



# Empowering women through alternative livelihoods in the coastal areas of the sundrbans, west bengal, india.

Arabindu Sardar,  
Assistant Professor in History,  
Sarat Centenary College, Dhaniakhali, Hooghly &  
Ph.D Research Scholar of The University of Burdwan.

## Abstract:

Women comprise over half of the world's population and play an important role for the well-being of their family members and sustainable development of their communities and nations, and also for the maintenance of the Earth's eco-systems, bio-diversity, and natural resources. United Nations Environment Programmers hope that women and their psychological affinity towards the environment will inspire the future of environmental and sustainable development of community towards the better understanding of the importance of gender and integration of gender perspectives across the world. There is a fundamental difference between the attitude of men and that of women towards Nature and natural resources. Throughout history, men used to look natural resources as commercial entities or income generating tools, while women have tended it to see the environment as a resource supporting of their basic needs. As we know very well that, women usually collect the dead branches, dry-leaves as fuel for cooking rather than cutting the trees. Ecological conditions are gradually deteriorating in the Sundarbans, being associated with poverty, unlimited and unplanned settlements leading to the environmental degradation. Production and processing of biomass, agriculture, and forestry and village crafts based on biomass as raw materials are also the biggest sources of employment in the Sundarbans. Since the Sundarbans is an underdevelopment region, women are ceaselessly facing additional barriers to empower themselves due to the viable presence of the issues like- male dominated society, illiteracy, lack of economic independence and conservative social structure with religious obscurantist practices and beliefs. I would discuss alternative livelihoods option of women in the Sundarbans.

**Key words:** Sundarbans, livelihood, migration, alternative women.

The age-old Indian tradition created a kind of belief that woman born to manage their households. No doubt, they are efficient in dealing with family activities. But gradually, a larger group of people came to realize that women can do the other important things of life as men can. When the idea of women empowerment came into existence, several projects and policies were taken by the governments (Central and State) and various non-government organizations to empower them, mainly to the rural womenfolk.

The concepts like '*Bharat Nirman*', '*Shining India*', '*Rainbow*', '*National Building Process*', '*Socio-Economic Development*' and '*Good Governance*' are not possible without participation and empowerment of rural women. Empowerment of women involves many things like economic opportunity, property rights, political representation, social equality, personal rights and so on. Historically almost in all parts of the world, either by law or by custom, the status of women is undermined by asymmetrical power relationships in decision making, personal and social rights, access to resources and entitlement.

The National Commission for women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women<sup>1</sup>. The West Bengal Commission for women was also established (29<sup>th</sup> July, 1992) for the same purposes<sup>2</sup>. The goal of this policy is to out about advancement, development and empowerment for women. The objective of the Acts is to represent the rights of women in India and to provide a voice for their issues and concerns. The prime subjects that have included are prohibition of dowry and domestic violence, demands for equal wage and representation of women in jobs. These also discuss violence against women, building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women organizations.

The National Policy for empowerment of women (2001) has emphasized on policies for upliftment, development and empowerment in socio-economic-political and cultural area. It also stresses on creating awareness on various issues in relation to the empowerment. The policies aim at creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for development of women, ensuring fundamental rights and freedom for women. It also aims to give equal access to participation and decision making in social, political and economic life. It gives importance on women's equal access to health care, quality education etc. and finally strengthens the legal systems for elimination of discrimination to women.

Naila Kabeer divides interrelated 'empowerment' into three dimensions: agency (pre-conditions), resources (process) and achievements (out comes). Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. Resources are the medium through which agencies are exercised and achievements refer to the outcomes of agencies<sup>3</sup>. The empowerment is a process and it would cover 'resource need to exercise life choices', 'well-being outcomes', 'autonomy' etc.

June Lennie illustrates four forms<sup>4</sup> of empowerment among rural women. These are mostly interrelated among them. The first one is *Social empowerment* means new knowledge and information, awareness and understanding of developing new skills, abilities, confidence and competence, obtaining the friendship and support of other women, participating in various activities with other women. The second is *Technological empowerment* means imparting new knowledge and awareness about new benefits of technology for rural development and tourism development or development of agriculture cooperatives. The third one is *Political empowerment* means influence to other government policies and decisions directed to rural communities, changing of town-based beliefs, networking in government and industry and other issues affecting rural women and rural communities. The fourth one is *psychological empowerment* which helps to increase self-confidence and self-esteem, greater motivation, inspiration, enthusiasm and interest to develop news skills and knowledge pushing for better services for rural people, feelings of belonging related to participation in the online groups in particular.

The Question that arises is what can be done to improve the livelihood opportunities of the local indigenous people specially women in a changing climate? And what kind of alternatives socio-economic strategy should be taken for this region to developed livelihoods patterns, constraints and opportunities? Maintaining lives and livelihoods in the Sundarbans are continuously in danger by being challenged high levels of risks from cyclonic storms, tidal creek erosion, embankment failures, salinity intrusion to other natural processes. The basic predominant livelihood activities and forestry in the Sundarbans are mostly male dominated.

The Sundarbans are divided into two parts: mainland and island. Comparatively, the economic opportunities and benefits of people living in mainland are much better than those who live in the islands. The communities of the island mostly constituted of small agricultural land holders, landless labourers and full time or part-time fishermen. In the Sundarbans, there are two avenues of alternative earning for the destitute, poor and helpless women due to environmental reasons. One is to work alternatively from own home, through which the income of the family will increase and beautiful life together in own family. The other is to make a living by migrating to the urban area with family or alone for alternative income.

Migrations always open alternative livelihoods options. It is a combination of 'push' and 'pulls' factors, indicating opportunities for employment of women in the city or urban areas. Migration tends to highlight economic factors behind marital family migration i.e. extreme poverty, insurmountable debt traps, lack of earning opportunities in the rural economy, and the general dwindling of rural resources. Such causality is driven by traditional push arguments.

Rural-urban migration for alternative livelihood has been one of the most prevalent features of developing economics struggling with decelerating agricultural growth and lack of adequate rural non-farm employment. Single woman's migration is often perceived as a revocation of family authority. Desertion, widowhood, social transgressions or marriage are the chief causes of women migration.

In recent years, the public focus on ‘trafficking’ masks, as focused in the debates of the nineteenth century, indicated three factors compelling women to migrate on their own: These are –(a) when they suffer impoverishment through inadequacy or loss of male earnings by desertion, barrenness, or widowhood; (b) when denied familial/ community resources for transgression of family, caste, or community moral codes; and (c) when they wish to physically escape oppressive fathers, husbands and others family<sup>5</sup>. These three categories of women figure prominently both in individual rural-urban migration.

Twentieth Century onwards, women’s participation in the paid labour force has risen more or less continuously. There are also financial reasons why a growing number of women have entered into the domestic labour market from the Sundarbans region. The traditional family model composing a breadwinner, female housewife and dependent children is gradually breaking down. Economic pressures on the households, including a sharp rise in male unemployment, led more women to seek paid work. Many households now find two incomes are required in order to sustain a minimum desired lifestyle. Other changes in household structure, including high rate of singlehood (nuclear family) and childlessness as well as growth in lone-mother households, has meant that women outside traditional families have also been entering the labour market-either out of choice or necessity<sup>6</sup>.

Women workers from the Sundarbans have traditionally been engaged in routine occupations and caring jobs such as nursing, child caring (*aaya*) and housekeeping works. Occupational gender segregation refers that men and women are mostly involved in different types of job, but women largely dominate the domestic work, particularly in rural and semi urban areas. According to Anthony Giddens, a prominent American Sociologist says many women have chosen to enter the labour market out of a desire for personal fulfilment<sup>7</sup>. For a new migrant, having a friend or a relative in the city adds a valuable social capital. It is through their contacts with migrants who had already employed, the new migrants manage accommodation as well as a relative job. These personalized channels are crucial factors in migration. Personal networking with friends, relatives, and co-villagers, brokers, *dadals* continuously generate a chain of migration of workers from rural to urban area<sup>8</sup>.

A growing number of women now work as full-timer outside their homes, a large proportion of women are remain concentrated in part-time employments. In recent decades, opportunities for part-time work have increased enormously in the area of domestic work in the urban or city areas. Part time jobs more flexibility for employees than full time work. So these jobs are often been favoured by women who continuously search for balancing works and family obligations. However, part-time domestic work carries certain disadvantages, such as low pay, job insecurity and limited opportunities for betterment.

The government infrastructure is extremely inadequate particularly in islands perhaps because of remoteness and inaccessibility during monsoon months. In order to averse risks relating to livelihoods, people of the Sundarbans also involve in a number of alternative activities. Besides various governmental

schemes, a good numbers of civil society organizations such as NGOs also provide basic training to women for improvement of the capabilities of the vulnerable communities.

The most effective government scheme that is helping to improve the living standards of the Sundarbans islanders is Mahatama Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). It is woman friendly programme and the income through this programme helps a lot in achieving economic independence and thus contributes to extend their empowerment. Government sponsored livelihood schemes also continue to play important role in reducing vulnerability and in mitigating hazards. Through this scheme government provided guaranteed hundred days of works to people (men and women) living below poverty line (BPL). The cash for work schemes encourage social forestry in restoring and protecting the eco-system.

Another economic scheme for ensuring upliftment and empowerment of rural women in these regions is The Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY). SGSY was launched by the Union Ministry of Rural Development on April 1, 1999, which was subsequently replaced by Integrated Rural Development (IRDP) and allied schemes. The objective of SGSY is to ameliorate of the assisted poor families (*Swarozgaris*) from the poverty line by ensuring appreciable increase in incomes over a period of time. The objective is to uplift the underprivileged by inter-allied schemes through a process of social mobilization, training, capacity building and there is a provision of income generating assets through a mix of bank credits and government subsidies.

The two schemes together have significant role in the socio-economic development of the Sundarbans particularly the rural women. The first scheme is usually managed by the *panchayet* supervisors and in the second one, there are different promotional institutions. In the case of the Sundarbans, different agencies are working. In all cases, financial transactions are now being done through the banks.

Empowerment of rural women is not possible without monetary freedom. Earning money brings economic freedom to the rural women as well as peace and healthy living in the family. Various self-help groups have been able to empower women in the Sundarbans to become economically self reliant and provided alternative livelihoods too.

Self-Help Promoting Institutions (SHPIs) have the potential to empower women in rural areas through micro credit and related financial services, which promote the 'Self Help Groups'. SHPI's key role is to bring up the SHGs of rural poor women. Generally three types of SHPI are categorized in West Bengal<sup>9</sup>:- 1. Government SHPI (*panchayet*), 2. Non-governmental SHPI (different NGOs) 3, and combined functions of NGOs and Governments. Self help group formation, monitoring and empowerment of the rural women through income generating activities are the main functions of SHPIs.



Self-help groups are voluntary in nature. The structures are small. They are usually formed by peers who come together for mutual assistance in satisfying common needs, like overcoming common life disrupting problems, and bring out desired social and personal change. The initiators and members of such groups perceive that their needs cannot be addressed only by the existing social institutions. Self-help groups emphasize on face to face social interactions and on personal responsibility of the members. They often provide material assistance, as well as emotional support; they are frequently "cause"-oriented, and promulgate an ideology or values through which members may attain an enhanced sense of personal identity.<sup>10</sup>

In the Sundarbans the promotional institutions are-Governments, Banks, NGOs, NABARD and other local micro financial institutions. These institutions not only help the groups through financial help but also monitor the groups for recovery of loan. They promote different training programmes distributing benefits to the groups. Social and economic developments as a whole play significant role in the development of women in society. The SHGs are playing very pivotal role providing access to financial services to the working women of the groups.<sup>11</sup> Women members of SHGs can get loan under the different schemes of SGSY through DRDC (District Rural Development Cell).

In the Sundarbans, the SHG groups of women usually belong to same socio-economic conditions. They are associated with depredation of poverty and most of them often reside in same locations. The SHGs raise a common fund, open a group's bank account for doing a small business and fulfil livelihood requirements of the groups. NGOs, Regional Rural Banks (RRBs) are also playing important role in promoting the SHGs in the Sundarbans.

The Sundarbans belong to two districts of West Bengal: South 24 parganas and North 24 parganas. It is observed that SGSY is largely acting as catalyst in the Sundarbans under SHGs bank linkage programme. Simultaneously, SHGs have been formed by other agencies too like-NGOs, banks, co-operatives etc. The number of SHGs working for empowerment of rural women in the under developed Sundarbans is presented below:<sup>12</sup>

Table no-1 Numbers of Self -Help Groups.

District	SGSY	Other Agency
North 24 Parganas	11270	26066
South 24 Parganas	20402	8944

It is estimated that there are more than 381144 SHGs in West Bengal, out of which 150201 SHGs have been formed under the SGSY alone.<sup>13</sup> A lot of initiatives have been undertaken to implement self help groups by 50:50 ratio for uplifting women and engaged them to micro-enterprises which are essentially linked to their livelihoods. Under the schemes, NGOs hire women from low income groups for re-

plantation of mangrove. This plan improves the economic situation of women as they have additional sources of income. Further it improves the environmental balance in the delta.

Field studies reflect that members of self help groups engaged in traditional livelihood activities with the help of different NGOs and government schemes are good in number and their area of activities are the following:

Table no-2 List of Alternative Activities by SHGs.

Name of the Island	SHGs group activities
Gharamara	Betel vine orchard, Making cotton yarn,
Sagardwip	poultry, horticulture, Betel vine orchard, Animal husbandry, Bee Keeping,
Mousuni	Betel vine orchard, poultry, horticulture, Bee Keeping,
Namkhana	Goatery, poultry, horticulture, Betel vine orchard, Animal husbandry, Bee Keeping,
Patharpratima	poultry, horticulture, Animal husbandry, Bee Keeping,
G-plot	Sunflower cultivation, Betel vine orchard, cultivation of green chillies.

Paribesh Unnayan Parishad (PUPA), Society for Socio Economic and Ecological Development (SEED) and Sabuj Sangha are some of the NGOs in the Sundarbans that are playing pivotal role in the socio-economic development of women in these regions. Paribesh Unnayan Parishad was established on the concept of sustainability, economic growth and furthering social ties. They help in fostering community ownership and village level institution building. The groups (SHGs), village coordinator and local facilitating clubs act as pillars for local Institution building.

PUPA works closely with the women self help groups and other groups for implementation and monitoring of livelihood improvement and climate change adaptation activities. These SHGs further helped strengthening livelihood improvement training and actions. PUPA works in the Sundarbans, mainly at Sagar Island and their beneficiaries are given below<sup>14</sup>:

Table no-3 Beneficiaries list of PUPA.

Nature of Group	Number	Total members	Female	Male
SHG	77	1083	1061	22
SGSY	22	331	331	NIL

The activities of this NGO with the beneficiaries are based on economic cost at the ratio 50:50.<sup>15</sup> They work livelihood improvement and climate resilient activities in the Sundarbans with SHGs like integration

of duck, azolla, fish and paddy cultivation, kitchen gardening, chick rearing, chick breeding, black Bengal goat, nursery and plantation etc.

Sabuj Sangha is a non-governmental development organization, working for sustainable development of marginalized and vulnerable people of the Sundarbans to improve their quality of life through empowerment, education, information, infrastructure development and economic self-reliance through convergence of services provided by local governments.

Sabuj Sangha recognizes women and supports women's self help groups with inputs in livelihood initiatives. They support assistance of micro finance as well as institution building, and provide impetus to financial empowerment. At the same time, SHGs involve in local multi-sectoral development initiatives. All these efforts together help women to claim a distinct and empowering space for themselves in becoming articulate spokespersons for their communities and in influencing the climate. Thus their focus is closely interlinked with environmental and climate change adaptation measures.<sup>16</sup>

Activities and supportive role of the Sabuj Sangha is primarily pond based integrated farming (PBIF) which supports farmers, and contributes income and food security. They also provide micro finance support for economic empowerment of rural women and livelihood promotion for off-farm small business enterprises through SHGs.<sup>17</sup> Women SHGs have women's cooperatives and associated with products like bakery, dairy, poultry farming and feed etc.

SEED, one of the pioneer NGOs is working in the Sundarbans for the last two decades. SEED builds up capacity to reduce economic vulnerability of climate change areas, organises various activities in different sectors of livelihood generation. There are 700 women self help groups (SHGs) and 10 fish production Groups (FPGs) covering 10000 families in the Sundarbans dispensing capacity building training to different livelihood activities. SEED provide skill assessment entrepreneurship development training to women for preparation of nature based handicraft items. Thus, more than 250 women were trained in preparing photo frames, lamp shades, hand bags, pen stands, mobile holders, clay dolls, jute bags, paper bags, batik printing on cloth item and embroidery etc.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the women groups have started food manufacturing business. They process rice into *muri* and sold it in the markets. The self help groups therefore encourage women's entrepreneurial spirit and there by improve their purchasing power.

Nature, Environment & Wildlife Society (NEWS) provides training for upgradation of socio-economic condition to the womenfolk of the Sundarbans islanders through Sea Weed Culture as an alternative livelihood<sup>19</sup>. Sea weed is a favourable protein supplement to the under-nourished womenfolk. Mud crab farming is one of the livelihood options of the coastal communities. It was a breakthrough for a sustainable alternative livelihood of rural youth men and women empowerment after the cyclone 'Aila'. The effect of *Aila* cyclone is maximum in paddy cultivated areas including freshwater ponds.



Women also engage in fish collection and fish drying process during the month of October to February as they have no other viable alternative livelihood during this period. Now in the Sundarbans of Frezarganj area at Kalistan and Baliara Char two important dry fish business centres were established<sup>20</sup>. Before, only main dry fishing centre was in Jambudwip. This island remains completely uninhabited excepting the fishing season when the fisherfolk pitch their camps as temporary hutments<sup>21</sup>. In fisheries, women have traditionally been engaged in pre- and post- monsoon period for prawn seed collections. DISHA (2006) reported that an estimated more than 50,000 people are involved in fish seed collections in the districts of North & South 24-Parganas, among them around 75 per cent are women.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, NGOs help awareness programmes about various governmental schemes and thereby helped to reduce the migration of local communities during the dry season providing alternative livelihood options. 'Livelihood diversification not only reduces the necessity of forced migration but develops locally relevant and environmentally sustainable livelihood options. And also livelihood diversification is an important tool to free people of lower caste and class to escape from the "poverty trap".<sup>23</sup>

#### Reference:-

1. <https://wcd.nic.in> The Act vide notification No-S.O.99(E), dated 31-01-1992, access date-03-04-2020.
2. [www.wbcdwds.gov.in](http://www.wbcdwds.gov.in), access date-03-04-2020.
3. Naila Kabeer, 'Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third millennium development Goal', *Gender and Development*, Vol-13, No.1, March-2005, p.14.
4. June Lennie, 'Rural women's empowerment in a communication technology project: Some contradictory effects', *Rural Society*, Volume-12, No-3, p.229.
5. Samita Sen & Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic Days, Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, p.77.
6. Anthony Giddens, 'Sociology', Polity Press, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2005, p.391.
7. *Ibdi.*, p.391.
8. Samita Sen & Nilanjana Sengupta, *Domestic Days, Women, Work and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, p.89.
9. [https://shgsewb.gov.in/shgportal/schemes\\_prgm](https://shgsewb.gov.in/shgportal/schemes_prgm) dated 20.03.2022.
10. Alfred H. Katz, 'Self-help and mutual aid: An Emerging Social Movement?', *Annual Reviews Social*, 1981, vol.7, pp.135-136.
11. Sagarika Saha, 'SHGs are the path towards an inclusive, self-reliant and sustainable society', *Essays on Health, Education and Women Empowerment in India*, Pranab Kumar Chattopadhyay and Daya Shankar Kushwaha (eds), Renu Publishers, New Delhi, 2015, p.99.
12. Durgadas Roy, 'Mid-term evaluation of the composition and working of Swarnajayanti Gram Swarozgar Jojana in 24 Parganas South District (West Bengal)', Project report, Planning Commission, Govt. of India, Calcutta, June-2007, p.22.
13. *Ibid.*, p.22.

14. Final Report, Paribesh Unnayan Parishad, 2018-19, p.17.
15. Ibid., p.17.
16. Interview with Arunabha Das, Head of Resource Mobilization & External relations Officer, Sabuj Shagha, dated-12-01-2020.
17. Annual Report, Sabuj Shagha, 2014-15, p.20.
18. Annual Report, SEED, 2017-18, p.12.
19. <https://naturewildlife.org/> dated.20.02.2022.
20. Aparna Roy and others, 'Socio-Economic features of women folk of Indian Sundarbans involved in Fish Drying', *Indian Journal of Extension Education*, vol.53, no.2, 2017, p.143.
21. Bikash Roy Chowdhuri, *The Moon and the Net: Study of the Transient Community of Fishermen at Jambudwip*, Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata, 1980, Reprinted 2003, p.3.
22. Pradip Chatterjee (Chief Coordinator), 'A Study on Corporate Abuse in Sundarban', Society for Direct Initiative for Social & Health Action, January, 2006, p.21.
23. S. Jain and others, 'Livelihood Diversification by Indigenous communities of Sundarbans', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.6, Number.2, 2016, pp.136-137.

