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Role of Rural Women in Non-Farm Enterprises and Household Income Diversification: A Study on Dikrong Gaon Panchayat, Lakhimpur District, Assam

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Abstract
This study examines the role of rural women in non-farm enterprises and their contribution to income diversification in Dikrong Gaon Panchayat, Lakhimpur District, Assam. A structured interview schedule was used to collect primary data from 130 rural women involved in different non-farm activities. The results reveal that the major non-farm activities in which women in the area are engaged are weaving, livestock rearing, petty trade and tailoring. The income generated from these activities forms a substantial share of the total household income and contributes to diversifying the livelihood of the household from agriculture alone. Access to credit and poor market linkages remain a constraint on growth of these enterprises. The need for improved credit support, skill training and market access is highlighted in the study for women's non-farm activities to enhance the rural livelihood security in the panchayat.
Keywords: *Rural Women, Non-Farm Enterprises, Income Diversification, Dikrong Gaon Panchayat, Lakhimpur, Assam*

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I. Introduction

Agriculture and allied activities remain important sources of livelihood for a large share of Assam's rural population. In Lakhimpur District, agriculture is identified as the principal economic activity, with about 70 per cent of the working population engaged in agriculture (NABARD, 2016). Paddy is the major agricultural crop in Lakhimpur District; mustard, potato and pulses are also cultivated in the district (NABARD, 2016). Agricultural livelihoods in Lakhimpur are affected by structural and environmental constraints, including small and fragmented holdings, inadequate irrigation, limited infrastructure and recurring floods. These constraints can make farm-based livelihoods vulnerable and reinforce the need for supplementary sources of income.

Facing these constraints, many households turn to other sources of income. Non-farm enterprises are an important way of diversification. These activities include weaving, livestock rearing, tailoring, petty trade, food processing and other small businesses. These activities are usually conducted within or close to the village and do not need significant capital investment to get started.

Rural women in Assam participate in a range of farm, allied and non-farm livelihood activities, including handloom weaving, livestock rearing, food processing and small-scale enterprises. Handloom-based micro-enterprises are particularly important for women's income generation and empowerment in the state (Hazarika & Goswami, 2016; Deka et al., 2024). Weaving, poultry rearing, piggery and other livestock-related activities are important livelihood options for many rural and tribal women in Assam. In Lakhimpur District, weaving was reported as a livelihood activity by 65 per cent of sampled tribal women entrepreneurs, followed by agriculture, selling of rice beer, poultry farming, and piggery and fishery activities (Saikia & Chauhan, 2021). Self-help groups promoted under the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Mission provide an institutional mechanism through which rural women can access savings, bank credit, livelihood support and marketing-related interventions. ASRLM has promoted bank linkage for SHGs and has supported rural enterprises through initiatives such as rural marts, fairs, branding, packaging and online/offline marketing support (ASRLM, 2023). The income generated through these activities can supplement farm income and contribute to household livelihood diversification. However, the scale and returns of women's enterprises vary according to access to finance, productive assets, skills, raw materials and markets (Hazarika & Goswami, 2016; Deka et al., 2024).

This process can be explored at the micro level in the context of Dikrong Gaon Panchayat in Lakhimpur District. The panchayat is part of Karunabari Development Block and is named after the Dikrong River. It is a mainly agricultural region. The primary sources of livelihood are agriculture, small trade and daily wage labour. At the same time, women's involvement in non-farm activities has grown, especially through self-help groups.

In Dikrong Gaon Panchayat, there are two to three villages with a majority Thengal Kachari population. As a tribal community, the Thengal Kacharis have traditional involvement in weaving as well as livestock rearing, including pigs, goats, ducks and hens. Based on the author's field observations and community knowledge, the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council has been supporting women weavers in these villages by providing yarn for weaving traditional products such as Thengal gamusa and other handloom items, which has reduced the raw-material cost for many women engaged in weaving.

Although these activities are visible, there is little systematic evidence available at the village-level on the nature of women's non-farm enterprises and their contribution to household income. The majority of studies conducted so far have been at the district or block level in Assam or Lakhimpur. A detailed analysis of a single panchayat may give a better idea of the actual operation of these enterprises and the limitations that women face. The present study is aimed at filling this gap. It looks into the nature of non-farm enterprises taken up by rural women in Dikrong Gaon Panchayat and the role of income generated from these enterprises in diversifying household income.

II. Objectives

The study is guided by the following two objectives:

1. To examine the nature, types and extent of rural women's participation in non-farm enterprises in Dikrong Gaon Panchayat.
2. To analyse the contribution of women's non-farm enterprise income to household income diversification and total household income.

III. Literature Review

The importance of non-farm activities in rural livelihoods has received a lot of attention in the development discourse.

In developing countries, rural households do not rely on a single source of income, as Ellis (1999) pointed out. Diversification into non-farm activities is a general risk management and smoothing of consumption over the season. This observation holds true for the agrarian areas of the Brahmaputra valley where sources of income are often unpredictable.

Reardon et al. (2001) demonstrated that non-farm income can contribute substantially to overall household income in rural Latin America, averaging around 40 per cent of rural incomes. Their work highlighted that non-farm activities are not residual or secondary, but are integral to livelihoods in many developing regions.

Chand, Srivastava and Singh (2017) discussed the evolution of the rural economy in the Indian context. They observed that the shift of rural labour out of agriculture and into non-farm employment was a gradual process, and that non-farm activities now generate a substantial share of rural income.

Research on Assam offers a more regional perspective. Hazarika and Goswami (2016) found that rural women engaged in handloom activities in Assam experience improved intra-household power relations, greater decision-making ability, ownership of assets and income, and reduced domestic violence, linked to their earnings from home-based micro-enterprises. The study also urges better policies to facilitate women's access to productive resources, especially financial ones.

Self-help groups have become an important institutional platform for rural women's collective savings, access to credit and livelihood promotion in Assam. ASRLM interventions include credit linkage, capacity building, producer-group development and marketing support for SHG-based enterprises (ASRLM, 2023). However, access to affordable working capital, training, reliable raw materials and remunerative markets continue to influence the scale and performance of women's enterprises (Deka et al., 2024).

A study on Lakhimpur District indicates that weaving is a major livelihood activity among tribal women entrepreneurs. Saikia and Chauhan (2021), in a study of 120 Mishing tribal women in Lakhimpur District, found that 65 per cent of respondents were engaged in weaving, 47.5 per cent in poultry farming, and 36.67 per cent in piggery and fishery activities. Another study of rural women in the handloom industry of Lakhimpur also examined their entrepreneurial behaviour, finding that age, years of experience in the enterprise, and profit level were significantly associated with the level of entrepreneurial behaviour, while education showed no significant association (Dutta & Radha, 2022).

A study on the nature and extent of income diversification among rural households in a less developed area of Assam (Saikia & Goswami, 2015) revealed that the non-farm sector had become the major source of household income, contributing about 69 per cent of total income compared with roughly 22 per cent from the farm sector. This diversification is frequently a response to the unremunerative character of farming and restricted returns from small holdings.

Studies conducted on the handloom micro-enterprises in Assam in recent years have revealed that proper organization of the handloom weavers in the form of training, inputs and training and market linkage can be a

great help in improving their income. The case study also show that providing technical and marketing support to women has resulted in increased production and net returns, as is the case in Udalguri (Deka et al., 2024).

Borah et al. (2020) revealed that in the North Bank Plain Zone of Assam (Lakhimpur and Dhemaji), backyard pig farming is an active occupation of rural women in large numbers.

The available literature, therefore, indicates two clear points. First, rural women in Assam, even in Lakhimpur, are engaged in non-farm activities. Second, these businesses do contribute to household income but are limited by structural constraints like credit, markets and infrastructure. The studies reviewed above provide evidence on women's empowerment, handloom entrepreneurship, livelihood choices, self-help groups and income diversification in Assam. However, these studies mainly focus on the state, district, selected communities or particular activities such as handloom and piggery (Hazarika & Goswami, 2016; Saikia & Goswami, 2015; Borah et al., 2020; Saikia & Chauhan, 2021; Dutta & Radha, 2022; Deka et al., 2024). Within the literature reviewed for the present study, limited evidence is available on the share of women's non-farm enterprise income in total household income at Panchayat level. The present study addresses this location-specific gap. The present work aims to fill this gap by concentrating on the case of Dikrong Gaon Panchayat.

IV. Methodology

The study has been conducted by collecting primary data from Dikrong Gaon Panchayat of Lakhimpur District, Assam. The panchayat is a part of Karunabari Development Block. It has a rural livelihood and an increasing role of women's self-help groups.

A total of 130 rural women involved in non-farm activities were chosen for the study. Since a complete list of all women running non-farm enterprises in the panchayat was not available, convenience sampling was adopted. Every effort was made to include women engaged in a variety of activities, including weaving, livestock rearing, tailoring, petty trade and the limited food processing activities found in the area. The sample consisted of adult women who were actively engaged in, or regularly contributing labour to, a non-farm enterprise.

The author belongs to the Thengal Kachari community and has long-term familiarity with Dikrong Gaon Panchayat and its surrounding villages. Information on the demographic composition of villages, traditional livelihood practices of the Thengal Kachari community, and institutional support from the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council is based on the author's field observations, informal discussions with local stakeholders and responses collected during the primary survey. These elements are therefore treated as part of the primary evidence for this case study rather than as general facts drawn from published literature. This positionality provides detailed contextual knowledge of local institutions, social norms and livelihood strategies, while also shaping the interpretation of field data. To ensure transparency, all claims regarding Thengal Kachari villages, traditional occupations and council support are grounded in the author's fieldwork and community engagement unless otherwise cited.

A structured interview schedule was used for face-to-face data collection. The socio-economic profile of the respondents, nature and scale of their non-farm enterprise, income generated from the enterprise, total household income from all sources, and the major constraints encountered in their non-farm enterprise were discussed. Both closed and open-ended questions were used.

V. Results and Discussion

5.1 Socio-Economic Profile of the Respondents

The sample of 130 women showed a fairly mixed age profile. Around 38 percent of the respondents were in the 31–45 years age group, followed by 29 percent in the 18–30 years group, while the remaining respondents were above 45 years of age. Most of the women had studied up to the secondary or higher secondary level, and a few had completed their Bachelor's degree. For the majority of respondents, agriculture remained the primary household activity, followed by small business.

Many of the women were from self-help groups. Membership in these groups appears to have encouraged women and provided the relatively small capital required to initiate or extend non-farm activities. This finding is in line with the overall trend in the Lakhimpur district where SHGs have emerged as an important institutional support for rural women.

5.2 Nature and Types of Non-Farm Enterprises

The first objective of the study was to explore the nature and types of non-farm businesses in which the rural women of Dikrong Gaon Panchayat are involved. These enterprises are found mainly in the home or in the village and are mainly family labour based as shown by the results.

The most prevalent activity was weaving, reported by 33.8 percent of the respondents. Livestock rearing (mainly poultry, piggery and goat rearing) was the second most important activity. Tailoring and petty trade are

supplementary sources of livelihood for the women. The food processing activity is still small and limited and only the pickling activity of self-help groups is being undertaken with sale at local fairs and markets.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Type of Non-Farm Enterprise

Type of Enterprise	Number of Women	Percentage
Weaving	44	33.8
Livestock rearing	40	30.8
Tailoring	21	16.2
Petty trade / small shop	15	11.5
Food processing (mainly pickles) and others	10	7.7
Total	130	100.0

Source: Field Survey
Note: Livestock rearing (pigs, goats, ducks and hens) is treated as a non-farm activity in this study because the women do not practise it like a farm activity. It is carried out as a home-based activity, around the household and mainly with family labour.

This predominance of weaving is not surprising. The traditional art of weaving is shared by women in the area and the products (gamocha, mekhela-chadar and related products) have a ready local demand. The livestock rearing fits very well with the agrarian household economy and it is a business with a low capital requirement. Women with some training or those who have easier access to local markets are more likely to be engaged in petty trade and tailoring. There is a small scale food processing activity, primarily for pickle making by self-help groups which are sold in the local fairs and weekly markets, as well as through individual orders received from customers.

The presence of Thengal Kachari community in two to three villages of the panchayat has influenced the non-farm economy in the area. The Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council provides yarn assistance to the women of these villages to make traditional products like Thengal gamusa. Apart from this, some of the Thengal Kachari women are also involved in the business of livestock rearing, especially pigs, goats, ducks and hens. Weaving is one of these activities and is very important in their non-farm livelihood portfolio and for providing extra cash income.

The majority of enterprises are small in size. Most activities are conducted at home using the woman's own labour and sometimes with the assistance of her family. This not only makes the operating costs low, but also reduces the income that can be earned from the enterprise.

5.3 Contribution to Household Income and Diversification

The second objective of the study was to examine the contribution of women's non-farm enterprise income to the total household income and income diversification. The results suggest that this contribution matters a great deal in the local context.

Women's income depends on the nature of activity and size of operation. Based on the responses collected during the field survey, women involved in weaving, livestock rearing and other activities generally reported higher annual income than women involved only in small petty trade. The average annual income obtained from non-farm activities varied across the sample, consistent with the differences noted above by type of activity.

If the proportion of women's non-farm income to total household income is analysed, a clear pattern emerges. In almost half of the households (46.9 percent), the woman's non-farm income was 20-40 percent of the total household income. About a quarter of the households had a higher share. The proportion was less than 20 per cent in the remainder of households.

Table 2: Share of Women's Non-Farm Income in Total Household Income

Share in Household Income	Number of Households	Percentage
Less than 20 percent	36	27.7
20 to 40 percent	61	46.9
Above 40 percent	33	25.4
Total	130	100.0

Source: Field Survey

These figures indicate that women's non-farm enterprises are not just 'residual' or 'supplementary'. They are an integral component of the income portfolio in many homes. This is especially significant in an agricultural context, where income from agriculture may fluctuate from year to year, such as because of small farm holdings and price volatility. Multiple respondents mentioned that income generated from weaving or livestock enabled them to cope with household expenses and decrease their overall reliance on agriculture.

The diversification effect works in two ways. First, the overall level of household income tends to be higher when women make regular contributions from outside the farm. Second, households with women in regular non-farm activities have a more balanced income structure compared to households that are predominantly farming alone.

5.4 Constraints Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

Although non-farm enterprises have made a positive contribution, women are limited by a number of constraints when it comes to expanding their activities. The most common issue reported was a lack of working capital. While the self-help groups are offering small loans, the loan amounts are generally too small to buy raw materials in bulk and/or to expand the enterprise.

Marketing difficulties were ranked second. A large number of women sell their products either in the village or to the middlemen. Prices received tend to be low and access to larger or more remunerative markets is limited. Other restrictions are the lack of advanced skills training, irregular supply of raw materials, specifically yarn for weaving, domestic work burden and some infrastructure related issues from time to time.

Table 3: Major Constraints Reported by Respondents

Constraint	Number of Responses	Rank
Inadequate credit / working capital	91	1
Marketing difficulties	77	2
Lack of skill training	53	3
Raw material problems	44	4
Infrastructure-related issues	40	5

Source: Field Survey
Note: This was a multiple-response question — respondents could report more than one constraint. The number of responses (305) therefore exceeds the sample size of 130 and does not represent a count of individual respondents.

The ranking of the constraints suggests that financial and market related constraints are more critical than a lack of skill. This has a direct implication for policy. Training programmes alone will not be sufficient. To encourage a larger scale of women's non-farm enterprises, credit availability and market access must be addressed more directly.

The results also highlight the need for local institutional support. The Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council has helped a section of the weavers by providing them with yarn assistance, which has lowered their input cost. The integration of weaving with livestock rearing (pigs, goats, ducks and hens) by some women also reinforces the value of traditional livelihoods in supporting household income portfolios. Such local practices need to be better known at block and district level for livelihood planning.

The overall study from Dikrong Gaon Panchayat reinforces the Assam literature which suggests that women's non-farm activities play a significant role in the earning of the family but their development is constrained by structural factors which need coordinated policy intervention.

VI. Policy Implications

The results of the study suggest some practical implications for local development support.

First, more credit must be provided for women's non-farm businesses. While the current SHG-bank linkage is a good starting point, the loan sizes are too small for significant growth. More flexible working capital facility for women for weaving, livestock and small trading would help them to go beyond subsistence level.

It is a good local initiative that the Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council provides support to the community in the form of yarn for weaving. Further strengthening of the handloom business of women in the panchayat could be done by expanding and regularising such raw material support and providing them with better marketing channels.

Second, there is a need to seriously address the linkages of the market. Most of the women producers of Dikrong Gaon Panchayat are involved in the local and informal markets. They could get better returns for their

products if they were organized into producer groups with better access to local haats, or if well-designed digital platforms were made available to them.

Third, training skills should be more closely matched to the real market. Many women have the traditional skills; training in design improvement, quality control and basic business skills would add value to these skills.

Fourth, basic infrastructure support can improve the production and marketing environment for women's non-farm activities in the panchayat.

Finally, women's non-farm enterprises should be treated as a core part of the rural livelihood strategy rather than a minor add-on. The development of these enterprises can help not only in enhancing livelihood security of the households but also in the overall rural economic diversification in Assam.

VII. Limitations of the Study

The study is restricted to Dikrong Gaon Panchayat and the sample size is 130 women. Caution should be taken in generalising the findings with respect to the entire Lakhimpur District, or to other districts of Assam. The use of convenience sampling introduces the possibility of selection bias. Income data is self reported by respondents and is subject to some recall error. The study is a cross-sectional study, so it is not able to capture changes in enterprise performance over time.

VIII. Conclusion

The rural women are actively involved in the non-farm activities of Dikrong Gaon Panchayat and are visible in these activities. Weaving, livestock rearing, petty trade and tailoring are the main activities through which they generate income. This income makes up a considerable portion of the household's total income and adds to livelihood diversification. In an agri-based community, this diversification is beneficial for the security of the household.

The study draws on both published literature and primary field evidence, including the author's community-based knowledge of Thengal Kachari livelihood practices and local institutional support.

At the same time, credit availability and market access remain a problem in these enterprises, limiting their size. Addressing these constraints through targeted credit support and improved market linkages and relevant skill development can improve the contribution of women's non-farm enterprises to rural household incomes in the area. The findings from the Dikrong Gaon Panchayat demonstrate that women's non-farm activities can be a viable pathway to resilient rural livelihoods.

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