

ROLE OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEUR IN SUALKUCHI SILK INDUSTRY, ASSAM: PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

LEKHA BORAH, ANURADHA BORSAIKIA, KABERI DUTTA

Abstract: Women Entrepreneurship in different sectors of economy is on a rise of which handloom industry forms an integral part. Here, involvement of women is found to be dominant in different stages of functioning of the industry. The Sualkuchi Silk Industry located in Kamrup district in the western part of Assam is an evident example, where women have been playing a significant role towards the advancement of the economy of the local area. This study particularly tries to analyse the role of women entrepreneurs in Sualkuchi silk industry, assess the contribution of women in overall economy of the study area and unveil the underlying problems along with future prospects. To collect relevant data semi-structured interviews were conducted and secondary data were collected from authorised sources. From the present study it was found that there was a prevalence of unorganised system of entrepreneurial activity in the handloom sector of the study area due to which it has far reaching implication in the industry. Beside the structural weakness the other problems associated with the industry includes the presence of middlemen, lack of infrastructure, lack of efficient funding and increasing dominance of products from outside the state flooding the market. But with proper implementation of strategies to organise the various stages of the industry will lead to better prospects of women entrepreneurship in the industry. Organised marketing system, effective training programmes and establishment of handloom cooperative societies are some of the practical strategies we propose to mitigate the problems and enhance future prospects.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, women, role, problems, suggestions.

Introduction: The expansion of economic hubs throughout the world has influenced not only the superior section of the society but also the marginalised section, in which women's development has been an evident example. Gone are the days when women were merely regarded as a homemaker. In some way or the other different socio-cultural factors have played hindrance in the growth of women to their full potential. Unlike the past women have entered every areas which were earlier male dominated. Their role towards the development of the economy is felt widely through their entrepreneurial skills.

"An entrepreneur is someone who organises, manages, and assumes the risk of a business or enterprise" (Sobel. S. R). The managerial skills and organising capacity of women have led to the existence of many successful entrepreneurs in today's world as Suchi Mukherjee (Founder of Limeroad), Aditi Gupta (Founder of Menstrupedia), Anita Roddick (Founder of The Body Shop), Ekta Kapoor (Owner of Balaji Telefilms).

The handloom sector like any other sector is one of the important ventures of entrepreneurial activity for women. Economic development cannot be achieved without active participation of women in all aspects of life. (Sarfaraz et. al., 2014). Various studies show that entrepreneurs contribute to economic development, job creation and different aspects of well-being through creative innovations. Women have been contributing immensely in different phases of handloom activity since time immemorial. The share

of women's contribution to the economic and social developments depends on the promotion of gender equality and gender blind support from the institutions. Although women constitute about fifty percent of the world population, compared to men, they have less opportunity to control their lives and make decisions (Revanga and Sudhir, 2012)

Various studies were conducted in this regard to study the different aspects of women entrepreneurship. In one such study conducted by Sarfaraz et.al put forward that the degree at which entrepreneurship affects the economy depends on numerous factors, including the quality, gender composition and type of entrepreneurial activity. Gender equality and female entrepreneurship are the key factors in economic development. In another study conducted by Poonam Sinha it is revealed that the main motivation factor to start an enterprise was to earn money by both men and women entrepreneurs. The units of both men and entrepreneurs were suffering from inadequate income generation. While Shubhamitra Das put forward through her paper that new opportunities and forum could provide political space for women from diverse background to promote and fight for equitable gender relations.

Background of the study: The origin of Indian handloom industry dates back to days since time immemorial. Different varieties of traditional works with different techniques are carried in most part of the country. The Indian handloom industry not only

succeeded in demonstrating the artistry of weavers but also the richness and diversity of Indian culture. Assam, situated in the north eastern part of the country has been endowed with diverse culture and ethnicity which have enriched the handloom sector of the state. Undulating topography, differential climate and the rich ethno cultural background of the area have played a significant role in diverse nature of handloom products.

Sualkuchi Silk industry located in the Kamrup district of Assam in the bank of the Brahmaputra river is one of the prominent handloom industry of the region. The present study is an attempt to analyse the entrepreneurial activity of the Sualkuchi Silk industry with special References to women. It also tries to throw light on role of women as entrepreneur in the industry and their problems and gives suggestions to eliminate those hindrances.

Methodology: This study uses both primary and secondary data for the purpose of analysis. Primary data has been collected through field study and interviews through questionnaire cum schedule. Based on random sampling technique the sample size taken into consideration is of 17 units (household). While secondary data has been collected from different sources such as journals, news reports, publications etc.

Results: Socio-demographic characteristics

Out of the total number of sample (17) it was found that 88.23% of women fall in the age group of 35-40 years, whereas women with age above 40 constitute only 11.76%. And out of the total sample 12 (70.58%) had their educational level below matriculation whereas the 5(29.41%) of them acquired education till higher secondary level.

Family structure: The overall family structure among the surveyed sample was found to be nuclear family which has subsistence form of economy. 13(76.47%) out of 17 samples had single family structure while 4 (23.52%) of them had joint family structure having subsistence form of economy carrying forward their age old traditional business of handloom industry. Their income source are solely dependent on the handloom cottage industry of the area. The average income of the families excluding the expenditures is within Rs. 22,000 per month only. The overall expenditure pattern of the surveyed sample was found to be mostly incurred in raw materials, household goods and medical expenses.

Sualkuchi handloom industry: The Sualkuchi handloom industry is mainly a cottage based industry famous for producing Assam silk and Muga cloths. Even though all the members of the family are some way or the other involved in different aspects but women specially plays the pivotal role in working of the industry. The sample analysis shows that the handloom sectors still depends on traditional

indigenous hand driven machineries. While majority of the raw materials are procured from outside market mainly Mysore, but some amount of raw material is also brought from local sericulture cultivators. The production pattern is mostly in small scale where majority of the surveyed households has a minimum of 3-4 looms operated by rented weavers and family members themselves. The rented weavers are hired from different nearby parts of the state as Nalbari, Marigaon, Bongaigaon, Nagaon etc. The final products are mostly sold in the Sualkuchi market from where the products are further sold to other parts of the state, and the country by different traders.

Women Entrepreneurs: Problems: Women entrepreneurs working in the sualkuchi silk industry is characterised by traditional cultural values, relatively less spatial accessibility, low income, unavailability of local raw materials and less favourable business environment. Women entrepreneurs experience many typical challenges. (Singh & Saxena, 2000). Some of the major problems are discussed under heads below.

(a) Raw materials:

The study shows that, with the growth of the industry there has been a increasing trend in unavailability of locally produced raw materials as a result of which raw materials has to be procured from Mysore and other places. Due to which there has been a sudden hike in the price of the raw materials resulting in increase in cost of production ultimately increasing the market price of the final product which has affected the desirability of the customers to buy local products.

(b) Low educational level:

Most of the surveyed entrepreneurs have low level of education. It is seen that majority of them has only acquired up to primary level of education. This posed as an obstacle in their path of future development of the business.

(c) Machinery :

The handloom industry still depends on traditional indigenous looms which consumes more time and labour that ultimately affects their productivity. Long working hours and manual nature of the work has seemed to make them unequipped to compete against the modern power looms of other areas.

(d) Problem of liquidity and finance:

Although problem of liquidity and finance is common to both men and women entrepreneurs, it is acute for women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneur are mostly untrained, lack skills of book keeping, and mostly depend on personal savings, or savings from family and friends. Many factors have been responsible for low utilisation of bank credit by women, e.g., inadequate size of

loan, margin money requirements, ignorance of banking procedures, insistence of collateral time taken to process loan application, tight repayment schedules, lack of experience in formulating bankable projects, lack of marketing, accounting and management skills leading to failure of projects and consequently ability to repay loans, or simply an attitudinal problem not to approach banks and bankers' reservation about women customers/ventures. (Singh and Saxena, 2000).

- (e) Lack of self-confidence and family involvement:
The age old tradition of dominating women and suppressing their talent is evident through the present study which resulted in their diminishing self-confidence making them more dependent on their family members. Moreover due to prioritising the needs of the family led them to compromise many a times between their family needs and their potential.
- (f) Lack of inspiration:
Lack of exposure to the world outside their home due to lack of education, family responsibilities, lack of professional skills etc. have limited their boundaries. Moreover there is a acute lack of personal aspiration from their side to expand their horizon and reach their potentialities.
- (g) Competition with products from outside market:
The flooding of local markets with products from outside the state and the growing demands of such products in the market due to its cheap price has led to set back for the local entrepreneurs of the area.
- (h) Problem from employees:
Due to lack of skilled labours from local areas, the entrepreneurs have to hire weavers from other parts of the state which has increased the cost of production as well as increase in number of holidays and security deposits to be given to the weavers. This has resulted decrease in the number of working days of the weavers causing delay in their productivity.
- (i) Lack of information and experience:
Women entrepreneurs, because of their shy nature and low self-confidence, do not like to interact with outside, but like to interact through consultants only when problem becomes unmanageable. Due to poor information scanning and lack of business experience they are unable to tap market potential and also fail to encash on opportunities provided by various governmental schemes. (Singh and Saxena,2000)
- (j) Intrusion of middleman:
No proper marketing platform and lack of proper managerial skills, they are bound to sell their final products to middleman who sells their products at hefty amount ripping of their right to achieve the actual valuation of the product.

Strategies and prospects:

Empowerment is a process to increase an individual's intrinsic task motivation. In the context of women entrepreneurs, empowerment will mean chancing intrinsic motivation to involve in entrepreneurial ventures. Change agents, family members and policy makers can make integrated efforts to influence entrepreneurs' work role along the following dimensions (Singh and Saxena ,2000)

- (a) Provide basic vocational training:
The basic vocational training should be provided in a much larger and wider scale to the weavers and entrepreneurs of the area. Even though women entrepreneurs are carrying out the handloom business in a much micro scale and to make them professionally oriented, insight to vocational know how and different avenues is utmost essential.
- (b) Introduction of power looms:
Use of traditional looms has not only led to increasing working hours and low productivity but also indirectly led to increase in the production cost thereby decreasing their profit. The introduction of power looms will thus not only decrease the production hour but will also make the industry able competitor with the other handloom industries of the state and country.
- (c) Government initiatives and finance:
The handloom industry is one of the prominent industries of the region including majority of the women in the business. Therefore introduction and implementation of proper Government schemes, training programmes for management of entrepreneurial activities and proper credit system should be made easily available for the women entrepreneur.
- (d) Forming self-help groups:
Formation of local organisation for organising the activities related to handloom sector and bringing greater scope for marketing & business expansion is necessary. Creation of self help group is required in a local level where women entrepreneur can collectively organise their work and showcase their creativity and potential in a wider platform.
- (e) Role of NGO's and other such organisations:
NGOs' can intervene to a large extent in empowering the women entrepreneurs of the handloom industry by providing necessary awareness programs, enlighten them with government schemes, providing necessary counselling for the entrepreneurs and family members, becoming link between government and financial agencies and also providing the entrepreneurs with suitable markets for selling of their final products.
- (f) Women Entrepreneurs' Association:

An Women Entrepreneurs' Association can be formed. This can be initiated, in the beginning by the developmental agencies and promotional agencies. Many of the women entrepreneurs were not aware of the other co-entrepreneurs hence such an association would help develop kinship in the beginning and become more active later on. They can derive moral support from each other. They can also, as groups, seek help from different institutions. A formal association would also encourage other potential entrepreneurs. (Singha, 2003).

(g) Increasing accessibility :

Increasing accessibility through roads and other form of transportation can lead to greater connectivity. Moreover women entrepreneurs can also earn the benefits of online marketing facilities which will bring them at a closer proximity with the customers.

Conclusion: From the analysis of the samples it can be derived that Sualkuchi silk industry is one of the

most promising handloom industry of Assam carrying forward the legacy and vibrant culture and tradition of the handloom industry of the region. Overall means of livelihood of the people of the area solely depends upon the different stages of work of the handloom industry. Women who are the weavers and the entrepreneurs play the most significant role in sustenance and efficient working of the industry. Even though engulfed by various problems of raw materials, employees, technical knowhow, traditional nature of the work etc. But all this hindrance can be overthrown by change in the mindset of the people of the area who are more of conservative nature and lack professionalism, with proper implementation of the various initiatives of the government, together with knowledge about their competition outside market. Thus proper management would be able to bring improvement in the condition of the whole industry making them compatible and even making them sufficient to reach great height.

References:

1. Das, S. "Women and empowerment: predicament or affirmative action", *"The Indian Journal Of Political Science"*, VOL LXIII, No. 1, pp. 123-135.
2. Sinha, P. "Women entrepreneurship in the Northeast India: Motivation, social support and constraints", *"Indian Journal Of Industrial Relations"*, VOL. 38, No. 4, pp.425-443.
3. Singh, S. And Saxena, S.C. "Women entrepreneurs of Eastern UP: Challenges and Strategies of
4. Empowerment", *"Indian Journal Of Industrial Relations"*, VOL 36, No. 1, pp. 67-78.
5. Sarfaraz et al. "The relationship between women entrepreneurship and gender equality", *"Journal Of Global Entrepreneurship Research"*, VOL 2, No 6.
6. Revengar, A. & Sudhir, S. " Empowering women is smart Economics", *" Finance and Development"*, VIL 49, No.1, p. 4

Lekha Borah/ Research scholar/ Gauhati University /
Anuradha Borsaikia/Research scholar/Gauhati University/
Kaberi Dutta/ Student/ Gauhati University/