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## TRANSFORMING LIVES: THE CONTRIBUTION OF MISING WOMEN SELF-HELP GROUPS (SHGS) IN DHEMAJI, ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

The study emphasizes the critical role of women in rural development, highlighting their economic and social empowerment as drivers of positive change. In developing countries, women are pivotal in household management and agricultural activities, yet persistent gender inequalities hinder their potential. Women often lack access to resources, education, and property rights, which limits their productivity and income-earning opportunities. Their responsibilities extend beyond farming to include household chores, caregiving, and income-generating activities such as trading and wage labor, often working 12 hours more per week than men, especially in regions affected by climate change and migration. Despite their extensive roles, women face significant barriers due to limited access to resources, services, and decision-making power. Addressing these issues is essential for sustainable community growth, as women's participation directly influences social fabric and local economies. Recognizing the changing landscape of smallholder agriculture amid globalization, climate challenges, and technological advancements underscores the need for supporting women to adapt and capitalize on emerging opportunities. To achieve equitable development, gender inclusion must be systematically integrated into rural programs, encouraging women's participation in planning and leadership roles. Promoting women's associations and ensuring their involvement in decision-making can lead to more balanced and effective rural development. Specifically, empowering Mising women in the studied villages under Ujani Sissi Tangani Panchayat is vital for reducing poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. This paper

explores the contributions of Mising women, emphasizing their importance in fostering sustainable socio-economic progress in their communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Empowerment, Gender inequality, Rural development, Women's participation, Sustainable progress etc.

## INTRODUCTION

Women play a crucial role in agriculture and rural development across Asia-Pacific, regardless of their country's level of economic progress. Their contributions are vital for ensuring food security, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and fostering community resilience (FAO, 2011). However, traditional societal norms, patriarchal practices, religious interpretations, and widespread illiteracy significantly restrict women's participation and mobility, hindering their ability to contribute fully to economic and social sectors (Kabeer, 2005). These constraints often render women's contributions invisible in economic monitoring and planning processes, as their work is undervalued or unrecognized, thereby confining them to reproductive roles and denying access to resources that could enhance their social and economic status (World Bank, 2012).

Despite low formal membership in agricultural cooperatives, women influence these organizations indirectly through household heads, shaping decision-making and resource allocation within households (Doss, 2002). Barriers such as limited participation in decision-making and leadership roles persist, with women often perceiving administrative responsibilities as the domain of men. In countries like India, women's membership in agricultural cooperatives remains minimal, and few serve on governing boards, reflecting persistent gender disparities (Singh & Singh, 2020). Women actively participate in women's associations within cooperatives, organizing activities around household and farm life, which provides some avenues for social engagement and skill development (Kumar & Singh, 2018). Rural women, especially in developing nations, are among the poorest and most vulnerable populations, disproportionately affected by poverty. Empirical evidence indicates that rural women face higher poverty levels than men, exacerbated by gender bias and inequality in access to land, credit, and education (UN Women, 2014). Development strategies have historically overlooked gender equity, often viewing women merely as beneficiaries rather than active agents in development processes (Mayoux, 2001). Consequently, rural women continue to lack access to essential services such as food, healthcare, and education,

underscoring the urgent need to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into rural development policies to promote equitable growth and empowerment (World Bank, 2013).

### **Status of Mising Women**

The status of Mising women reflects their significant yet unequal role within their society, highlighting both their contributions and the persistent gender disparities. Women actively participate in all stages of agricultural work, from soil preparation to harvesting, often working alongside men but with limited recognition (Das & Baruah, 2017). They also manage household chores such as weaving, cooking, and gathering vegetables and firewood, which are vital for the sustenance of their families (Sarma & Dutta, 2019). Beyond domestic responsibilities, women engage in income-generating activities like selling livestock and woven products, often independently of their husbands, primarily supporting their children's needs and contributing to household livelihoods (Kumar & Hazarika, 2020).

Despite these vital economic contributions, women face significant legal and social restrictions. They lack inheritance rights, and in the event of their husband's death, can only inherit property by marrying their deceased husband's younger brother, a practice rooted in customary laws that limit women's economic independence (Mishra, 2018). This restriction effectively marginalizes women from accumulating and controlling land and other assets, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence. Women's political representation in community decision-making bodies, known as Kébang, remains minimal; they usually attend as witnesses or appellants rather than as active decision-makers (Bhattacharyya & Saikia, 2016). Their limited participation in leadership roles reflects broader gender biases, with religious roles predominantly reserved for men, and women often barred from serving as priests or engaging fully in religious ceremonies (Baruah, 2015).

Family decisions are primarily made by male members, although women's opinions may sometimes influence decisions related to children's marriages and household affairs (Dutta & Baruah, 2019). While some interpret these restrictions as social discipline rather than outright discrimination, it is clear that Mising women occupy a lower societal status, facing systemic barriers that hinder their social mobility and empowerment (Bora & Talukdar, 2021). However, increasing access to education for girls is gradually fostering change, providing new opportunities for girls to challenge traditional norms and promoting a shift toward greater gender equality and empowerment within the community (Sharma & Goswami, 2020).

## **Objectives**

1. To assess the impact of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) on the economic empowerment of Mising women in Assam.
2. To analyze the contribution of SHGs in enhancing sustainable livelihood practices among Mising women.
3. To identify the key challenges faced by Mising women in participating in SHGs and adopting sustainable livelihood strategies.
4. To examine the role of SHGs in promoting social empowerment and community cohesion among Mising women.
5. To evaluate the effectiveness of SHG-led interventions in improving the overall quality of life and environmental sustainability of Mising women and their communities.

## **Significance of the Research**

The Mising tribe, predominantly residing in Assam's Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, and other districts, relies heavily on agriculture, with 80% of their population depending on it for livelihood. Mising women are vital contributors to farming and rural development, significantly impacting food production, household income, nutrition, and social welfare. Despite their crucial role, social barriers and gender biases often conceal their contributions, and government programs frequently overlook women in agriculture. Enhancing rural Mising women's access to education and resources can unlock their full potential, leading to improved socio-economic outcomes such as increased productivity, literacy, and poverty reduction. Opportunities in agricultural extension, land reforms, and rural welfare can further empower women, as evidenced by successful initiatives like credit access and water supply projects targeting women's participation. The agriculture sector, integral to the region's economic growth, continues to benefit from women's involvement, yet their contributions remain under-recognized by policymakers. This study highlights how rural Mising women are becoming catalysts for development and empowerment, emphasizing the need for targeted efforts to recognize and harness their workforce for sustainable rural progress and economic growth in Assam.

## **Review of Literature**

The role of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in empowering women and transforming rural communities has garnered significant academic attention over the past few decades. SHGs are recognized as vital instruments for promoting socio-economic development, particularly

in marginalized and tribal populations (Kumar & Pal, 2010). In the context of Assam, tribal women's participation in SHGs has been pivotal in fostering economic independence, social cohesion, and community development (Dutta & Baruah, 2015).

The Mising community, an indigenous group in Dhemaji district of Assam, has historically faced socio-economic challenges such as limited access to education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities (Baruah & Das, 2017). The formation of women's SHGs within this community has been a strategic intervention to address these issues, promoting microfinance, skill development, and social empowerment (Sarma & Goswami, 2018). Studies have shown that Mising women's involvement in SHGs has led to increased household income, improved decision-making power, and greater social recognition (Hazarika & Rahman, 2019).

Research by Singh (2020) emphasizes that SHGs act as catalysts for transforming traditional gender roles, enabling women to participate actively in economic activities and community affairs. Furthermore, the collective strength of SHGs fosters a sense of solidarity and self-reliance among women, leading to sustainable development (Khan & Mukherjee, 2021). However, challenges such as lack of proper training, limited access to credit, and cultural barriers continue to hinder the full potential of these groups (Gupta & Sharma, 2022).

The literature accentuate that Mising women's SHGs in Dhemaji have significantly contributed to socio-economic transformation, although there remains scope for addressing existing challenges to maximize their impact (Das & Baruah, 2023).

### **Research Methods Adopted**

Ethnographic and survey research methods were employed in three selected villages within Ujani Sissi Tangani Gram Panchayat of Sissiborgaon Revenue Circle. Data collection involved face-to-face interviews; Key Informants Interviews and FGD were conducted within the villages. A total of 15 local women, five from each village, representing farming families, were interviewed. The data collection took place during August and September 2024. Besides, observational methods were used to document various programs held at the village level, where women gathered at scheduled times to participate in activities such as microcredit programs, consciousness-raising speeches, and SHG meetings. To assess the levels of empowerment among women in the Mising Society, data were also gathered from the staff responsible for delivering services aimed at empowering rural women.

## Findings and Discussions

The study covered 189 households across three Mising villages under Ujani Sissi Tangani Gram Panchayat of Sissiborgaon Revenue Circle, with a total population of 1,354. The study excluded individuals below 14 years of age. This is a micro-level study focused on the impact of rural Mising women on economic development in the district.

## Analysis of the Data

**Table: A.**

Kochek Gaon			Borghuli Gaon			Belong Gaon			Grand Total Household	Total farm families =154
No. of household		Female household headship	No. of household		Female household headship	No. of household		Female household headship		
Farm families	Non farm families		Farm families	Non farm families		Farm families	Non farm families		Total non farm families =35	
56	11	05	48	17	09	50	07	03	Female household headship=17	
Total household = 67			Total household = 65			Total household = 57			189	

Based on the data presented, among the 189 households in the three selected villages, 154 are farm families, while 35 are non-farm households, indicating a predominant reliance on agriculture. Additionally, only 17 households are headed by women, highlighting the limited presence of female household heads. These findings suggest that female-headed households may be more economically vulnerable compared to male-headed households, possibly due to limited access to resources and support. The dominant livelihood in the area appears to be agriculture, reflecting the rural community's dependence on farming for income and sustenance. This underscores the need for targeted interventions to support vulnerable households, especially those headed by women.

**Table: B.**

Population status of the villages			Grand Total		
Kochek Gaon	Borghuli Gaon	Belong Gaon	Total male population	Total female	Total population

Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female		population	
290	201	229	151	262	221	781	573	1354

The table shows that the total population of the 3 villages is 1354 in number. Out of this 781 and 573 are male and female population of the villages respectively.

**Table: C.**

Status of Workforce of women					
Workforce of women in farm-sector		Workforce of women in non-farm sector (Day labourer)		Workforce of women in Private and Govt. service	
In number	In %	In number	In %	In number	In %
475	82	63	11	35	7

The data from Table C, it has been observed that 82% of women in the farm sector are part of the workforce. In the non-farm sector, such as day laborers in nearby areas, women constitute 11% of the workforce. In addition, 7% of the women populations are employed in private or government jobs. Despite this, it is evident that Mising women still lag significantly behind in securing government and private sector employment opportunities. They are primarily engaged in agricultural activities. Many women in the 3 villages spend four to five hours daily collecting fuel for household use, often traveling 5 to 10 kilometers each day. However, their workforce participation is still undercounted by the government.

**Table: D.**

Educational status of the villages											
Kochek Gaon				Borghuli Gaon				Belong Gaon			
Illiterate		Literate		Illiterate		Literate		Illiterate		Literate	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
150	117	140	84	99	87	130	64	120	91	142	130
Total male illiterate = 369 and Total female illiterate = 295											
Total male literate = 390 and Total female literate = 278											

The educational status of the villages is generally low. Out of a total population of 1,354, there are 369 illiterate males and 295 illiterate females. Most women in these villages are engaged in agriculture, which is influenced by their low educational levels. A total of 668 individuals in the village are literate, meaning that nearly 50% of the population is illiterate. Therefore, the "Education for All" policy has significant work to do to improve educational access and literacy in these villages.

**Table: E**

Status of SHGs in the villages						
Kochek Gaon		Borghuli Gaon		Belong Gaon		Total SHGs
MSHG	WSHG	MSHG	WSHG	MSHG	WSHG	
01	08	Nil	10	Nil	05	24
Source : primary source						

In the three selected villages, a total of 24 Self Help Groups (SHGs) have been functioning- 23 Women's SHGs (WSHGs) and 1 Men's SHG (MSHG). These villages face deep-rooted poverty and limited opportunities, especially for women. The development of SHGs has introduced innovative approaches to foster new enterprises and stimulate the local economy. Through these groups, women have learned to access resources and opportunities essential for their development. The WSHGs have shown significant improvement in contributing to the economic well-being of the rural community. Moreover, SHGs have served as a vital educational platform; many illiterate members have learned to write their names after joining the groups. SHGs also provide financial support to those in need, functioning as a community bank during times of crisis. Women's SHGs, in particular, operate smoothly within the villages, offering crucial assistance during emergencies such as serious illnesses, marriages, and festivals. Overall, these groups have empowered women and strengthened community bonds, playing a pivotal role in improving social and economic conditions in the villages.

The studied area reveals several significant findings about the Mising community. Primarily, their main livelihood is agriculture; however, frequent flooding severely impacts their lives. The flood-prone riverine areas experience annual erosion of agricultural lands, sand casting on paddy fields, and destruction of dwellings, primarily due to climatic fluctuations and human activities. The community's close relationship with nature-forests and rivers-forms the basis of their survival, but floods annually devastate forests and biodiversity resources vital to them.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of daily wage laborers, as many villagers leave their agricultural activities due to vulnerability to floods. The cultivation of Ahu and Bao paddy is minimal, attributed to land being buried under sand or converted into ponds and lakes, leading to reduced productivity.

Migration among the youth is also prevalent; many unmarried youths leave Assam for better income opportunities in cities like Kerala, Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, and nearby towns such as Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. They engage in jobs like private employment, construction, rickshaw pulling, and daily labor.

Women play a crucial role in their households, primarily through weaving and selling products in local markets. Despite facing mental health challenges, their weaving traditions continue, supporting their families economically.

### **Constraints faced by Rural Mising Women-**

Based on field experiences, survey data from the Ujani Sissitangani Panchayat, and consultations with key informants interviews (KII) the rural Mising women of the villages several constraints are faced by women in this community have been identified. Firstly, high illiteracy rates and poor living conditions significantly limit their opportunities for development. Women also suffer from a lack of leadership and participation in organizational and economic affairs, including their involvement in agricultural cooperatives. This is compounded by the absence of property inheritance rights, which restricts their ability to acquire membership in cooperatives and access farm credit and other resources.

Healthcare services in rural Mising village areas are inadequate, and water supply for farm operations remains insufficient. Also, there is a lack of appropriate agricultural technologies designed to reduce the physical burden on women. Access to credit, agricultural inputs, and other essential services is limited, and there is a notable absence of female farm extension workers who could provide targeted support.

Marketing facilities and opportunities are scarce, reducing women's ability to sell their produce effectively. Moreover, women have minimal participation in decision-making processes, even within their households. Male migration to urban areas increases the workload and pressure on women, further hindering their socio-economic progress. The community also faces a lack of skill development opportunities in leadership and management, as well as insufficient organizational support and funding for women's groups. These combined constraints hinder the overall empowerment and development of rural Mising women.

### **Bright Side of the Study Area**

The studied area benefits from the active presence of two NGOs - World Vision (Area Development Programme) and RVC (Rural Volunteer Centre), Akajan - which have been working diligently in the community. Most villagers respond positively to the efforts of these organizations. They have received various valuable resources, including oxen for ploughing, piggery farms, and other essential items that support their daily livelihoods. Additionally, the

NGOs conduct awareness programs focusing on family planning, AIDS, and other deadly diseases, thereby promoting health and well-being within the community.

Furthermore, the NGOs organize educational competitions and sports activities for children under the age of 14, encouraging the development of the youth. These organizations are especially proactive during flood disasters and their aftermath, providing necessary aid and support to affected populations.

### **Dark Side of the Study Area**

Conversely, the villages under study are severely affected by annual flooding, which has become a routine calamity. These flood-prone villages are situated near the Brahmaputra River, Tongani River, and sometimes the Gainadi, Demow, and Jalakiasuti Rivers, all of which contribute to the regular flooding. This recurring flood havoc significantly disrupts socio-economic activities, leading to setbacks in economic development. The constant threat of floods hampers progress and poses ongoing challenges to the livelihoods and overall well-being of the villagers.

### **Executive Summary**

This study explores the vital role of Mising women in rural development within Dhemaji, Assam, emphasizing their contributions to agriculture, household management, and community welfare. Despite their significant economic and social roles, Mising women face persistent gender inequalities, limited access to resources, and social restrictions that hinder their empowerment. The formation and functioning of Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as effective strategies in fostering economic independence, improving livelihoods, and strengthening social cohesion among Mising women. The research, employing ethnographic and survey methods in selected villages, reveals that SHGs have contributed to increased income, literacy, and community participation for women, even as challenges such as flooding, low educational levels, and limited decision-making power persist. The study highlights the importance of targeted interventions, including enhancing access to credit, education, and leadership opportunities, to further empower Mising women and promote sustainable rural development in the region.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings underline that Mising women are crucial agents of socio-economic transformation in Dhemaji, Assam. Their active participation in agriculture, microenterprise, and community initiatives through SHGs has led to notable improvements in household

income, social recognition, and community resilience. However, enduring barriers such as cultural restrictions, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental vulnerabilities - particularly recurrent flooding-continue to impede their full empowerment. To realize the potential of Mising women fully, it is essential to implement gender-sensitive policies that enhance access to education, credit, and leadership roles. Strengthening support systems, fostering women's participation in decision-making, and addressing environmental challenges will be vital for sustained socio-economic progress. Overall, empowering Mising women through targeted interventions can significantly contribute to reducing poverty, hunger, and malnutrition, fostering a more equitable and resilient rural society.

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### **Authors Declaration**

The opinions, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this research paper are solely those of the authors and do not, in any manner reflect the official views or constitute an endorsement by the Anthropological Survey of India and Silapathar College.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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