



“ROLE OF WOMEN IN LIVELIHOOD GENERATION IN CHAR AREAS OF ASSAM”

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ABSTRACT:

In Assam, the char areas are river islands which are prone to flooding and soil erosion. Every year in the monsoon the area is threatened by the severe flood and erosion, which tends the people of the area struggle for their survival. During other seasons the char dwellers engaged themselves in agricultural activities, which is not permanent. Therefore, the male members of the family have to migrate to nearby areas in search of work. The female members of the households have to take care of the family. The present study was done to find out the women's role in generating livelihood in the char villages of Kamrup district of Assam. The observed data had been collected from two char villages, viz., Andhupara and Bangalpara village. A scheduled set of interview schedules has been used to collect primary data from 80 sample households. The present study illustrates that women in the char areas engaged themselves in agricultural activities, animal husbandry, weaving, silkworm rearing, etc., for their family's survival.

KEYWORDS: Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Weaving.

INTRODUCTION:

Assam, one of the states of northeast India, is characterised by diverse physical and socio-economic features. Among those diverse physical features, char areas are the areas which are covered with water bodies (rivers) and usually known as riverine areas. Such areas are affected by floods and soil erosion every year. So, the people of the area have to struggle to fulfil their basic necessities. Such char areas are overpopulated and devoid of all basic amenities of modern life (A. Farhana, 2018). These areas are the geographically most hostile terrain, where people have to struggle for their survival. Because of floods and erosion in these areas, every year the char dwellers remain homeless and damage their agricultural lands; therefore, the areas are the most socio-culturally and economically backward areas. The char dwellers try to engage themselves in diverse livelihood options as their livelihood. But the area has limited livelihood options for its residents. Women, along with men, also play a very significant role in generating livelihood. Male members of the family usually move outside as migrant workers, while the womenfolk engage themselves as daily agricultural labourers or engage in some small home-based work (B. Ara Anjuman, 2021). Here women have to endure an additional burden from the society as well as from the state because the govt. initiatives for health, education, empowerment, etc., do not reach these areas. The inter-relationship between women and work has been affected by the diversity of socio-economic institutions (Das and Misra, 2008). According to AIDMI (All India Disaster Mitigation Institute), women in char areas mostly engaged in the production of primary food

products. The women's participation in activities of income generation is very low because they have to manage and look after the household's deeds when men of the family migrate in search of work.

Thus, women play a pivotal role in livelihood generation in the char (riverine island) areas of Assam, despite facing multiple socio-economic and geographical challenges. These regions, shaped by frequent flooding and erosion from the Brahmaputra River, are marked by poor infrastructure, limited access to markets, and restricted mobility. Within this difficult context, women contribute significantly to household income through a range of activities. They engage in agricultural labor, livestock rearing, weaving, fishing, petty trade, and sometimes wage labour in nearby areas. Livestock management, in particular, is often considered the domain of women and is a vital source of subsistence and income in char households. Women are also involved in homestead-based economic activities such as poultry, dairy, and small-scale vegetable cultivation. Their contribution is crucial to sustaining the family economy, especially when male members migrate seasonally in search of work (Sharma, 2010; Deka & Goswami, 2017).

Despite their contributions, women in char areas often remain invisible in official statistics and development planning due to cultural norms, low literacy levels, and lack of access to institutional credit and extension services. The patriarchal nature of society and restricted mobility further limit their empowerment. Nonetheless, studies have found that enhancing women's access to resources, skills, and markets can significantly improve household resilience and reduce poverty in the char areas (Nath & Baruah, 2015). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to find out women's participation in different livelihood-generating activities.

METHODOLOGY:

The present study is basically descriptive and analytical in nature and based on both primary and secondary data.

Coverage:

The present study has been conducted in two char villages, viz. Andhupara and Bangalpara, of Kamrup district of Assam. The data have been collected from 80 households, taking 40 from each village. The sample unit consisted of only women from the sample households.

Data collection and analysis:

A set of structured interview schedules has been developed to collect the primary data from the sample households through personal interviews. For selecting the sample households, a multistage random sample technique has been used. The secondary data has been collected from the Directorate of Char Areas Development, from different published sources such as reports prepared by the government (the report of the Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission), statistical handbooks, various journals, research work, library work, etc.

For processing and analysing the collected data, basic statistics like frequency distribution and percentage have been used. Besides these, a participation index has been used, with the help of which the women's participation in various activities has been ranked. The above mentioned index has been developed as

$$\text{Work participation} = \text{regularly} \times 2 + \text{occasionally} \times 1 + \text{never} \times 0 \quad \text{Index}$$

RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

In Indian society, women play a very significant role in performing various unpaid activities like household chores, animal husbandry and tasks associated with agriculture, etc. But income-generating activities of rural women can be divided into two broad categories, agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Homestead vegetable cultivation, crop production, post-harvest activities in agriculture, poultry rearing, management of livestock, fisheries, bee-keeping, sericulture, etc. are the most important agricultural activities. On the other hand, traditionally women are participating in non-farm activities such as handicrafts like basket making, jute bag making, bamboo works, embroidery, etc. (Al-Amin, 2008). Moreover, they conduct small businesses such as shop keeping or travel from village to village to sell cloths and other items (Fakir, 2008). The poorest women are finding work such as gathering firewood and selling it. The char areas of Assam, which are the extreme rural areas, are rich in natural resources. People of such areas are mostly agricultural dependent. They used to invest their time and labour effort in agriculture and allied activities. Along with the men, the women household members also engage themselves in such activities. But such activities are seasonal, as the areas

are prone to some natural calamities like floods and soil erosion. Therefore, the char dwellers have to diversify their livelihood options to survive throughout the year. Such calamities also affect the migration rate of the area. The male members have to migrate to the nearby urban areas in search of work, and the female members have to remain at home and have to struggle for their living. So, the female members of the family have to engage themselves in agriculture, animal husbandry and some locally available works to run their family. For discussing the women's participation in livelihood-generating activities in such areas, a field survey has been done in Andhupara and Bangalpara char villages of Kamrup rural district.

The collected data are presented below, where work participation is categorised in three stages, viz. regular, occasional and never. These were assigned the weighted scores of 2, 1 and 0, respectively.

Table-1: Various livelihood initiatives adopted by women of Andhupara village and their work participation index.

Initiatives	X ₂	X ₁	X ₀	Participation Index	Rank order
Agriculture	12	22	6	46	
Animal husbandry	29	11	0	69	II
Agricultural Labor	5	10	25	20	
Craft Work	4	12	24	20	
Weaving	20	10	10	50	IV
Poultry Rearing	30	2	8	62	III
Handicraft	4	29	7	37	
Woodcutting & Selling	14	20	6	48	V
Grocery shops	10	0	30	20	
Jute bag making	2	28	10	32	
Homestead gardening	35	5	0	75	I

Source: Field survey (Formula of Index)

The above table provides a comprehensive overview of the types of income-generating activities women are engaged in and the extent of their involvement. It categorizes participation into three levels: X₂ (high participation), X₁ (moderate participation), and X₀ (low or no participation). The Participation Index is a calculated measure based on these values and reflects the overall intensity of women's involvement in each activity. The index helps to compare the relative popularity or preference for different livelihood options among the women surveyed. From the table, it is evident that homestead gardening is the most prominent livelihood initiative, with 35 women in high participation (X₂), 5 in moderate (X₁), and none in low or non-participation (X₀), giving it a Participation Index of 75, the highest among all initiatives. This suggests that homestead gardening is widely accessible, manageable alongside domestic responsibilities, and possibly yields quick returns, making it the most favoured choice. Accordingly, it is ranked first (I). Animal husbandry ranks second (II) with a Participation Index of 69, with a large proportion (29 women) falling into the high participation category. This reflects the significance of livestock-related activities as a livelihood source. The minimal presence in the low participation category (X₀ = 0) also points to its widespread acceptance and feasibility among women. Poultry rearing follows closely with a Participation Index of 62, ranking third (III). Although the number of women with moderate and low participation is small, the high participation (X₂ = 30) is quite notable. This suggests that like animal husbandry, poultry rearing is a practical and profitable livelihood option. Weaving, with a Participation Index of 50, is ranked fourth (IV). While not as dominant as the previous three, weaving still represents a significant traditional skill-based livelihood activity among the women. The fifth most significant initiative is woodcutting and selling, with a Participation Index of 48. This activity likely requires physical effort and access to forest resources, which may limit broader participation, yet it still holds a strong position in the ranking. In contrast, activities like agricultural labor, craft work, grocery shops, and jute bag making have relatively low Participation Indices (all at or below 32), suggesting limited engagement by the women of the village. For example, grocery shops have 10 women in the high participation category, but none in the moderate and 30 in the low, resulting in an index of just 20. Similarly, craft work and agricultural labor also show high numbers in the low participation category (X₀ = 24 and 25,

respectively), leading to low indices and indicating these are less preferred activities, possibly due to skill requirements, lower returns, or market limitations. Overall, the data reveals that women in Andhupura village tend to prefer home-based, low-investment, and livestock-related livelihood options. These choices likely align better with household responsibilities, resource availability, and local economic conditions. The Participation Index serves as an effective tool to quantify and compare the extent of women's engagement across various livelihood activities, helping identify areas of strength and potential for policy or developmental interventions.

Table-2: Various livelihood initiatives adopted by women of Bangalpara Char village and their work participation index.

Initiatives	X ₂	X ₁	X ₀	Participation Index	Rank order
Agriculture	16	19	5	51	IV
Animal husbandry	27	13	0	67	II
Agricultural Labor	8	12	20	28	
Craft Work	9	10	21	28	
Weaving	19	12	9	50	V
Poultry Rearing	20	15	5	55	III
Handicraft	12	11	17	35	
Woodcutting & Selling	18	10	12	46	
Grocery shops	17	0	23	34	
Jute bag making	11	14	15	36	
Homestead gardening	31	9	0	71	I

Source: Field survey

Table-2 illustrates the various livelihood initiatives undertaken by women in Bangalpara Char village, presenting data on their work participation index based on three levels of involvement: X₂ (high participation), X₁ (moderate participation), and X₀ (low or no participation). The Participation Index serves as a composite measure reflecting the degree of women's involvement in each activity. According to the data, homestead gardening emerges as the most prominent livelihood activity, with 31 women showing high participation, 9 with moderate participation, and none with low participation, resulting in the highest Participation Index of 71 and thus ranked first (I). This trend reflects the suitability and attractiveness of homestead-based agricultural activities for women, likely because they are low-cost, accessible, and can be carried out alongside domestic responsibilities. Following this, animal husbandry ranks second (II) with a Participation Index of 67, which is also notably high. A total of 27 women are in the high participation category and 13 in the moderate, with none reporting low or no involvement. This shows the importance of livestock-related activities as a stable and familiar source of livelihood for women in the char area. Poultry rearing ranks third (III) with a participation index of 55, based on participation of 20 women (high) and 15 (moderate). This continues the pattern observed in other char areas, where animal-based activities are favored due to their manageability and relatively quick returns. Agriculture, which includes crop cultivation, has a Participation Index of 51, placing it fourth (IV) in the ranking. Though 16 women reported high participation and 19 moderate, the presence of 5 women in the low participation category slightly reduced its index. Agriculture remains a significant but more physically demanding and possibly resource-dependent activity compared to animal-related livelihoods. Weaving is ranked fifth (V) with an index of 50, showing a decent number of women (19 high, 12 moderate) engaged in this traditional skill-based livelihood, although the presence of 9 women with low participation suggests some barriers, possibly linked to demand, market access, or time constraints. In contrast, other activities like agricultural labor and craft work show lower participation indices (both at 28), due to a significant number of women (20 and 21 respectively) falling into the low participation category. These are possibly more strenuous or less rewarding in terms of income. Handicraft, grocery shops, and making jute bag shows moderate level of participation, with indices ranging from 34 to 36, suggesting that while these are relevant activities, they are not as widely adopted. Overall, the data from Bangalpara Char village highlights a strong preference among women for home-based and livestock-related activities such as homestead gardening, animal husbandry, and poultry rearing. These are likely considered more feasible and economically

viable options within the socio-economic and environmental context of char areas. Activities requiring more physical labor, outside mobility, or specialized skills tend to have lower participation indices, suggesting the need for targeted support and training to broaden livelihood options for women in the village.

FINDINGS:

- 1) From the study it becomes clear that the majority of the women in both the Andhupara and Bangalpara char villages used to engage themselves in homestead farming. Homestead farming is the main agricultural activity of women in char areas, which provides the major share of livelihood resources for them. In such areas, home gardens are a well-established land-use system where different vegetables and trees are grown. Most of the women utilise the space around their house to grow vegetables, like brinjal, cabbage, cauliflower, radish, etc. They also grow fruits like litchi, mango, blackberry, jujube, etc. Jujube is the most commonly grown fruit in this area. Women of the household used to sell them to vegetable and fruit dealers and earn money.
- 2) The women of the area also engage in animal husbandry for their survival. Animal husbandry is the basis of survival for poor and landless char dwellers. The female members of the family look after the animals. They rear cows, sheep and goats. Goats are reared by almost all households; they sell them to the local butcher. They also sell milk.
- 3) Along with the homestead farming and animal husbandry, the women of the area also rear poultry to sell meat and eggs. This is the most common means of earning for them. Poultry rearing at the household level in char areas is a traditional method. It is an integral part of the agribusiness of rural communities.
- 4) As the char area is vulnerable to flooding and soil erosion, the people of the area cannot depend on agriculture alone. They engage in agricultural activities only seasonally; during the monsoon, the male members migrate to nearby urban areas, and the female members alone have to struggle for survival. So, they diversify their activities and engage themselves in multiple tasks and earn a living.
- 5) From the study, it has been noticed that many women nowadays invest their time and energy in weaving a local dress called mekhela sador. They use a local handloom machine called “tathal”. They also weave gamosh and sell them.
- 6) Some other initiatives that women of these char villages adopted for generating livelihood are craftwork, wood-cutting and selling, grocery shops, etc.

These findings suggest that livelihood interventions should prioritize and support women's engagement in homestead and livestock-based enterprises, while providing training and infrastructure to improve participation in less popular but potentially viable activities.

CONCLUSION:

From the overall explanation, a conclusion can be made that the women in the char areas contribute more than men in generating livelihood for the survival of the family. Almost all women engage themselves in some income-generating activities; either they are agricultural or non-agricultural activities. The present study depicts that the majority of the women engage themselves in homestead farming. This improves the resources of poor farmers and also meets several socio-economic and ecological conditions which contribute to sustainability and better living. Besides this, women of the selected char areas are also involved in animal husbandry, poultry rearing, weaving, woodcutting, etc.

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