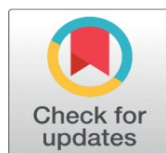
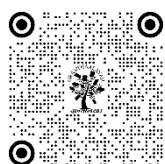


EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THE HANDICRAFT INDUSTRY OF ASSAM AND THEIR ROLE IN PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Luna Boruah ¹, Dr Vivek Kumar Pathak ²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Management, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai, India

² Associate Professor, Department of Management, Arunachal University of Studies, Namsai, India



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ABSTRACT

This study looked at how women entrepreneurs in Assam's handicraft sector are empowered and how they contribute to sustainable development. A descriptive and exploratory study design was used to gather information from 150 female entrepreneurs in chosen districts via focus groups, interviews, and structured questionnaires. The results showed that most respondents felt more economically and socially empowered, as shown by higher incomes, more freedom to make their own decisions, and greater involvement in financial affairs. Additionally, a lot of business owners embraced eco-friendly methods including recycling waste and using locally sourced, eco-friendly products. Although the findings showed a clear connection between sustainability and women's empowerment, the study also noted some important drawbacks, such as limited social mobility and insufficient access to formal training. These observations underscore the necessity of focused policy assistance and capacity-building initiatives to enhance the contribution of female entrepreneurs to attaining equitable and sustainable growth in the handicraft industry of Assam.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurs, Handicraft Industry, Assam, Empowerment, Sustainable Development, Eco-friendly Practices, Social Inclusion, Local Economy, Capacity Building



1. INTRODUCTION

In India, women's empowerment has become a key factor in inclusive growth and sustainable development, especially in the traditional and rural sectors. Women entrepreneurs are increasingly involved in the handicraft sector in Assam, a state renowned for its rich cultural legacy and traditional crafts. In addition to preserving ancient crafts like weaving, bamboo carving, and ceramics, these women have made them profitable ventures. Increased household incomes, better decision-making abilities, and increased social mobility—all important markers of empowerment—have resulted from their active participation.

In addition to financial benefits, women business owners in Assam's handicraft industry have embraced sustainable practices that support resource conservation and environmental preservation, such as using natural dyes, locally sourced raw materials, and eco-friendly production techniques. Through encouraging intergenerational knowledge transfer, community-based economies, and ethical production, their work supports the larger objectives of sustainable development. Notwithstanding these encouraging advancements, women still confront several obstacles in the areas of training, financial literacy, market access, and societal restrictions

This study examined the role that women entrepreneurs play in promoting sustainable development in their communities and evaluated the degree of empowerment among these women entrepreneurs in Assam's handicraft sector. In order to emphasize their accomplishments and the systemic support needed to further increase their effect, the research examined their socioeconomic condition, business practices, and sustainability initiatives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Agarwal (2018)** investigated how entrepreneurship may support women's empowerment in India's northeastern states. The study emphasized that, especially in historically male-dominated nations, women's financial independence and decision-making skills were much enhanced by their entrepreneurial endeavors. Additionally, it demonstrated how women-led microbusinesses in the agriculture and handicrafts sectors boosted local economies and promoted inclusive community development.
- **Agarwal and Lenka (2016)** used a few chosen case studies to perform an exploratory study on the growth of women entrepreneurs in India. Their results demonstrated the value of self-help groups, institutional assistance, and education in fostering women's entrepreneurial goals. Nevertheless, they also highlighted enduring obstacles that prevented women from reaching their full potential as business owners, including limited financial availability, insufficient training, and cultural norms.
- **Barooah, Baruah, and Changmai (2009)** emphasized women small-scale tea growers in Assam in particular, portraying their involvement as a means of achieving empowerment. The study highlighted how rural women were able to defy gender norms and take charge of their resources and livelihoods by participating in income-generating activities like growing tea. It emphasized how women's transition from unpaid work to active production changed the gender dynamics in households and communities.
- **Begum (2020)** examined the potential and difficulties of using entrepreneurship to empower people, as well as the role that social entrepreneurship plays in rural development. The study made the case that although social entrepreneurship could provide durable solutions to local problems, rural women frequently lacked the networks, mentorship, and institutional support necessary to be successful in such endeavors. These restrictions were more noticeable in less developed areas.
- **Chitsike (2000)** in a broader international context, analyzed how cultural norms acted as barriers to rural women's entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe. Her research showed that patriarchal structures, limited property rights, and gender-biased perceptions often hindered women's ability to start and sustain businesses. Although the geographic focus was different, the cultural constraints observed paralleled those in parts of rural India, including Assam.

3. MATERIALS AND METHOD

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

A descriptive and exploratory research design was used in the study. This method worked well for analyzing the level of empowerment of women entrepreneurs in Assam's handicraft industry since it made it possible to describe current trends in depth and investigate the underlying connections between sustainable development and empowerment. To represent the complex character of women's experiences and contributions, both qualitative and quantitative indicators were used.

3.2. STUDY AREA

Four Assamese districts—Kamrup, Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Barpeta—were chosen for the study. Because of their strong handicraft traditions and the active participation of women in this industry, these districts were specifically selected. The regions provided a thorough understanding of the socioeconomic and cultural variety impacting women's entrepreneurship in the area, since they represented both urban and rural environments.

3.3. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The study's population comprised female entrepreneurs who produced and sold handicrafts in the designated districts. To guarantee the inclusion of a varied group of women, including those connected to cooperatives, self-help groups (SHGs), and independently operated businesses, a purposive sample technique was used. In order to produce a representative and statistically significant dataset, 150 respondents in total were chosen.

3.4. DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The study utilized multiple data collection methods to ensure a holistic understanding of the research problem.

- Structured questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data related to income, decision-making power, market access, sustainability practices, and business operations.
- In-depth interviews were conducted with selected respondents to gain deeper insights into their empowerment journeys, personal experiences, challenges, and the practices they adopted to promote sustainability.
- Additionally, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held in collaboration with local NGOs to explore the collective experiences and community-level impact of women entrepreneurs in the handicraft industry.

3.5. RESEARCH VARIABLES

The study examined a range of independent and dependent variables to assess the dimensions of empowerment and sustainability.

- **Independent variables included:** education level, training received, years of experience, type of enterprise, and access to financial resources.
- Dependent variables comprised indicators of economic empowerment (such as income generation and savings), social empowerment (including decision-making ability and mobility), and environmental practices (like use of eco-friendly materials and waste management), all of which collectively contributed to sustainable development.

3.6. TOOLS FOR DATA ANALYSIS

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyze the gathered data. The quantitative responses were summarized using descriptive statistics like means, percentages, and frequencies. Furthermore, correlation analysis and chi-square tests were used to investigate the statistical connections between sustainable development indicators and empowerment characteristics. Thematic analysis was used to find recurrent themes, perspectives, and insights about women's roles in the handicraft sector and their sustainability initiatives in qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

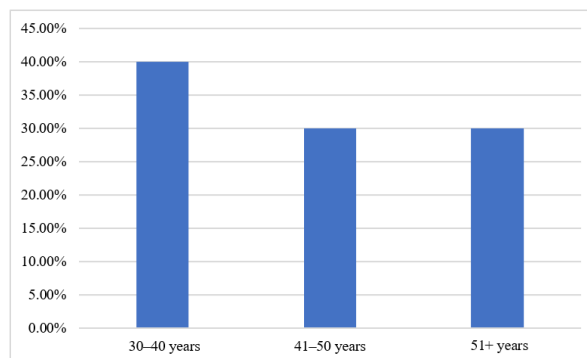
The study's conclusions provided important new information about the situation of women entrepreneurs in Assam's handicraft sector, emphasizing their degrees of empowerment and environmentally friendly business practices. The information gathered from 150 female business owners was examined to comprehend the difficulties encountered, environmental influences, and socioeconomic changes. With the help of pertinent tables and descriptive statistics and thematic patterns, this section shows and evaluates the results.

4.1. SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Most respondents were found to be within the age group of 30–50 years and had completed at least primary education. A significant portion of the women had over 5 years of experience in the handicraft business.

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
30–40 years	60	40.0%
41–50 years	45	30.0%
51+ years	45	30.0%
Total (Age)	150	100.0%

Figure 1**Figure 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents**

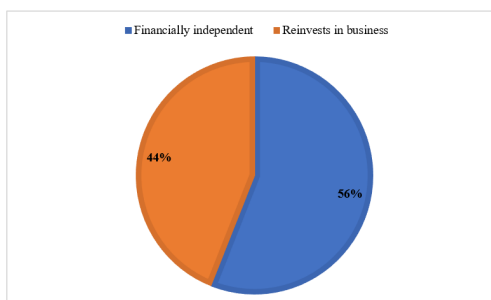
According to the respondents' demographic profile, the majority of women entrepreneurs in Assam's handicraft sector were middle-aged, with 40% of them being between the ages of 30 and 40. This implies that a sizable percentage of women started their own businesses when they were at the height of their economic activity. Furthermore, 30% of responses were between the ages of 41 and 50, and another 30% were over 50, indicating that older women have been actively involved in the industry. The even distribution of ages demonstrates the cross-generational participation in the handicraft sector, indicating that both mid-career and seasoned women were essential to the preservation and advancement of traditional crafts in their local communities.

4.2. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT INDICATORS

Economic empowerment was evaluated based on income generation, financial independence, and reinvestment capability.

Table 2 Financial Practices of Respondents

Financial Indicator	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Financially independent	84	56.0%
Reinvests in business	66	44.0%
Total	150	100.0%

Figure 2**Figure 2 Financial Practices of Respondents**

Over half of the respondents had control over their income and financial decisions, according to Table 2's data, which shows that the majority of women entrepreneurs (56%) in Assam's handicraft sector identified as financially independent. Furthermore, 44% of respondents said they reinvested their profits back into their companies, indicating a strong desire to maintain and grow their company endeavors. Long-term economic stability and company expansion depend on this reinvestment pattern. When taken as a whole, these factors imply that women in this field were not only making money but also engaging in wise financial practices, which strengthened their economic independence and promoted sustainable community development.

4.3. SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT AND DECISION-MAKING

The study evaluated women's involvement in household and business decisions as indicators of social empowerment.

Table 3 Social Empowerment Indicators

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Takes independent business decisions	45	30.0%
Participates in household financial decisions	39	26.0%
Has mobility without permission	36	24.0%
Participates in local entrepreneur networks	30	20.0%
Total	150	100.0%

Figure 3

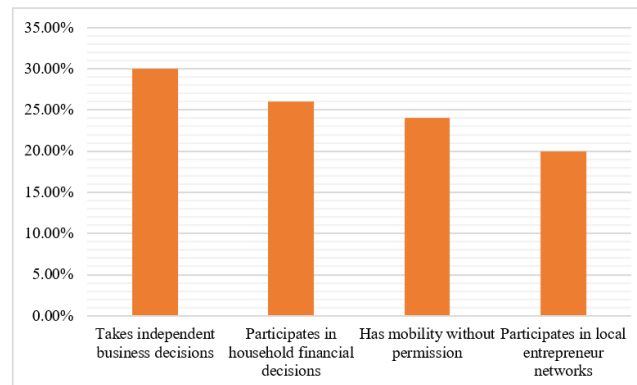


Figure 3 Social Empowerment Indicators

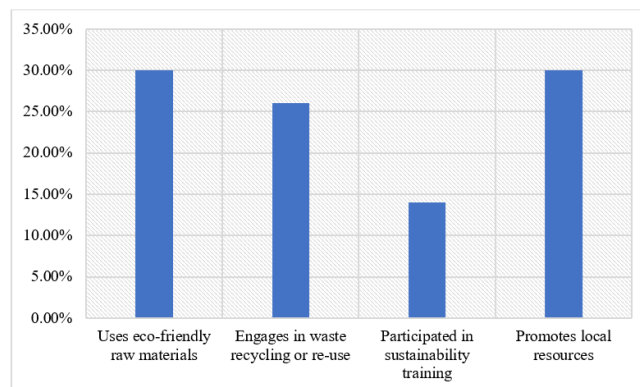
The table's corrected data show that women entrepreneurs in Assam's handicraft industry have differing degrees of social empowerment. A considerable trend toward independence and control over business operations is indicated by the fact that almost 30% of respondents said they made independent business decisions. Furthermore, 26% actively participated in financial decisions made by the household, indicating an increase in home influence. However, just 20% were part of entrepreneurial networks and only 24% had unfettered movement, indicating persistent sociocultural barriers. These results imply that although many women were becoming more independent in their work-related positions, there was still a lack of wider social empowerment, particularly with regard to mobility and community involvement, which necessitated focused intervention.

4.4. SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN BUSINESS

Respondents were asked about their environmental awareness and sustainability-driven practices in production and sales.

Table 4 Sustainability Practices Adopted

Practice Adopted	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Uses eco-friendly raw materials	45	30.0%
Engages in waste recycling or re-use	39	26.0%
Participated in sustainability training	21	14.0%
Promotes local resources	45	30.0%
Total	150	100.0%

Figure 4**Figure 4 Sustainability Practices Adopted**

Most women entrepreneurs promoted the use of local and eco-friendly materials, indicating strong alignment with sustainable development goals. However, only a limited number had access to formal training on sustainability, pointing to a gap in capacity building.

5. CONCLUSION

According to the aforementioned study, women entrepreneurs in Assam's handicraft sector significantly contributed to the advancement of sustainable development through their contributions to the economy, society, and environment. The results showed that most of these women were moderately financially independent, actively participated in decision-making, and implemented environmentally friendly business practices. They demonstrated a solid basis for grassroots sustainability through their investing in their businesses, utilization of local resources, and reliance on traditional skills. But the study also identified enduring issues including social mobility barriers and restricted access to formal sustainability training, which call for focused governmental initiatives and support networks in order to fully achieve their developmental and empowering potential.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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