Empowering Rural Women Through Handloom Micro Enterprises: A Case Study of Udalguri District, Assam

P. Deka[1], P. Barman[1], H. Rabha[1], P. Bora[2], D. Borah[3], P. Das[4]

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ABSTRACT

Background: The handloom industry in Assam showcases a remarkable diversity that extends across both rural and urban areas which serves as a supplementary source of income for numerous households in the state. *Nalkhamara,* a village in Udalguri district of Assam became the workplace for a group of 15 most talented weavers who grouped to form a SHG called *Rampar Self Help Group*. But unfortunately, they faced significant challenges due to limited resources and absence of marketing organizations. In order to address the issues, the SHG reached out to the KVK, Udalguri for assistance and accordingly, the KVK conducted a demonstration on capacity building of women weavers to enhance their skills in weaving and provided guidance on modern marketing techniques *etc*. Hence, the present study was planned with the objectives to analyze the economic impact on weavers before and after KVK intervention, types of products manufactured and the constraints faced by them.

Methods: The study has followed the case study method with a total of 15 weavers of *Rampar* SHG having training under KVK, Udalguri. A pre tested questionnaire was prepared to collect data. To measure the economic impact, parameters like gross cost and return, net return, B: C ratio *etc*. were considered before and after intervention. To evaluate the problems of weavers, open ended questions were asked. Suitable statistical tools were used to analyze the data.

Result: With the intervention of KVK Udalguri, the weavers of the SHG able to earn average annual income between Rs. 13.00 to ₹15.00 lakhs and could able to produced twenty types of diversified handloom products. The constraints faced by them were like improper time management, high input price, exploitation by intermediaries *etc.*

Key words: Handloom, Self help group, Weaving.

INTRODUCTION

The term handloom refers to a loom, which is operated manually to weave a fabric by interlacement of warp and weft in an economy (Singh, 2007). The handloom sector in Assam plays a vital role in empowering rural women through employment opportunities. Empowering women in the handloom sector would likely build livelihood development and cushion their financial management through employment (Goswami, 2005). There is no denying of the fact that the handloom weaving is a way of life for people in both rural and urban area of Assam (Handique, 2016). The natural fibers such as cotton, silk and jute are primarily uses as raw materials in handloom sector (Jain, 2007). Recently, the Assam state had achieved a significant milestone by obtaining a Geographical Indication (GI) patent for its traditional garments, safeguarded under the Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act of 1985.

Handlooms sector has not only provided livelihoods for women and their families but has also caught the attention of governments which shows keen interest in promoting and supporting these women by offering financial assistance and facilitating in establishment of their own business ventures. Moreover, women weavers of North East Region multitask as both handloom producers and traders, thus paving a path towards economic empowerment (Raju, 2014 and Sakuntala, 1999).

In Udalguri district of Assam, specifically in remote areas where *Bodo* and *Rabha* tribes resides, women rely on traditional resources and possess valuable knowledge and skills in the art of weaving. *Nalkhamara,* a village in the district with a total of 214 households, known for its skilled weavers, became the workplace for a group of 15 most talented weavers who grouped to form a SHG called *Rampar Self Help Group*. But unfortunately they faced significant financial challenges due to limited resources and absence of marketing organizations which made it difficult for them to sell their products at fair prices, leading to minimal profit margins. Additionally, the weavers faced

[1]Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Assam Agricultural University, Lalpool-784 514, Udalguri, Assam, India.
[2]Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Assam Agricultural University, Sonitpur-784 028, Tezpur, Assam, India.
[3]AICRP-Integrated Farming System, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat-785 013, Assam, India.
[4]Department of Extension Education, FA, Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat-785 013, Assam, India.

Corresponding Author: P. Deka, Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Assam Agricultural University, Lalpool-784 514, Udalguri, Assam, India. Email: pallavi.deka@aau.ac.in

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stiff competition from power loom products flooding the market during specific seasons, resulting in decreased demand and lower prices for their handloom products.

In order to address the issues faced by the weavers, the Rampar Self Help Group reached out to the Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Udalguri for assistance. In the year, 2020-21, KVK Udalguri conducted a demonstration on Capacity building of women weaver group through production and marketing of handloom products like *Gamosha etc* with the objectives to standardization of handloom products, increase knowledge for better marketability and to increase income of the weaversbesides supplyinginput like different types of natural yarn from their end. These training programs aimed to enhance their skills in weaving, dyeing and designing, while also educating them about the importance of quality control and standardization. Furthermore, the KVK provided guidance on modern marketing techniques, helping the weavers understand the current market trends and demands and facilitating the process for obtaining handloom mark labels for the SHG. These labels are awarded to handloom products that adhere to quality standards and authenticity requirements. The attainment of handloom mark labels boosted the confidence of the weavers and instilled a sense of pride in their work.

Therefore, keeping in mind the above facts, the present study was planned with the objectives to analyze the economic impact on weavers before and after KVK intervention, types of products manufactured and the constraints faced by the weavers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study has followed the Case Study method. The case was taken from Nalkhamara village of Udalguri district with a total of 15 weavers of Rampar Self Help Group having training under Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Udalguri. A well-designed and pre-tested questionnaire was prepared to collect data regarding the impact on income and different diversified products produced after KVK intervention and also the constraints faced by the weavers through personal interview method. Here, to measure the impact on income, parameters like gross cost and return, net return, B: C ratio and percentage change over net return were considered before and after intervention. To evaluate the problems of weavers, open ended questions were asked. Suitable andappropriate statistical tools like percentages, mean, cost of production, Garrett ranking *etc*. were used while tabulating, analyzing and interpreting the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Economic impact on weavers of Rampar self help group

In the year, 2020-21, KVK Udalguri conducted a demonstration programe for women weaverson production and marketing of handloom productswith the objectives to standardization of products, increase knowledge for better marketability and to increase income of the weavers. As a part of the demonstration, KVK Udalguri organized a training program for the members of the Rampar Self Help Group besides supplying inputs like different types of natural yarn *etc*. as shown in Fig 1 where it shows that more than 15 weavers were enthusiastically took part in the training programmes along with proper demonstrations (Fig 2) for producing ideal products for standardization and marketing of products like Gamosa *etc*.

Prior to the interventions, the weavers struggled to fetch fair prices for their handloom products. It can be observed from Table 1 that before intervention of the KVK, during 2019-20, the weavers were having the gross return and net return of ₹ 1478920.00 and ₹ 522697.00 respectively with gross cost of ₹ 956223.00. But after intervention, it increases with 165.74 as percentage change over net return with the gross return and net return of Rs. 3556000.00 and ₹ 1389050.00 respectively with gross cost of ₹ 2166950.00. These may be due to the fact that the KVK provided guidance on modern marketing techniques, helping the weavers understand the current market trends and demands. These interventions proved instrumental in improving the overall product quality, increasing productivity, reducing time and effort and enhancing the marketability of their handloom products.

Moreover, one significant intervention by KVK Udalguri was facilitating the process for obtaining handloom mark labels for the Rampar Self Help Group. These labels are



Fig 1: Training conducted by KVK, Udalguri on capacity building of the weavers.



Fig 2: Demonstration conducted by KVK Udalguri on standardization and marketing of Gamosa.

Table 1: Economic impact on weavers of Rampar self help group.

Particulars	Year	Gross cost (Rs.)	Gross return (Rs.)	Net return (Rs.)	BC ratio	% change over net return
Before intervention	2019-20	956223.00	1478920.00	522697.00	1.54	-
After intervention	2023-24	2166950.00	3556000.00	1389050.00	1.64	165.74

Table 2: Types of diversified products produced by Rampar self help group.

Types of clothes	Price range (Rs.)
Gamosha (one side flower)	175
Gamosha (Both side flower)	600-1000
Gamosha used for wedding purposes	1200-2000
Mekhela chadar	1200-2200
Dinning mat with runner	450-800
Bath towel	200-300
Seleng chadar	500
Handkerchief	40-80
Baby napkin set	200
Handbag	500-1000
Single chadar	200-330
Mercerized single mekhela	300-500
Apron with Rabha or Bodo traditional motif	700-800
Sofa bag	1200-1500
Cotton saree	500-1500
Shopping bag	330-850
Table cloth set	850
Bed sheet	800-1200
Eri shawl	1500-3000
Rabha dhoti	500-800

awarded to handloom products that adhere to quality standards and authenticity requirements. The handloom mark labels serve as a seal of approval, assuring customers of the product's genuineness and traditional craftsmanship. The attainment of handloom mark labels boosted the confidence of the weavers and instilled a sense of pride in their work. It also opened doors to a wider market, as discerning customers seek out products with such certification.The annual turnover of the Rampar Self Help Group now ranges between ₹ 13.00 to ₹ 15.00 lakhs, which is a substantial improvement from their earlier earnings with collective team efforts. The earnings of weavers under the cooperative society were also almost like the merchant weavers (Devi, 2012). It was reported in a study that participation of nearly 89% of women weavers in the self-help group not only increased their monthly income and production in handloom products but also improved their standard of living (Baishya, 2019).

Types of diversified products produced by Rampar self help group

With the support and interventions provided by KVK Udalguri, the Rampar Self Help Group has witnessed significant improvements in their handloom business. They have mastered the art of creating standardized handloom products, experimenting with unique designs while incorporating traditional motifs. This creative freedom has allowed them to diversify their product range and cater to the evolving preferences of their customers. At present, they are involved in making twenty different types of standardized products (Table 2) like Gamosha, Mekhela Chadar, Dinning mat with runner, hand bags, sarees *etc.* both in *Assamese* and *Rabha* design as shown in Fig 3.

The Rampar Self Help Group has also adopted sustainable practices, such as using natural fabrics and dyes. By utilizing locally available resources, they have not only ensured the longevity of the fabric but also contribute to environmental conservation. The weavers take pride in their ability to create handloom products that are eco-friendly and socially responsible.The interventions by KVK Udalguri have yielded significant positive outcomes for the weavers of the Rampar Self Help Group. Their hard work, coupled with the support and guidance provided has resulted in improved product quality, increased productivity, reduced time and effort and higher earnings.

Problems faced by weavers of Rampar self help group

In this study, we looked at a variety of obstacles that handloom weavers are facing. These obstacles are the result of how they see others around them as well as many institutional

and psychological restraints that are a part of society. All the identified constraints were categorized into two groups i.e personal and socioeconomic constraints. The respondents were given these constraints to rate them on a five-point continuum from very severe, quite severe, severe, not so severe and least severe. The collected details were analyzed using the Garrett's ranking technique.

The Garrett's ranking technique was employed to find out and rank the major constraints faced by the weavers. It provides the change of orders of constraints into numerical scores. The prime advantage of this technique over simple frequency distribution is that the constraints are arranged based on their importance from the point of view of respondents. Hence the same number of respondents on two or more constraints may have been given different rank.

Table 3: Constraints faced by weavers of Rampar self help group.

Problems faced	Garrett score	Rank
Personal problems		
Improper time management	74.25	I
Restricted mobility	71.67	**II**
Low level of education	64.45	**III**
Unsupportive family	62.59	IV
Low confidence	57.65	V
Health issues	49.00	VI
Fear of failure	45.45	VII
Socio economic problems		
High/rising input price	69.21	I
Exploitation by intermediaries	54.33	**II**
Labour shortage	45.54	**III**
Scarcity of raw materials	43.67	IV
Poor infrastructure	40.00	V
Competition with power loom products	38.96	VI

Garrett's formula for converting ranks into per cent was given by,

$$\text{Per cent position} = \frac{100\ (Rij - 0.5)}{Nj}$$

Where:

Rij= Rank given for the ith factor by the jth respondent.

Nj= Number of factors ranked by the jth respondent.

The per cent position of each rank was then converted into scores by using Garrett table given by Garrett and Woods Wordh (1969). For each factor, the scores of individual respondents were added together and divided by the total number of the respondents for whom scores were added. These mean scores for all the factors were arranged in descending order, ranks were given and most important factors were identified.

Personal problems

Here, in this study, different personal problems that have been faced by the weavers were identified and from Table 3, it was observed that problem like improper time management was ranked I with Garrett Score 74.25 followed by restricted mobility (rank II, Garrett Score 71.67). Similarly, low level of education and unsupportive family were ranked III and IV with Garrett Score of 64.45 and 62.59 respectively. Further, it was also found that Low confidence, Health issues and Fear of Failure were some of the personal problems that were faced by the weavers of Rampar Self Help Group which ranked V, VI and VI with Garrett Score of 57.65, 49.00 and 45.45 respectively.

Socio economic problems

The economic problems are the problems that relate to societal financial and organizational problems arise in



Fig 3: Different products of Rampar SHG with handloom mark.

running a business. Here, in this study, different socio economic problems that might have been faced by the handloom weavers were mentioned and ranked accordingly. As revealed in Table 3, it is understood that High/rising input price was the most severe problem faced by the weavers of the SHG with the Garrett score of 69.21 followed by exploitation by intermediaries and labour shortage which were ranked II and III having score of 54.33 and 45.54 respectively. It was further disclosed that scarcity of raw materials, poor infrastructure and competition with power loom products were some of the socio economic problems faced by them with the ranking of IV, V and VI with score of 43.67, 40.00 and 38.96 respectively. These findings are in line with the findings of Hujuri (2023).

CONCLUSION

The handloom sector in Assam, particularly in the Udalguri District, has undergone a remarkable transformation with the support of organizations like KVK Udalguri. Through their interventions, they have empowered women weavers, improved product quality and enhanced market access for handloom products. The success of the Rampar Self Help Group stands as a testament to the immense potential of the handloom sector in promoting women's empowerment and socio-economic development. The journey of the Rampar Self Help Group showcases the resilience, creativity and entrepreneurial spirit of women weavers in Assam. By preserving traditional craftsmanship while embracing modern techniques and market trends, they have managed to carve a niche for themselves in the competitive handloom market. Moving forward, it is crucial for the government, NGOs and other stakeholders to continue supporting and promoting the handloom sector in Assam. Access to credit, market linkages and skill development programs should be prioritized to ensure the sustainability and growth of this vital industry. By doing so, we can preserve the rich cultural heritage of handloom weaving in Assam while empowering countless women and uplifting their communities.

Conflict of interest

The authors of the paper declare no conflicts of interest. No other journal has received a submission for publication of this work.

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