



**SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OF RURAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN
ASSAM: FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship has gradually become an essential livelihood strategy for rural women in India. Women's entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in promoting economic empowerment of women and making our country self-dependence. Assam's rich culture, traditional skills, and predominantly rural population create both opportunities and challenges for women who wish to become entrepreneurs. Rural women entrepreneurs in Assam are contributing significantly to local economies, cultural preservation, and social well-being. The objectives of this study are to explore the key problems faced by rural women entrepreneurs in Assam and examine the underlying gendered, cultural, institutional, and ecological barriers that shape entrepreneurial paths. This paper is descriptive type and based on secondary sources. Secondary data has been collected from academic literature, policy documents, and regional socio-economic analyses related to women's entrepreneurship in Assam.

The study has revealed that entrepreneurial potential of rural women remains underutilised due to gendered socio-cultural norms, inadequate market access, weak institutional support systems, environmental vulnerability, and limited financial and capacity resources. This paper has shown the key problems faced by rural women entrepreneurs in Assam and examines the underlying gendered, cultural, institutional, and ecological barriers that shape entrepreneurial paths.

Key words: Women, Entrepreneurship, Rural, Assam,

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship has gradually become an essential livelihood strategy for rural women in India. Women's entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in promoting economic empowerment of women and making our country self-dependence. Through entrepreneurial activities, women make a major contribution to economic development of the country in terms of job opportunities, GDP growth and poverty reduction, market opportunities, upliftment in skills and empowerment. Assam's rich culture, traditional skills, and predominantly rural population create both opportunities and challenges for women who wish to become entrepreneurs. For generations, rural women in Assam have been deeply involved in productive activities—whether weaving exquisite handloom fabrics on traditional looms, rearing livestock alongside household work, making homemade food products, or running small roadside shops. Yet, despite their immense contribution, their work has often been treated as an “extension” of domestic labour rather than recognised as genuine entrepreneurship (Neog & Kalita, 2020). As a result, many women remain far away from the broader economic narrative.

In recent decades, the growth of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), credit linkages through NRLM and banks, micro-enterprise development schemes and digital financial inclusion have expanded entrepreneurial opportunities for women. However, the transition from informal income-generation to sustainable entrepreneurship remains difficult. Many rural women-owned enterprises in Assam suffer from low capital investment, limited scalability, restricted mobility, and poor access to formal markets and the burden of domestic work. Flood-prone geographies further increase business fragility. Therefore, the question is not merely how to promote women's entrepreneurship, but how to dismantle the structural constraints that keep most rural women-led enterprises at a survival level.

CONCEPT OF EMTERPRENEURSHIP

Entrepreneurship is the process of turning an idea into something real and useful—whether it is a product, a service, or a solution to a problem. At its core, it is about noticing opportunities that others may overlook and having the courage to act on them. An entrepreneur is someone who

imagines a possibility and then works step by step to make it happen, often by taking risks, learning from failures, and adapting to challenges along the way.

Entrepreneurship is not limited to starting a business. It also involves creativity, initiative, and the ability to think differently. Many entrepreneurs begin with small resources but a strong desire to create change whether in their own lives, in their communities, or in the larger economy. What sets them apart is their willingness to take responsibility, make decisions, and keep moving forward even when the path is uncertain.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature emphasises that women's entrepreneurship is influenced not only by individual traits but also by socio-cultural, institutional, and economic structures. Global studies indicate that women entrepreneurs face gender-based discrimination, limited access to credit, and restricted mobility (Brush et al., 2018). In India, rural entrepreneurship is often embedded within patriarchal norms, informal labour markets, and household-based production systems (Tambunan, 2019).

In the North-East, literature notes that women have historically enjoyed relatively better social status compared to some patriarchal northern states, yet face marked challenges in accessing markets, technology, and formal financial services (Goswami, 2021). Assam-based studies show that women entrepreneurs predominantly operate in traditional sectors like handloom, handicrafts, food processing, and livestock (Saikia & Das, 2022). While SHGs have improved financial inclusion and collective agency, the leap from micro-credit to micro-enterprise remains limited due to insufficient training, lack of market exposure, and absence of business development services (Hazarika, 2020).

Several studies document infrastructure barriers, such as transport and electricity, coupled with environmental shocks due to recurring floods that disrupt production cycles and supply chains (Choudhury & Dutta, 2021). However, literature remains fragmented, often focusing on SHGs or credit rather than a comprehensive analysis of the entrepreneurship ecosystem. This study attempts to piece together a more integrated understanding.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyse the complex realities of rural women entrepreneurs in Assam, this paper draws on three interrelated theoretical lenses:

1. Gender and Development (GAD) Perspective:

The GAD framework emphasises how gender relations, division of labour, power dynamics, and social norms shape women's economic participation. Rural Assamese women often carry disproportionate household responsibilities, limiting time and mobility for enterprise development.

2. Capability Approach ():

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach suggests that empowerment must be assessed not only through economic gains but through enhanced freedom, agency, and life choices. Entrepreneurship should enable women to expand their capabilities—yet most remain constrained by structural inequalities, limiting agency.

3. Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory:

This approach challenges the male-centred definition of entrepreneurship and acknowledges contextual barriers that shape women's entrepreneurial identities and performances (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). For Assam, it helps to understand why women-run businesses cluster in low-risk, home-based sectors and rarely scale.

These frameworks collectively enable an understanding of women's entrepreneurship as a gendered, socially embedded process rather than a purely economic activity.

OBJECTIVES

This paper explores the key problems faced by rural women entrepreneurs in Assam and examines the underlying gendered, cultural, institutional, and ecological barriers that shape entrepreneurial paths.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is descriptive type and based on secondary sources. Secondary data has been collected from academic literature, policy documents, and regional socio-economic analyses related to women's entrepreneurship in Assam. Data sources included academic journals, government reports (Ministry of MSME, NRLM and Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission), NABARD, and research studies conducted by universities in Assam.

RESULTS / ANALYSIS

The analysis reveals that the challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs in Assam emerge from the intersection of socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, institutional gaps, and ecological vulnerabilities. These challenges can be categorised into six key dimensions: financial barriers, market and mobility constraints, skills and technology gaps, socio-cultural and gender norms, institutional and policy limitations, and environmental and infrastructural challenges.

➤ *Financial Barriers*

Access to finance continues to be one of the toughest challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs. Although Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance institutions have undoubtedly opened the door for women to access small loans, these amounts often remain too limited to support the growth of their businesses. Many women are able to start an activity—like weaving, livestock rearing, pickle making, or running a small shop—but they struggle to expand beyond this initial stage because the capital they receive is barely enough for survival-level operations.

Formal banks, on the other hand, still feel distant and intimidating. Most rural women are unable to meet the requirements that banks typically demand; such as land deeds for collateral, extensive documentation, or a stable credit history. As a result, even capable and hardworking women are excluded from larger financial opportunities simply because they lack the papers or assets that institutions expect (Saikia & Das, 2022). This “documentation gap” silently pushes them back into dependency on small, repetitive loans.

Another layer of the problem is financial literacy. Many women run their enterprises with tremendous dedication, yet they often do so without adequate knowledge of budgeting, bookkeeping, profit calculation, savings, or reinvestment planning. In the absence of these skills, they may find it difficult to track expenses, negotiate with suppliers, or plan for long-term growth. For example, a woman may earn a steady income from her weaving business but may not know how to calculate her net profits or how much she should reinvest to upgrade her loom or buy raw materials in bulk.

These gaps in knowledge and access create a cycle in which women work hard but remain unable to scale their enterprises, resulting slow growth in business. Essentially, the financial barriers they face are not just about money but they are about confidence, visibility in the financial system, and the institutional support required helping them grow from micro-entrepreneurs to sustainable business owners.

Market and Mobility Constraints

Women entrepreneurs in rural Assam generally operate in home-based environments with limited physical access to markets. Social norms and household responsibilities restrict their ability to travel to urban markets, attend trade fairs or manage supply chains. This reduces market exposure and price negotiation capacity (Goswami, 2021). Additionally, rural markets are saturated with similar products—particularly handloom and food-based goods that results getting limited market and low returns. Poor value addition, traditional designs and limited branding further limit competitiveness. Digital marketing presents opportunities but remains underutilised due to digital literacy gaps.

Skills, Technology, and Innovation Limitations

The absence of business development services, inadequate vocational training, and limited exposure to technology restrict innovation. While Assam is rich in traditional craft and agro-based skills, many entrepreneurs lack training in modern production techniques, packaging, quality control, digital marketing and product diversification (Hazarika, 2020). Lack of access to upgraded tools and machinery lowers productivity.

Socio-Cultural and Gender Norms

Patriarchal norms continue to shape women's entrepreneurial experiences in profound ways. Across most households, women remain primarily responsible for unpaid domestic and care giving work, which significantly reduces the time and flexibility they can devote to running an enterprise. National statistics show that Indian women perform nearly three times more unpaid care work than men, directly affecting their ability to participate in income-generating activities (ILO, 2018; NSSO Time Use Survey, 2019). As a result, women's business efforts are often interpreted as a natural extension of household labour rather than as independent economic pursuits. This perception reinforces the long-standing notion that their earnings are merely "supplementary," rather than central to family income and economic stability (Neog & Kalita, 2020; Sudha & Kannan, 2021).

Decision-making power also continues to be concentrated within male authority structures. Studies on women entrepreneurs in rural India show that control over financial decisions—such as applying for credit, investing in assets, or planning business expansion—frequently lies with male household members (UN Women, 2020; Swain & Wallentin, 2009). This limits women's autonomy, affects their confidence in taking risks and restricts their ability to scale their enterprises. In many cases, even when a woman is the primary operator of the business, the financial documents, bank accounts, and formal registrations remain in the husband's or a male relative's name (Mahajan, 2022). Such constraints illustrate how deeply gendered power relations continue to influence entrepreneurial outcomes.

Institutional and Policy Limitations

Despite various government schemes promoting women's entrepreneurship, such as PMEGP, NRLM, and state-specific programs, institutional inefficiencies persist. Procedural complexity, bureaucratic delays, and limited awareness of entitlements create barriers to scheme utilisation. SHGs play a vital role in collective empowerment, yet they often lack structured pathways to formal enterprise development. Institutional support rarely addresses gender-specific needs such as childcare, mobility, or long-term mentoring.

Environmental and Infrastructure Challenges

Assam's geography intensifies entrepreneurial vulnerability. Recurring floods, riverbank erosion, and seasonal disruptions damage physical assets, reduce production days, and break supply chains (Choudhury & Dutta, 2021). Inadequate rural transport, storage facilities, electricity supply, and communication networks elevate business risks and reduce profitability. Entrepreneurs in flood-prone districts face repeated restarts, reducing accumulated gains.

DISCUSSION

The findings make it clear that rural women's entrepreneurship in Assam cannot be viewed through a simple economic lens. It is deeply shaped by the gendered social order, by the ecological conditions of rural life, and by the institutions that mediate women's access to resources and opportunities. Seen through these broader frameworks, entrepreneurship emerges not just as an income-generating activity but as a lived negotiation within unequal structures.

From a Gender and Development (GAD) perspective, women's entrepreneurial journeys remain closely intertwined with patriarchal expectations that locate women primarily within the household. As scholars like Kabeer (1999) and Razavi (2007) argue, women's economic participation often overlaps with unpaid domestic labour instead of substituting it. In Assam, this dual burden is evident: women manage enterprises while simultaneously handling cooking, childcare, elder care, and agricultural chores. This overlap drains the time, energy, and emotional bandwidth necessary for business expansion. Consequently, entrepreneurship does not automatically produce empowerment unless it is accompanied by shifts in social norms and intra-household power relations.

Drawing on Sen's Capability Approach, empowerment must be assessed not merely by access to credit but by the expansion of women's real freedoms — mobility, decision-making, confidence, bargaining power, and the ability to aspire (Sen, 1999; Alkire, 2005). While the spread of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Assam has strengthened financial inclusion and collective solidarity (Datta & Gailey, 2012), many women still have limited say in major enterprise decisions. Their capabilities are often constrained by restricted mobility, limited market exposure, and

bureaucratic hurdles in accessing schemes or formal training. Thus, the growth of microcredit does not always translate into genuine agency.

Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory provides additional clarity by explaining why women tend to cluster in low-risk, low-return, home-based activities. As Brush et al. (2009) and Ahl & Marlow (2012) note, women's enterprise choices are shaped by gendered expectations of "acceptable" work, household responsibilities, and fear of social judgement. This dynamic is visible in rural Assam, where the pressure to maintain family honour discourages women from entering male-dominated or higher-profit sectors. Consequently, most women engage in survival-oriented ventures like weaving, food processing, small retail rather than opportunity-driven entrepreneurship.

Overall, the discussion reinforces that improving women's entrepreneurship requires more than credit, training, or SHG participation. Effective policy must address the deeper structural constraints women face. This includes gender-transformative interventions, long-term mentoring, market-linked skill development, climate-resilient livelihood planning (especially relevant in flood-prone Assam) and stronger institutional coordination across departments. Without tackling these underlying barriers, entrepreneurship is likely to remain a coping strategy rather than a pathway to genuine empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Rural women entrepreneurs in Assam are contributing significantly to local economies, cultural preservation, and social well-being. However, their entrepreneurial potential remains underutilised due to a combination of gendered socio-cultural norms, inadequate market access, weak institutional support systems, environmental vulnerability, and limited financial and capacity resources.

To improve outcomes, policy interventions must be grounded in local realities and adopt a holistic approach that combines skill building, market linkage, gender-sensitisation, infrastructure development, and climate adaptation measures. Entrepreneurship development must transition from a credit-led to a capability-led model that strengthens agency and creates an enabling environment for women to grow beyond micro-businesses. Building resilient, market-connected,

and gender-inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems is crucial for unlocking women's economic and social empowerment in Assam.

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