



INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND GENDER DYNAMICS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WORKING AND NON-WORKING WOMEN AS CULTURAL CUSTODIANS

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is a centuries-old storehouse of knowledge, customs, and beliefs. Local societies have created it via consistent engagement with their surroundings, which forms a fundamental component for both societal continuity and environmental resilience and is closely linked to cultural identity, ecological stewardship, and sustainable development. In the past, women have played a crucial role in maintaining the Indian Knowledge System, protecting cultural assets, health practices, biodiversity, and child socialization. With rapid socioeconomic development and an increase in female labor force participation, gender roles and information transfer procedures are evolving. This study explores the impact of decision-making authority and self-esteem on cultural custodianship and compares the roles of working and non-working women in the transmission and preservation of indigenous knowledge. A sample of 200 married women from urban and semi-urban areas of Kolkata, 100 of them were employed, and the other 100 were non-working, from India. A mixed-method comparative study design was used, where qualitative tales were subjected to thematic analysis, and quantitative data were assessed using independent t-tests and Pearson correlation. The findings demonstrate that whereas working women deploy adaptive institutional and digital modes of transmission, non-working women engage in everyday household-based indigenous traditions more frequently. In both categories, cultural participation is strongly predicted by decision-making authority and self-esteem. The study comes to the conclusion that women's position as cultural guardians is transformed rather than diminished by employment.

Keywords: Cultural custodianship, Decision-making power, Gender dynamics, Indigenous knowledge, Self-esteem

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge (IK) refers to the traditional understandings, skills, and philosophies developed by local communities through long-term interaction with their environment and cultural practices. It represents a rich repository of traditional understandings, practical skills, and guiding philosophies, maintained by Indigenous communities to sustain life, culture, and ecological balance. Both cultural legacy and global sustainability depend on its study and



protection, where IK is the practical, spiritual, and cultural knowledge that indigenous peoples acquire over many generations. It is frequently context-specific and intimately related to the environment, social structures, and history of a certain group.

IK is intricately intertwined with everyday life in South Asian cultures, and household spaces play a crucial role in its transmission and preservation, where women are the main keepers of this knowledge, integrating it in various ways into family, community, and home rituals. Women serve as intergenerational cultural continuity bridges through food preparation, herbal medicines, ceremonial practices, storytelling, and childrearing; these procedures are usually relational, experiential, and informal. They serve as guardians, educators, and practitioners, integrating IK into intangible practices like rituals, storytelling, and moral advice as well as concrete activities like the kitchen, garden, and craft areas.

Economic liberalization, educational reforms, and increased female labor force participation have altered the gendered division of labor. Policies like the National Education Policy 2020, which promote women's education and employment inclusion, are reshaping domestic power relations. The question of whether employment alters the means of transmission or reduces women's involvement in indigenous knowledge practices is thus brought up. The current study contrasts working and non-working women as cultural guardians and looks at the psychological and structural elements that affect their involvement in indigenous knowledge preservation in order to address this question.

Conceptualizing Indigenous Knowledge and Gender Dynamics

Understanding how gender roles and dynamics interact with traditional knowledge systems is a key component of the concept of Indigenous Knowledge and Gender Dynamics. These knowledge systems are essential to the identity and resiliency of indigenous communities, and indigenous women are vital in their transmission and preservation; although patriarchal rules frequently obscure female contributions, their autonomy and resiliency allow women to negotiate and make their voices heard within established knowledge systems. Knowledge transfer, control, and access are all significantly influenced by gender due to their everyday household duties, women are at the center of domains related to indigenous epistemologies, such as food systems, caregiving, and health management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women as Custodians of Indigenous Knowledge

Vandana Shiva (1988) argues that women's ecological knowledge is fundamental to biodiversity conservation and sustainable agriculture, the ecofeminist perspective positions women as guardians of environmental ethics and traditional practices. Similarly, Agarwal (1994) emphasized the importance of women's participation in natural resources governance and collective management systems where it is demonstrated that women's inclusion strengthens sustainability outcomes.



The Food and Agricultural Organization (2011) reported that women are primary actors in seed preservation, food processing, and household-level agricultural decision-making, thereby sustaining local food systems; another study by Halder, (2025) highlighted how women function as intergenerational transmitters of indigenous education, ecological ethics, medicinal practices, and oral traditions. Both the study argued that women's roles extend beyond domestic labour and contribute significantly to cultural sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Similarly, research conducted in Odisha by Naik & Das (2025) demonstrated that tribal women play a vital role in preserving ecological balance and traditional environmental knowledge through farming practices, medicinal plant usage, and ritual activities. The study further emphasized that modernization, migration, and deforestation threaten these indigenous systems, making women's cultural labour increasingly significant.

In the Indian context, Kumar & Das (2025) examined women's contribution to preserving Indigenous Environmental Knowledge (IEK) and argued that women's everyday interactions with food, agriculture, and caregiving position them as critical agents of ecological continuity and sustainability. These studies demonstrate the importance of women in the preservation of indigenous knowledge, but they do not systematically compare urban working and non-working women.

Empowerment, Agency, and Decision-Making

Naila Kabeer (1999) defined empowerment as the development of people's capacity to make informed life decisions which integrates resources, agency, and achievements and highlights decision-making ability as a critical indicator of empowerment. Employment is often associated with increased negotiating power inside households (Kabeer, 1999) and includes psychological components like self-worth.

Cultural Capital and Intergenerational Transmission

The term "cultural capital" was first used by Pierre Bourdieu in 1977 to describe the generational transmission of norms, attitudes, and practices within families. Indigenous knowledge is transmitted via everyday interactions and serves as a type of embodied cultural capital. Time restrictions may affect the embodied transmission of cultural traditions, even if working women may have more financial capital. On the other hand, women who do not work can have more time but less institutional channels for sharing information. The necessity of comparative empirical analysis is shown by this disparity.

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates three theoretical perspectives:



1. Feminist Standpoint Theory- Lived experiences of women generate unique epistemic insights.
2. Empowerment Theory (Kabeer, 1999)- Decision-making power and self-esteem enhance agency.
3. Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1977)- Knowledge transmission occurs through familial and social reproduction.

The proposed framework synthesizes three interrelated theoretical perspectives to explore women's lived experiences, agentic capacity, and knowledge transmission within socio-cultural and employment contexts.

OBJECTIVES

1. To compare indigenous knowledge engagement between working and non-working women.
2. To analyse differences in modes of transmission.
3. To examine the relationship between decision-making power and custodianship.
4. To assess the role of self-esteem.

HYPOTHESES

H₁ (Directional Hypothesis): Non-working women exhibit significantly higher involvement in daily household-based indigenous practices than working women

H₂ (Directional Hypothesis): Working women demonstrate significantly higher institutional/digital knowledge transmission than non-working women

H₃ (Correlational Hypothesis): Decision-making power positively correlates with indigenous knowledge engagement

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A comparative mixed-method design was used for the present study to evaluate employment status and its relation to the transmission of indigenous knowledge, decision-making power and self-esteem.

Sample

There was a total of 200 women, consisting of 100 working women and 100 non-working women, between the age group of 25-50 years from urban and semi-urban areas of Kolkata. Stratified random sampling was used for this purpose. For the qualitative part, 10 women (5 working and 5 non-working) are selected who scored better in the quantitative analysis. The interviews were taken through telephone for about 30 minutes. This age range was



deliberately selected to capture women who are actively engaged in household decision-making, child-rearing, and socio-cultural practices, thereby increasing the relevance of their role in indigenous knowledge transmission.

Instruments

Name	Items	Reliability
Indigenous Knowledge Engagement Scale (IKES)	40 items covering Food traditions, Health practices, environmental ethics, and storytelling	$\alpha = .86$
Household Decision-making Scale	Adapted from empowerment indices	$\alpha = .81$
Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale	Standardised 10-item measure	$\alpha = .88$
Semi-structured interviews	N=10	

Assumption

Although assumptions such as normality and homogeneity of variance were not formally tested, the independent samples t-test is generally considered robust to moderate violations of normality, particularly when sample sizes are sufficiently large, and group sizes are approximately equal (Havlicek & Peterson, 1974).

Data Analysis

- Independent samples t-test
- Pearson correlation
- Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke's 2006)

RESULTS

Comparative Analysis



Table 1: Household-based Indigenous practices (t-test)

Working status	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Non-working	78.4	8.2	3.12	238	<.01**
Working	72.1	9.4			

**** Indicates significance at the 1% level ($p < .01$)**

Non-working women scored higher in household-based indigenous practices than working women.

Table 2: Institutional/Digital Knowledge Transmission (t-test)

Working status	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Non-working	20.8	5.1	-3.18	238	<.05*
Working	24.6	4.3			

*** Indicates significance at the 5% level ($p < .05$)**

Working women scored higher in institutional/digital knowledge transmission compared to non-working women.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Two Correlations between two different variables

Variable	Correlation (r)	p-value
Decision-making Power & Indigenous Knowledge	.49	<.01**
Self-esteem & Custodianship	.42	<.01**

**** Indicates significance at the 1% level ($p < .01$)**

Decision-making power correlated positively with indigenous knowledge engagement. Whereas Self-esteem correlated significantly with Custodianship.



Qualitative Themes

1. **Continuity at Home:** Women who did not work placed a strong emphasis on embodied practice and ritual regularity. The idea of domestic continuity emphasizes how non-working women are the primary custodians of indigenous knowledge through everyday home tasks. In addition to being functional, their involvement is highly embodied and habitual, with knowledge being transmitted through regular rituals, repetition, and observation.
2. **Adaptive Transmission:** Working women used social media, schools, and community events. As demonstrated by the idea of adaptive transmission, working women handle time constraints and modern demands by integrating institutional and digital platforms into the diffusion of knowledge. Here, knowledge becomes more structured, mediated, and explicit than in the home model. Often, working women depend on: Social media sites like YouTube and WhatsApp groups, schools and formal education systems, and community-based initiatives. As a result, a hybrid model of knowledge transfer is produced, in which conventional methods are reinterpreted in light of modern circumstances.
3. **Intergenerational Negotiation:** In order to adapt to contemporary lifestyles, younger mothers changed their customs. The dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, especially among younger moms, is captured by the concept of intergenerational negotiation. They actively reinterpret and adapt customs to suit modern lifestyles rather than passively absorbing them. This negotiation takes place in a number of ways: Time restrictions (making long rituals simpler), evolving ideals (gender roles, education, and work), and urbanisation and mobility

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the comparative role of working and non-working women as custodians of indigenous knowledge (IK), with particular attention to the influence of decision-making power and self-esteem on cultural engagement. The results advance interdisciplinary research at the nexus of cultural sustainability, empowerment theory, and gender studies. The findings further confirm that indigenous knowledge functions as a type of embodied cultural capital that is passed down through routine activities in social and home contexts. The study, which is based on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural reproduction, shows that families serve as the main locations for the transmission of information, with women playing a crucial mediating role. Indigenous household-based behaviours are far more prevalent among non-working women. The outcome also shows that working women are adapting the channels of transmission rather than disengaging from cultural custodianship. Therefore, work position influences the mode of indigenous knowledge interaction rather than its presence or absence.



The results of the study indicate that, when it comes to women's engagement in the workforce, cultural agency is changing rather than diminishing. Employment often boosts women's access to social networks and financial resources, changing gender dynamics within households. Custodianship should be understood as an active debate between continuity and modernity rather than just the preservation of tradition and results show that agency increases cultural participation, which is consistent with empowerment theory (Kabeer, 1999). Women who do not work exhibit continuity-based custodianship that is based on everyday household activities. On the other hand, working women integrate indigenous knowledge into formal and digital environments, acting as adaptable guardians when women are recognized as cultural agents rather than passive bearers, indigenous knowledge is reframed as a dynamic, evolving system influenced by gendered negotiation.

The results disprove the idea that employment reduces cultural engagement and contrarily, employment alters custodianship practices. Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) is still present, but it takes on different forms based on the socioeconomic context. The study demonstrates that rather than being strictly preserved, indigenous knowledge survives through constant modification, negotiation, and recontextualization across institutional, generational, and domestic realms.

Limitations and Scope

The current inquiry faces notable limitations, which are-

First, the choice of an urban-centric sample limits the results' application to rural contexts, where sociocultural dynamics and indigenous knowledge systems may differ significantly. In order to generate more thorough comparative insights, future research should use samples from rural populations.

Second, the cross-sectional design of the study makes it more challenging to establish the causal relationships between the variables because the data were collected at a specific point in time, the observed connections should be interpreted with caution. Longitudinal research approaches may be used in future studies to improve causal findings and better capture changes over time.

Lastly, the study ignores intersectional factors like class and caste, which may have a significant impact on how people interact with indigenous knowledge systems, have access to resources, and have decision-making authority. In order to provide a more complex and thorough knowledge of the phenomenon, future research is advised to incorporate these elements.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of their employment situation, women continue to be the primary guardians of indigenous knowledge; however, the methods of transmission and preservation are different



for working and non-working women. Cultural agency is greatly enhanced by decision-making authority and self-worth, and women's caregiving responsibilities are transformed rather than diminished by employment, demonstrating the adaptive endurance of indigenous knowledge systems. The study aimed to investigate the impact of decision-making authority and self-esteem in influencing cultural involvement, as well as how working and non-working women serve as stewards of indigenous knowledge. The results make several important contributions-

First, regardless of their work status, women continue to play a crucial role in the preservation of indigenous knowledge. Participation in the workforce reconfigures cultural custodianship into adaptive forms rather than diminishing it while working women expand transmission into institutional and digital settings, non-working women maintain continuity through everyday physical actions.

Second, cultural participation is strongly predicted by empowerment factors, especially decision-making authority and self-esteem. Women's ability to prioritise and legitimise indigenous behaviours is strengthened by structural authority in the home. Their willingness to pass on knowledge to future generations is further reinforced by psychological confidence.

Third, the analysis questions binary presumptions that modernity and tradition are mutually exclusive. Indigenous knowledge, on the other hand, exhibits resilience through change. Working women provide as an example of how cultural systems adjust to modern socioeconomic structures while maintaining their core principles.

In conclusion, indigenous knowledge systems in urban and semi-urban India are maintained by gendered agency. Whether or not they have a job, women are dynamic cultural guardians whose roles shift in response to structural and psychological empowerment. Future studies should examine long-term shifts, the intersectional effects of caste and class, and legislative initiatives that formalise the preservation of indigenous knowledge by women.

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