Bengal in India, is an emerging region of utmost significance from the industrial and economic point of view. In this region, lots of industries have come up over the years as a result of this region being rich in several types of mineral resources. Hence, this region has evolved over the years to a certain extent and possess the potentiality of emerging as a developed region. However, review of literature indicated that not much work has been done in this region with regards to the condition of empowerment of women residing in this region. Mobility is regarded as one of the most significant factors of women empowerment. Mobility of women in the rural areas is largely governed by the mentality and opinion of the community members. Hence, a perception analysis of the mentality of the community members in the rural areas of ADPA will be beneficial for understanding the condition of mobility of women in the study area and in forwarding relevant measures for improving the status of free mobility of women. There are eight Community Development Blocks (C.D. Blocks) within the jurisdiction of ADPA. From these eight blocks two villages from each of the Gram Panchayats under these blocks were surveyed for the purpose of conducting the survey.

### **2.2 Selection of the Samples**

The main aim of the survey was to spatially cover the study area hence from each of the selected villages which has been selected

through multistage random sample method ten households were surveyed. All total from 95 villages 10 households were surveyed i.e. total 950 households were surveyed. The respondents for the in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion were selected in such a manner so that respondents belonging to various age groups, various income levels, gender, and working women, married women, unmarried women and housewives were included.

### **2.3 Focus Group Discussion**

For conducting the focus group discussion men, women and girls of various age groups and profession were chosen. From each of the chosen areas, men, women (both married and unmarried, housewives and working) and adolescent girls were included in the discussion. A lot of help was rendered by the panchayat pradhans in conducting the discussion. Separate groups were made for conducting the discussion- one comprising of the men, another with women and the third one with the adolescent girls. Each group comprised of about 10 people.

### **2.4 Questionnaire based Survey**

Information was also obtained by conducting questionnaire-based survey and the members of the panchayati raj institutions helped a lot for filling up the questionnaires. The obtained data has been represented with the help of cartographic diagrams.

### **2.5 In-depth Interview**

In-depth interviews of some selected women including housewives, working ladies, married and unmarried woman and some adolescent girls were conducted for representing showing some case studies for a better understanding of the status and condition of mobility of women and the various restrictions that they face in their daily lives for their movement.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

The opinion of the respondents in the context of women's mobility has been taken (Fig.-1). The respondents were asked about their opinion on women's mobility and the opinions has been represented under the categories of Approve, Moderately Approve and Disapprove.

Approve implies that the respondents who approved of women’s free mobility did not attach any criteria related to the free movement of women.

Moderately Approve implied that the respondents approved of women’s mobility based on certain criteria like the woman should complete household works properly before going out, they must return home before sunset, they must not stay out for their own career related needs for a long duration of time, they must inform in detail their outdoor schedule.

Disapprove implied that the respondents felt that women’s mobility might act as a distraction towards her responsibility towards her household works and for unmarried women they felt that it might unnecessarily attract outside attention. Some even cited safety and security as the reason behind their disapproval.

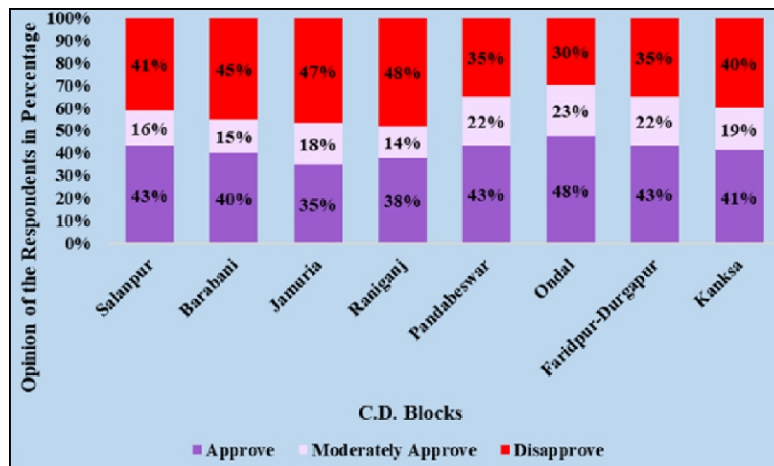
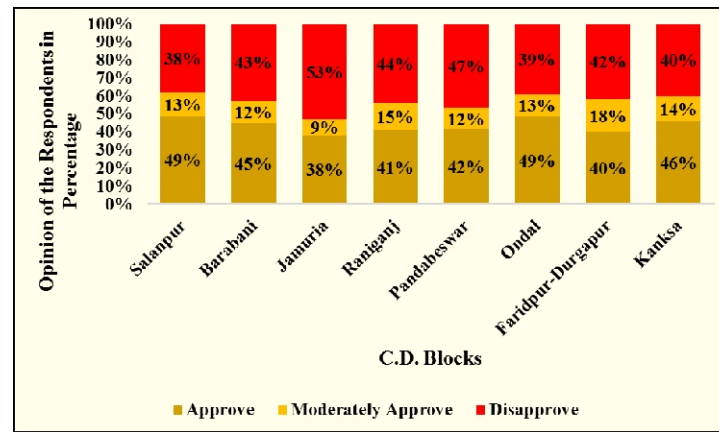


Fig-1 : Opinion of Community Members on Women’s Mobility in the Rural Areas of ADPA, Data Source: Primary Survey

Among the eight C.D. Blocks, only in Jamuria C.D. Block and in Raniganj C.D. Block, the proportion of approval on women’s mobility is below 40% (Fig.-1). In both of these C.D. Blocks, the sex ratio and literacy rates are relatively lower than the other C.D. Blocks. These two parameters play a significant role to a considerable extent in issues related to women empowerment.

During the primary survey while conducting the in-depth interviews it came to our knowledge that many respondents were fine with women working after marriage provided, they did not ignore their household responsibilities. However, some of the respondents were not in favour of married women working till late



**Fig.-2 : Opinion of Community Members on Married Women working for long hours in Rural Areas of ADPA; Data Source : Primary Survey**

hours as they held this viewpoint that women will ignore their household responsibilities. Swapan Bauri, a middle-aged man of Ethora village under Salanpur C.D. Block, moderately approved of married women working for long hours and opined that he feels that as long as a married woman fulfils all the household needs and her responsibilities towards the family properly there should be no problems in letting her work. Moreover, the woman will also contribute towards the family expenditure if she also works. He said that he owns a small grocery shop, the income generated from there is not sufficient for his family of six which comprises of his wife, two children and his old parents. Hence it is actually necessary for his wife to work in order to share the financial responsibilities of the family. His wife works as a household help in Asansol. Before she leaves for her work she completes all the household chores and upon returning she does the rest of the work, hence it is not possible for her to work for long hours at a stretch. On being asked if he helps her in doing the household works, his prompt reply was that household works are meant for women and not for men. It also came to light that his daughter helps her mother with the household chores and she also does some work before going to school but his son does not do any of the household works.

A perception analysis of the opinion of the respondents of the study area regarding their status of approval on various aspects related to mobility and independence of women. The parameters that were taken were access to health care facilities where the respondents were asked whether they totally approved of women

going out to access health care facilities for their health issues that were not only limited to child birth. The other parameter that was taken into consideration was going out for sanitation as in the rural areas people often do not have toilets attached to their homes. The parameter going out for household work comprised of going out for daily grocery shopping, accompanying children to educational institutions, fetching drinking water and such works. The status of approval of the community members on the women going out for their career needs included their going out for education or for their own jobs. Lastly, the parameter recreation comprised going out for a movie, visiting friend's home, morning/evening walk, going to a fair etc.



Fig.-3 : Perception Chart of the Study Area, Data Source : Primary Survey

In all the centres of the study area, almost 95% of the respondents completely disapproved of sanitation outside (Fig.-3 & 4). In course of the survey, it also appeared from the responses of the respondents that most of them were aware of the unhygienic aspects that are associated with outdoor sanitation and many of them also stated that they have received governmental aids for constructing their toilets. As far as access to health care facilities is concerned it has been noted that in all the C.D. Blocks more than 50% of the respondents have expressed their complete approval in this context as well (Fig.-3 & 4). During the in-depth interview, Nimita Maity, a 55-year-old woman living in Gobindapur village in Pandabeswar C.D. Block expressed for basic health care needs the women of the



villages usually go to the local primary health centre accompanied by any of the family members. She lives with her husband, two daughter-in-laws and sons. She got her daughter married as soon as she attained the legal age of marriage and did not continue her higher education as she felt the hidden societal pressure of getting her daughter married. She and her husband, approves their both of the daughter-in-laws to go out as they are part of a self help group only after they have finished their household responsibilities. Usually, both the daughter-in-laws on alternate days go out to fetch the drinking water.

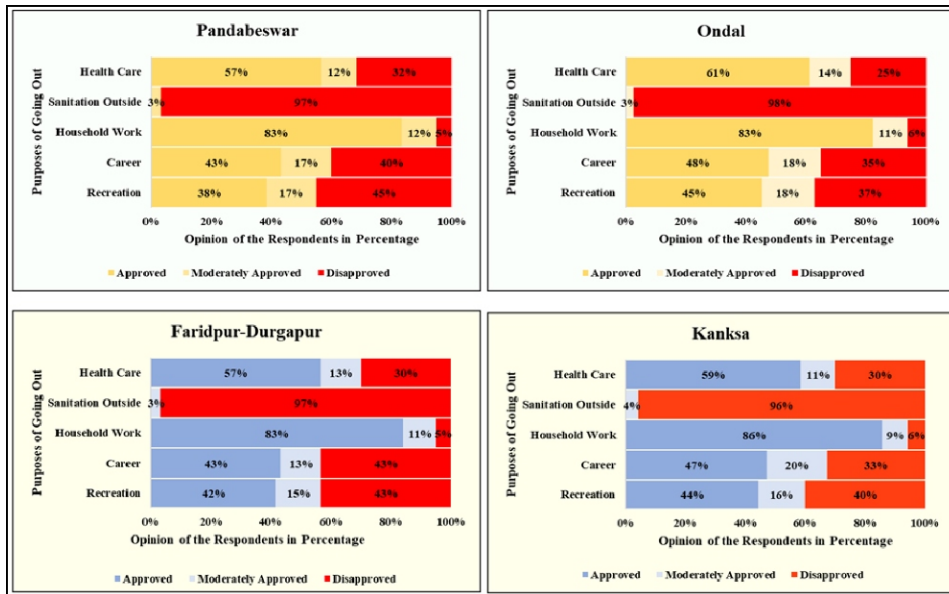


Fig.-4 : Perception Chart of the Study Area, Data Source : Primary Survey

As far as women going out for household needs were concerned, the respondents approved it as many outdoor household works such as going out to fetch drinking water or washing clothes and utensils in nearby ponds were to be done by women. Most of the respondents including women also considered that household works are to be done by women only.

However, it seemed that the respondents attached less significance to a considerable extent on the necessity of women going out for recreation. The approvals that came for women going out for recreation mainly meant letting women go out to visit their parent’s homes in case of married women and for unmarried girls recreation was mainly confined to going out of their house to neighbour’s house or meeting other girls within the close proximity of their house.

The perception of the respondents on various categories of women going out alone were also taken. Women were categorized as adolescent girls, married women and old women. The status of approval on the various categories of women going out alone shows that throughout the study area, majority of the respondents approved of old women going out alone (Fig 5 & 6). Majority of the respondents approved of old women going out alone because they held the viewpoint that the going out of homes of old women implied that they mainly stayed within their village and in close proximity of their houses. Moreover, the family members did not attach much importance on imposing restrictions on old women going out alone as they were not scared of the judgemental mindset of the society. Those who disapproved of old women going out alone were mainly concerned about the health issues of the old women as going out alone may not be safe in case the old woman feels sick due to old age-related health issues.

As far as going out alone of married women and adolescent girls are concerned it came to light in both the cases the main cause of disapproval came citing safety and security. However, the judgemental views of the society seemed to play a more important role in creating restrictions of outdoor movement of adolescent girls to a greater extent than the married women. The families of the adolescent girls were of the opinion that if they allow their young

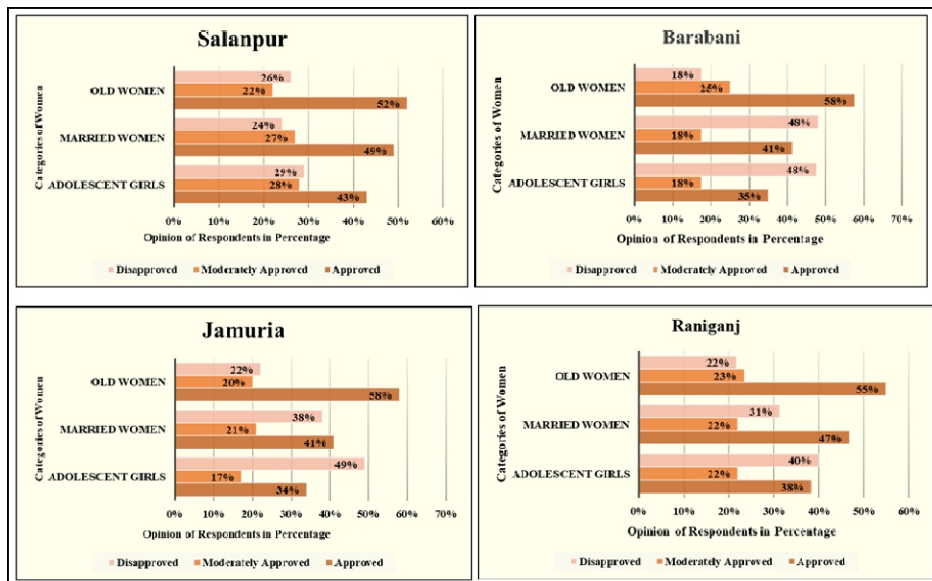


Fig.-5 : Perception of Community on Various Categories of women going out alone in the Study Area, Data Source : Primary Survey

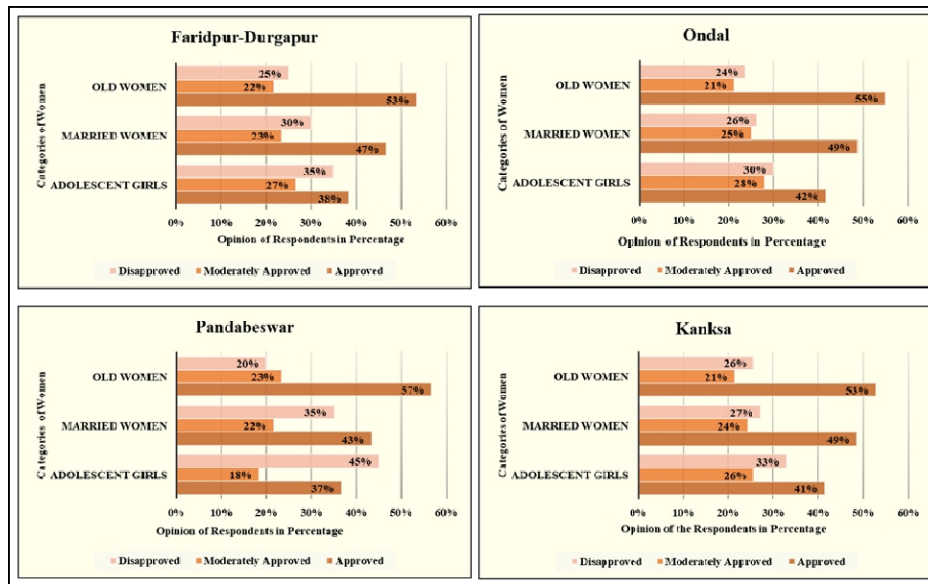


Fig.-6 : Perception of Community on Various Categories of women going out unaccompanied by Men in the Study Area, Data

Source : Primary Survey

girls to go out alone then it may bring dishonour to the family and they might also face problems in getting the girl married. Most of the respondents were not in favour of girls and married woman going out alone after sunset citing safety and security concerns. A significant proportion of disapproval came for married women as the respondents cited that married women suffer from time poverty and hence they disapproved of married women's going out and not only their going out alone.

### 3-1 Case Studies

In order to understand the status of women's mobility in the study area, some of the in-depth interviews are presented here as case studies. The in-depth interviews of a variety of respondents are presented here in order to get a diverse view of the mentality of all members of the society irrespective of age, gender, working status etc.

Sri Laxmi Bauri aged 36 years is a daily labour. He lives in Barabani village in Barabani C.D. Block. His family comprises of his parents, two children and wife. His daughter studies in standard 7 and his son in standard 4. He got his daughter enrolled in a nearby government school. He opined that household chores are sole responsibilities of a woman and hence he said that from a young age

only a girl should learn all the household works. So, his daughter is made to perform some household works before she could go for her school. Moreover, he furthered said he is providing his daughter with basic education as that will help in getting a good groom for her. Respondents like Laxmi Bauri approved of mobility of women when the aim of the outdoor movement of women meant going out for various household chores like washing clothes in the nearby pond or fetching drinking water. However, going out for their own needs like going out to work or going out for their own career needs were not quite approved by these kinds of respondents. However, some respondents like Subrata Saha who by profession is a carpenter living in Gaidhoba Village in Ondal C.D. Block holds a different mentality. He lives with his parents, wife, two daughters and a son. He always wanted to impart education to all his children. But he was compelled to get his elder daughter married off when she attained her legal age of marriage due to financial crisis and during her education days there were hardly any scholarships meant for girl child. But due to the availability of various scholarships from both the central and state government he is able to continue education of his younger daughter and his son. His daughter even got a cycle from the government under a scheme meant for which has eased her communication to the school. She studies in final year of school. He wants his daughter to become independent and to achieve that education is the only way he opined. As far as her outdoor mobility is concerned, he does not impose any restriction on her movement but only he does not allow her to stay outside post sunset due to safety and security concerns. However, he also stated that free mobility of woman is to a certain extent governed by the judgemental views of the society as the parents like Subrata Saha are gripped by the fear of facing difficulties in getting their girls married.

Padma Bauri aged 25 years lives in Ethora Village of Salanpur C.D. Block. She got married when she got attained 20 years of age as her father's financial condition was not sufficient enough to bear her expenses. She lives with her in-laws and her husband. She said that she completed her higher secondary education after which her family did not allow her to study further as the higher education institution is located at a distance from her father's home. However, her in-laws family is very supportive as they have allowed her to work so that she could earn some money for herself. She works with a local self help group where she goes everyday in the afternoon. Her

husband helps her in fetching the drinking water for their family. The household chores are shared between her and her mother-in-law but she tried to do most of the household works as she is gripped by the notion that in order to become a 'good daughter-in-law' she has to prove herself proficient in household works. As far as daily mobility is concerned, she stated that within the village she moves alone but while going to places that are far away from her home her husband accompanies her citing safety concerns.

#### **4. Major Findings**

In the rural areas, it seems that most of the people attach a lot of importance to the opinion of the society when it comes to taking decisions regarding the women of the families. As free mobility is to a certain essential for getting access to some of the basic services like education, health care etc. hence mobility of women has an important role to play to a considerable extent for liberation and empowerment of women. But often, free outdoor movement of women is met with certain restrictions specially in the rural areas. In the rural areas of ADPA, it has been noted that during the in-depth interviews many respondents stated that they are bound to attach importance to the mindset and view points of the society as even these days also women are considered as the flagbearers of the honour of the family. Hence, those women who have to stay outside for late hours or have to travel long distances for their career needs are often stigmatized by the society as 'unwise' and specially for unmarried girls the families are more gripped by this fear as they are gripped by the fear that they might face difficulties in getting their daughters married. So, from this fear many often do not let their daughters go out to pursue higher education if that requires them to travel to a long distance.

It has been observed that as far as mobility of the old women is concerned there is hardly any restriction on their free movement. The primary cause of restriction of any kind has been concerns over health issues. For married women also the movement within the close proximity of the house hardly meets with any restriction. Most of the married women are allowed to go out for their own career related works only after they have finished doing all their household responsibilities. But it has been noted during the survey that most of the women suffer from time poverty specially those who work hence, women cannot afford to undertake journeys that required lot of time

to reach the destination so mostly they have confined their works to the local Self-Help Groups. The adolescent girls face most of the restrictions in their outdoor movement as they most of the families are concerned about their safety and also about the judgement of the society.

During the survey, it has been noted that the various governmental schemes meant specially for the upliftment of women and girls plays a considerable role in empowering women. Many of the families even admitted that the governmental schemes have helped them in the continuing the higher studies of their daughters.

## **5. Suggestions**

In the rural areas of ADPA, it has been noted that decisions related to outdoor activities of women are largely governed by the mindset of the society. Hence, a liberal society will play a positive role in elevating the status of women and in improving the mobility of women. Widescale awareness programmes in compliance with the governmental rules and regulations might be beneficial for broadening the mindset of the community members. They must be made aware of the necessity of free mobility of women as it is extremely important for empowering women through providing them with access to basic amenities essential for upliftment of condition of women. Apart from this the level of safety and security for women should be improved so that the families do not feel scared in letting the female members go out alone.

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