

Gendered Value and Household Decision-Making among Women Weavers in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Women's participation in the handloom sector plays a critical role in sustaining cultural heritage and rural livelihoods in India, yet their economic contribution often remains undervalued within both market systems and households. Using a mixed-methods approach, primary data were collected from 268 women weavers registered under two Cluster Development Programmes through structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. A Role-Value Matrix was employed to analyse the alignment between women's labour roles, cultural contributions, and economic returns, while a composite Women's Household Decision-Making Index (WHDMI) was constructed to assess levels of household autonomy. The findings reveal a pronounced gendered imbalance in value distribution, with women concentrated in culturally significant yet economically marginalized roles. Although economic participation has facilitated greater involvement in household decisions, the majority of women exhibit only moderate decision-making autonomy, indicating that income generation alone does not guarantee empowerment. The study underscores the multidimensional nature of women's empowerment and highlights the need for policy interventions that integrate income enhancement with financial literacy, institutional support, and socio-cultural sensitization to strengthen women's agency within households and value chains.

Keyword: Women, Decision-making, Household, Gender, Weavers

INTRODUCTION

India's rural industries form an essential part of its economic framework, where agriculture stands as the primary source of employment and serves as the backbone of the nation's economy. Following agriculture, the handloom sector emerges as the second-largest income-generating activity. Renowned for its rich tradition and exceptional craftsmanship, the handloom industry plays a crucial role in preserving India's vibrant cultural heritage. Globally acclaimed for its distinctive hand-spinning, weaving, and printing techniques, this sector holds a proud and enduring legacy (Handique, 2016).

In Assam, weaving traditionally served as a home-based activity primarily for domestic use, with women skilfully crafting textiles alongside their household responsibilities. Over time, the handloom sector has transitioned toward commercialization, with Sualkuchi emerging as a key commercial hub for silk handloom products, catering to global markets (Shaieka, 2023). This evolving industry presents a meaningful avenue for women to enhance their economic status and social standing within their families and communities. Mastery of this craft not only provides a steady source of income but also fosters financial autonomy, strengthening women's decision-making power at home (Brahma & Subrahmanyam, 2023).

Decision-making power, a cornerstone of autonomy, allows women to shape vital aspects of life independently. The connection between autonomy and empowerment lies in granting women control over their financial, social, and personal dimensions, enabling them to pursue aspirations and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Promoting autonomy in finance, mobility, and decision-making is pivotal for dismantling barriers and fostering an equitable and empowered society (Patil & Farooqui, 2015).

Empowerment, in its true sense, enables women to recognize their individuality, capabilities, and strengths across five critical dimensions: economic, political, social/cultural, personal, and familial. Each of these dimensions is crucial, as comprehensive empowerment occurs only when women gain access to economic resources, develop the courage to participate in power structures, foster social and cultural connections, build self-confidence, and have a decisive voice in family matters. Empowering women is not only essential for their well-being but also benefits the entire nation by addressing challenges such as illiteracy, unemployment, and social inequality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women constitute nearly half of India's population, making their participation in economic activities vital for sustainable national development. Despite this, women's actual contribution to the economy remains significantly below its potential due to persistent discrimination in access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. These structural inequalities have constrained women's ability to participate fully in economic processes and to realize their overall developmental prospects (Rao, 2019).

Within this broader context of economic participation, earning capacity plays a decisive role in shaping household financial decision-making. Traditional gender norms often undervalue women's financial contributions, particularly when their work is informal or home-based. Addressing this imbalance requires a shift in societal attitudes that recognizes and respects individual economic inputs irrespective of gender. Providing women with financial knowledge and decision-making skills enables them to actively manage household finances, strengthens intra-household equity, and enhances their contribution to the wider economy. Understanding this linkage between income generation and financial autonomy is therefore crucial for advancing gender equality and fostering inclusive family structures (Manzoor, Manzoor & Idrees, 2022).

Historically, women have played a foundational role in economic production through their engagement in traditional crafts such as pottery, leatherwork, house construction, and cordage weaving. This gendered division of labour often limits women's visibility and economic recognition within the sector (Mishra, Das & Sangma, 2021).

The Indian handloom industry, deeply embedded in the country's cultural and historical fabric, continues to be sustained by skilled artisans, predominantly women and economically marginalized groups from rural and semi-urban areas. Characterized by low capital requirements, reliance on local resources, affordable labour, and distinctive craftsmanship, the sector has gained increasing national and international recognition. Preserving this industry is not only vital for protecting India's textile heritage but also for ensuring livelihood security for millions of women artisans (Mishra & Mohapatra, 2021).

Moreover, the largely informal nature of the handloom sector offers flexibility and accessibility, enabling women to utilize indigenous skills and cultural knowledge while balancing household responsibilities. This flexibility promotes self-reliance and community empowerment, particularly in rural areas, while also generating employment opportunities in urban settings. By linking rural producers with urban markets, the handloom industry serves as a bridge between regions and social groups, reinforcing its role as a vehicle for inclusive economic development (Baruah & Saha, 2022).

In this context, financial empowerment emerges as a critical pathway through which women transition from passive contributors to active agents of change. When women gain control over financial resources and decision-making, they challenge entrenched gender norms and contribute to more equitable household and societal structures. Consequently, women's financial empowerment functions not merely as an economic outcome but as a catalyst for broader social transformation and inclusive development (Aulakh & Saluja, 2017).

OBJECTIVES

In the handloom sector, women weavers contribute significantly to household livelihoods, yet their influence over domestic decisions often remains limited. The objectives are framed to capture variations in authority, participation, and influence in household decisions, thereby providing empirical evidence on the linkage between women's financial contribution and empowerment at the household level.

- To examine gendered value distribution in the handloom sector by analysing the alignment between women's labour roles, cultural contributions, and economic returns using a Role-Value Matrix.
- To measure the level of household decision-making power of women weavers using a composite Women's Household Decision-Making Index (WHDMI).

METHODOLOGY

The research design encompasses the selection of the study area and target population, determination of sample size, sampling techniques, research approach, and methods of data collection. By combining statistical analysis with qualitative insights, the methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic realities, challenges, and opportunities faced by women weavers.

Study Area and Target Population: The study was undertaken in the Kamrup district of Assam, a region historically recognized for its rich handloom tradition and extensive participation of women in weaving-related activities. The district represents an important handloom hub in the state due to the prevalence of household-based production systems and the implementation of government-supported cluster initiatives aimed at strengthening traditional livelihoods. The target population comprised women handloom weavers registered under the Cluster Development Programme (CDP) operating within the district. At present, Kamrup district hosts two functional CDPs, located in the Bhidia and Kamalpur development blocks. These clusters were purposefully selected as they represent organized production units where women are not only primary contributors to weaving activities but also key actors in sustaining cultural heritage and household economies. Focusing on registered women weavers ensured the inclusion of respondents who are directly linked to institutional frameworks, government schemes, and cluster-based interventions.

Sample Size Determination and Sampling Technique: To obtain a statistically reliable and representative sample, the study adopted a simple random sampling technique, ensuring that each registered woman weaver had an equal probability of being selected. The total population across the two clusters consisted of 809 women weavers, with 400 registered under the Bhidia CDP and 409 under the Kamalpur CDP.

The sample size was determined using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, which is commonly applied in social science research to maintain an optimal balance between precision and feasibility. The formula is expressed as:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where N represents the total population (809) and e denotes the permissible error margin (0.05). The calculated sample size was:

$$n = \frac{809}{1 + 809(0.05)^2} = 268$$

Accordingly, a total of 268 women handloom weavers were selected for the study. The sample was proportionately drawn from both clusters to reflect their respective population sizes. The adoption of random sampling minimized selection bias and enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the findings within the study area.

Research Design and Approach: The study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the multifaceted nature of women's empowerment in the handloom sector. Empowerment is a multidimensional construct encompassing economic independence, decision-making authority, social participation, and personal agency; therefore, reliance on a single methodological approach would be insufficient.

- **Quantitative Component:** The quantitative component involved the administration of a structured questionnaire designed to collect measurable data on respondents' demographic profiles, income sources, contribution to household income, expenditure and savings patterns, access to financial resources, participation in economic decision-making, and involvement in social and community activities. This component enabled statistical analysis of empowerment indicators and facilitated comparison across respondents and clusters.
- **Qualitative Component:** To complement the quantitative findings, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with selected women weavers from both CDPs. The qualitative approach provided deeper insights into women's lived experiences, occupational challenges, coping strategies, perceptions of empowerment, and aspirations for social and economic mobility. The integration of both methods ensured methodological triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity and depth of the research outcomes.

Methods of Data Collection: The study relied on both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure a comprehensive and reliable analysis of women's empowerment in the handloom sector. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation of findings and enhanced the validity of the research by combining field-level evidence with broader sectoral perspectives.

- **Primary Data:** It was collected through field-based surveys and focus group discussions conducted in the Kamrup district. The structured questionnaire, consisting mainly of closed-ended questions, was administered through personal interviews to ensure clarity and accuracy.

In addition to the survey, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were organized to explore qualitative dimensions of empowerment, including the impact of income generation on women's social participation, access to healthcare, children's education, self-esteem, and overall living standards. These discussions provided contextual depth and assisted in interpreting the quantitative findings within the socio-cultural framework of the region.

- **Secondary data:** It was sourced from published academic literature, government reports, policy documents, and credible online sources. Key references included the Third and Fourth All-India Handloom Census, as well as reports from relevant government departments and handloom agencies. Secondary data offered valuable insights into broader trends in production, employment, policy interventions, and structural challenges in the handloom sector, thereby strengthening the analytical foundation of the study and enabling meaningful comparison with primary findings.

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The Role–Value Matrix provides a structured representation of women's participation in the handloom sector by mapping their roles against key dimensions of labour, knowledge, and economic outcomes. By juxtaposing experiential and cultural inputs with income generation and market access, the matrix offers a gender-sensitive value-chain perspective that reveals how women's labour is differentially recognized across stages of production and exchange. This approach helps to identify structural imbalances between women's cultural centrality and their economic returns within the handloom economy.

Women's Roles ↓ / Value Dimensions →	Experience	Time Investment (Hours/Day)	Skill & Knowledge Acquisition	Income Contribution	Market Reach
Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission	High	Moderate	Very High	Very Low	Very Low
Cultural Preservation	Very High	Very High	Very High	Low	Low
Heritage Custodianship	Very High	High	High	Moderate	Low
Bridging Tradition & Adaptation	High	Very High	Moderate	High	Very High
Global / Market Relevance	Low	High	Very Low	Very High	Very High

Figure 1-Role–Value Matrix of Women in Handloom

- The matrix highlights a clear stratification of women's roles in the handloom sector, demonstrating an inverse relationship between cultural embeddedness and economic recognition. Roles that are foundational to the continuity and identity of handloom traditions—such as intergenerational knowledge transmission and cultural preservation—are characterized by high levels of experience, time investment, and depth of skill acquisition, yet yield minimal income and market reach. This pattern indicates that culturally intensive labour performed by women remains largely invisible within formal value chains and is rarely translated into economic value.
- Women's role in intergenerational knowledge transmission emerges as one of the most knowledge-intensive but least remunerated. Despite very high levels of skill and knowledge acquisition and sustained experiential engagement, this role contributes negligibly to income generation and market participation. The marginal economic recognition of knowledge transmission underscores a critical valuation gap, where the reproduction of skills essential for sectoral sustainability is excluded from market mechanisms.
- Similarly, cultural preservation reflects women's deep immersion in traditional practices, with very high scores across experience, time investment, and learning. However, the low-income contribution and limited market reach associated with this role reinforce the perception of cultural labour as a non-commercial activity, often absorbed into women's domestic and social responsibilities rather than acknowledged as productive work.
- The role of heritage custodianship occupies an intermediate position within the matrix. While women in this category exhibit high experiential knowledge and sustained engagement, their economic outcomes remain modest. The moderate-income contribution coupled with low market reach suggests partial value capture, where heritage-based work enters markets indirectly but remains constrained by limited visibility and bargaining power.
- In contrast, roles associated with bridging tradition and adaptation demonstrate a more balanced alignment between labour input and economic return. High time investment and experience translate into stronger income contribution and extensive market reach, indicating that adaptive practices—such as design modification and responsiveness to consumer demand—enable women to access higher-value segments of the handloom value chain. Nonetheless, the moderate level of skill acquisition suggests reliance on informal learning, highlighting the absence of institutional support for innovation.
- The most pronounced shift is observed in roles linked to global or market relevance, where economic outcomes are the strongest despite low levels of experience and formal skill acquisition. High income contribution and market reach in this category reveal the profitability of market-facing activities, particularly those connected to export or commercial networks. However, women's limited experiential depth and learning access in this role indicate mediated participation, where economic gains do not necessarily correspond to increased agency or control over production processes.

Overall, the matrix reveals a systemic gendered imbalance in value distribution within the handloom sector. Women are concentrated in culturally vital but economically marginalized roles, while higher economic returns are associated with market-oriented activities that offer limited autonomy and skill development. This structural disconnect not only constrains women's economic empowerment but also raises concerns for the long-term sustainability of the handloom tradition, as the cultural and knowledge foundations of the sector remain undervalued within prevailing market frameworks.

Measurement of Household Decision-Making Power of Women Weavers

Decision-making power within the household is widely recognized as a crucial dimension of women's empowerment, reflecting their ability to influence matters that affect their personal, economic, and social well-being. In the context of the handloom sector, where women contribute significantly to household income yet often remain embedded in traditional family structures, assessing decision-making autonomy becomes particularly important. Accordingly, the present study examines the decision-making role of women weavers through a structured and composite index derived from primary survey data.

Classification of Decision-Making Levels

Based on the index values, women weavers were classified into three categories: low, moderate, and high decision-making autonomy. This classification enables a clearer understanding of the distribution of empowerment levels within the sample and facilitates comparison with other socio-economic and financial variables.

Distribution of Women Weavers by Decision-Making Level

An analysis of the Decision-Making Index for 268 women weavers reveals notable variations in household decision-making power. A significant proportion of the respondents fall within the moderate decision-making category, indicating that while women are increasingly involved in household decisions, their participation is often shared or consultative rather than fully autonomous. This suggests a transitional stage of empowerment, where women's economic contributions through handloom activities are gradually translating into greater recognition within the household.

A considerable segment of women weavers exhibits low decision-making autonomy, reflecting limited involvement and minimal authority in household matters. This group largely remains constrained by traditional gender norms, male-dominated household structures, and restricted control over resources, despite active engagement in income-generating activities.

Only a smaller proportion of the respondents demonstrate a high level of decision-making power, characterized by independent or joint authority, frequent participation, and substantial influence over household decisions. These women are more likely to exercise control over economic resources, including the use of their earnings, and to participate actively in decisions related to consumption, savings, and family welfare.

INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATION

The findings underscore that economic participation alone does not automatically ensure full decision-making autonomy for women weavers. While engagement in handloom activities has contributed to increased participation in household decisions, complete empowerment remains limited to a relatively smaller segment of the sample. The prevalence of moderate decision-making autonomy suggests that women's empowerment in the handloom sector is evolving but remains constrained by socio-cultural norms and intra-household power dynamics.

The Decision-Making Index thus serves as a robust empirical tool to capture the nuanced nature of women's empowerment, moving beyond income-based measures to incorporate agency and influence within the household. The results highlight the need for policy interventions that not only enhance women's income and financial inclusion but also promote awareness, education, and supportive family environments to strengthen women's decision-making power.

The analysis of the Women's Household Decision-Making Index reveals important insights into the nature and extent of empowerment experienced by women weavers in the handloom sector. The predominance of women in the moderate decision-making category indicates that economic participation through handloom activities has enabled women to move beyond complete exclusion from household decisions; however, it has not resulted in full autonomy for the majority. This pattern reflects a partial transformation of gender relations, where women are increasingly consulted but do not consistently exercise independent authority.

The high incidence of moderate decision-making autonomy suggests that decision-making within weaver households is largely characterized by joint or consultative processes, particularly with spouses. While joint decision-making may be viewed as a positive departure from strictly male-dominated authority, it also underscores the persistence of patriarchal norms that limit women's independent control over household affairs. In many cases, women's participation appears to be conditional upon their contribution to household income rather than an inherent recognition of their agency.

The substantial proportion of women falling into the low decision-making autonomy category highlights the continued vulnerability of women weavers within traditional household structures. Despite their engagement in productive and income-generating activities, these women experience limited influence over household decisions, indicating a disconnect between economic contribution and decision-making power. This finding reinforces existing evidence that women's labour participation, particularly in informal and home-based sectors such as handloom weaving, does not automatically translate into enhanced bargaining power within the household.

Conversely, the relatively smaller group of women exhibiting high decision-making autonomy represents a segment where economic participation has successfully translated into meaningful empowerment. These women are more likely to exercise control over the use of their earnings, participate actively in decisions related to household expenditure, savings, and children's welfare, and influence broader family matters. Their position suggests that decision-making power is closely linked not only to income generation but also to factors such as financial literacy, asset ownership, duration of engagement in handloom activities, and supportive family environments.

Overall, the distribution of decision-making autonomy across the three categories reflects a continuum of empowerment rather than a binary outcome. The findings indicate that women weavers are situated at different stages of empowerment, shaped by intersecting economic, social, and cultural constraints. While handloom-based livelihoods provide women with a critical entry point into economic participation, entrenched gender norms and intra-household power relations continue to mediate the extent to which this participation translates into authority and autonomy.

The use of the Decision-Making Index enables a nuanced understanding of empowerment by moving beyond simplistic income-based indicators to capture women's agency, participation, and influence within the household. The results demonstrate that empowerment is a multidimensional process, requiring not only access to income and financial inclusion but also structural changes in household norms, gender roles, and decision-making practices.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that initiatives aimed at empowering women weavers should extend beyond income enhancement and employment generation. Interventions such as financial literacy programmes, awareness-building on women's rights, capacity-building initiatives, and family-level sensitization are essential to strengthen women's decision-making power. Without addressing the social and cultural dimensions of empowerment, economic gains alone may lead only to incremental rather than transformative changes in women's status within the household.

CONCLUSION

The study provides critical insights into the complex relationship between women's economic participation, value recognition, and household decision-making power within the handloom sector. The findings demonstrate that while women weavers play a central role in sustaining cultural heritage and household livelihoods, their labour remains unevenly valued across the handloom value chain. The Role-Value Matrix reveals a structural disconnect wherein culturally intensive and knowledge-driven roles—predominantly performed by women—yield minimal economic returns, while market-oriented activities generate higher income without necessarily enhancing women's agency or skill development.

The analysis of the Women's Household Decision-Making Index further indicates that economic participation has facilitated a shift from exclusion toward moderate inclusion in household decisions for many women weavers. However, full decision-making autonomy remains limited to a smaller segment, suggesting that income generation alone is insufficient to transform entrenched gender norms and intra-household power relations. Empowerment emerges not as a binary outcome but as a continuum shaped by financial literacy, duration of economic engagement, access to institutional support, and the broader socio-cultural environment.

These findings reinforce the argument that women's empowerment in informal and home-based sectors requires an integrated approach that extends beyond employment generation. Policy interventions must combine income enhancement with capacity-building, financial inclusion, recognition of cultural labour, and household-level sensitization to ensure that women's economic contributions translate into meaningful authority and autonomy. Strengthening women's decision-making power is essential not only for gender equity but also for the long-term sustainability of the handloom sector, as the preservation of traditional knowledge and skills depends fundamentally on the empowerment of the women who sustain it.

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