

# Women's Livelihood and Health Challenges in the Palengi Villages of Sivasagar District, Assam: A Study

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## Abstract

Rural women remain the backbone of agricultural and household economies in Assam. Their contribution is visible in farming, small businesses, and community-based activities. However, their work is often unpaid, unrecognized, and unsupported. This paper examines the livelihood activities, health conditions, and development challenges faced by women in selected villages of the Palengi area in Sivasagar district of Assam. The study focuses on Palengi Dhyan Pathar, Palengi Dhundar Mukh, and Palengi Kachari Pathar. Using a descriptive and qualitative approach, the paper highlights women's engagement in agriculture, Self-Help Group activities, and small income-generating practices. It also discusses problems such as lack of land ownership, low wages, poor access to credit, domestic workload, health issues, and environmental challenges. The role of government welfare schemes and community participation is examined to understand their impact on women's lives. The study finds that while rural women play a critical role in sustaining livelihoods, meaningful development requires better health services, financial access, infrastructure, and gender-sensitive policy interventions.

**Keywords:** Rural Women, Livelihood, Health Issues, SHGs, Rural Development, Assam

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women play a central role in the rural economy of Assam. Their daily lives are closely connected with agriculture, household responsibilities, and various informal income-generating activities. From early morning till late evening, rural women remain engaged in farming operations, livestock care, food preparation, child care, and maintenance of the household. Despite their continuous labour, much of their work remains unpaid and unrecognized. Their contribution is often viewed as an extension of domestic duty rather than productive economic activity. As a result, women's role in rural development is frequently underestimated in policy planning and development discourse.

Social norms and traditional gender roles continue to shape women's lives in rural Assam. Decision-making power within households largely rests with male members, while women have limited control over land, income, and assets. Economic constraints further restrict their opportunities for growth. Limited access to education, skill training, institutional credit, and markets affects their ability to diversify livelihoods or improve income levels. Institutional support mechanisms often fail to address women's specific needs, leading to their marginal position in the rural economy.

In districts like Sivasagar, rural women contribute significantly to farming and allied activities. They are involved in almost every stage of agricultural production, including seed selection, transplanting,

weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. Alongside agriculture, women also engage in small household-based activities to supplement family income. However, their efforts are constrained by limited land rights. Most women do not own land in their names, which restricts their access to formal credit and government benefits. Low wages for agricultural labour further reduce their economic security, and gender-based wage disparities continue to exist.

Access to markets remains another major challenge. Poor transport facilities and inadequate infrastructure limit women's ability to sell agricultural produce or handmade goods beyond local areas. Environmental issues such as floods, soil degradation, and climate variability have added to their burden. Frequent climatic changes affect crop yields and increase uncertainty in agricultural income. These environmental stresses also increase women's workload, as they are primarily responsible for managing household food security during difficult periods.

The Palengi area of Sivasagar district presents a clear example of these realities. Women in villages such as Palengi Dhyan Pathar, Palengi Dhundar Mukh, and Palengi Kachari Pathar actively participate in agriculture and Self-Help Group activities. SHGs have provided a platform for collective savings, small-scale production, and awareness-building. However, the benefits remain limited due to lack of adequate financial and institutional support.

Health problems have emerged as an additional concern among rural women in the area. Cases of diabetes, heart disease, maternal health complications, and malnutrition are increasingly reported. Poor nutrition, heavy physical labour, and limited access to health care services contribute to these issues. Women often prioritize family needs over their own health, leading to delayed treatment and long-term health risks. Together, these socio-economic, environmental, and health-related factors shape the livelihood conditions of rural women in the Palengi region and highlight the need for focused development interventions.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

**The study has the following objectives:**

1. To examine the main income-generating activities of rural women in the Palengi villages of Sivasagar district.
2. To identify the key socio-economic and health problems faced by women in the study area.
3. To understand the role of Self-Help Groups in supporting women's livelihoods.
4. To assess the impact of government welfare schemes on rural women's development.
5. To highlight environmental and infrastructural challenges affecting women's livelihoods.

## **3. Research Methodology**

The study follows a descriptive and qualitative research approach. Primary information has been collected through informal interactions and observations of women engaged in agriculture and small economic activities in the Palengi villages. Secondary sources such as books, government reports, and research articles have also been consulted.

The study area includes three villages: Palengi Dhyan Pathar, Palengi Dhundar Mukh, and Palengi Kachari Pathar in Sivasagar district. These villages were selected to understand common livelihood patterns and challenges faced by rural women in the region.

#### 4. Women's Livelihood Activities in the Study Area

Women in the Palengi villages are primarily engaged in agriculture, which remains the backbone of rural livelihoods in the area. Women actively participate in almost every stage of agricultural production. Their work begins with land preparation and continues through sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. In addition to fieldwork, women are responsible for cleaning, drying, and storing agricultural produce. These activities require long working hours and significant physical effort, yet much of this labour remains unpaid and unaccounted for in economic assessments.

Along with agriculture, women are involved in various household-based economic activities to supplement family income. These activities are generally small in scale and informal in nature. Women often manage these tasks alongside their domestic responsibilities, which limits the time and energy they can invest in income generation. Despite these constraints, such activities play an important role in supporting household consumption, especially during periods of low agricultural income.

Self-Help Groups play a significant role in shaping women's economic participation in the Palengi area. Many women are members of SHGs that focus on weaving, small-scale farming, savings, and awareness programmes. Through SHGs, women gain opportunities for collective action and mutual support. Weaving and handloom activities are particularly important, as they provide supplementary income during non-agricultural seasons. These activities also help preserve traditional skills and offer women a sense of financial contribution to their households.

SHGs have also contributed to improving social awareness among women. Regular meetings encourage discussions on savings, health, sanitation, and government welfare schemes. Participation in SHGs has increased women's confidence and improved their ability to interact with local institutions. However, the economic impact of SHGs remains limited due to insufficient financial assistance, lack of advanced training, and restricted access to larger markets.

Apart from agriculture and weaving, some women are involved in livestock rearing, tailoring, and other small home-based enterprises. Livestock activities such as rearing poultry and cattle provide additional income and nutritional benefits to households. Tailoring and small-scale services are practiced by a few women, mainly to meet local demands. These activities offer flexibility, allowing women to balance domestic responsibilities with income generation.

Despite their potential, these livelihood activities remain limited in scale and profitability. Lack of access to capital is a major barrier. Most women depend on small savings or informal borrowing, which restricts business expansion. Market access is another challenge, as poor transport facilities and limited networks prevent women from reaching wider markets. Training opportunities are also scarce, limiting skill development and innovation.

Overall, women in the Palengi villages demonstrate strong economic participation through agriculture, SHGs, and household enterprises. However, structural constraints continue to restrict their livelihood potential. Addressing issues related to credit access, skill development, and market linkage is essential for enhancing women's economic empowerment in the region.

#### 5. Key Problems Faced by Rural Women

##### Challenges Faced by Rural Women in the Study Area

Despite their active participation in agriculture and household-based economic activities, rural women in the Palengi villages face several persistent challenges. These challenges limit their economic independence, social mobility, and overall quality of life. Most of these problems are structural in nature

and deeply rooted in social and institutional practices.

Land ownership remains one of the most critical issues. In the study area, land is generally owned by male members of the household. Women rarely possess land titles in their own names. This lack of ownership restricts their access to institutional credit, crop insurance, and government welfare schemes linked to landholding. Without land rights, women remain dependent on male family members for major financial decisions. This dependency weakens their bargaining power within both household and community spaces.

Low wages further add to women’s economic vulnerability. Women are heavily involved in agricultural labour, yet they often receive lower wages than men for similar work. Payment is sometimes irregular and seasonal. During lean agricultural periods, income becomes uncertain. As a result, women’s contribution to farming remains undervalued despite their extensive involvement.

**Table 1: Major Economic Challenges Faced by Rural Women**

<b>Economic Issues</b>	<b>Nature of the Problem</b>
Lack of land ownership	No access to formal credit and land-based schemes
Low agricultural wages	Gender-based wage disparity
Seasonal employment	Income insecurity during off-seasons
Limited credit access	Dependence on informal money sources

Access to markets is another major concern. Women find it difficult to sell agricultural produce or handmade goods beyond nearby local markets. Poor road connectivity and limited transport facilities restrict mobility. Many women depend on middlemen, which reduces profit margins. Market information is also limited, preventing women from understanding pricing trends or demand patterns.

Credit facilities are insufficient and often inaccessible. Formal banking procedures are complex and time-consuming. Due to lack of collateral and documentation, women rely on informal sources such as local moneylenders or personal borrowing. These sources often involve high interest rates, which increases financial stress and debt burden.

Domestic workload adds significantly to women’s daily challenges. Women are responsible for cooking, cleaning, childcare, elderly care, and other household duties. These responsibilities continue alongside agricultural and income-generating work. As a result, women have very little time for rest, skill training, or personal development. This continuous workload also affects their physical and mental health.

Government support mechanisms often fail to reach women effectively. Lack of awareness about schemes, complex application procedures, and limited guidance from local institutions prevent many women from accessing benefits. In some cases, benefits are received indirectly through male family members, reducing women’s control over resources.

**Table 2: Social and Institutional Challenges Faced by Women**

<b>Social and Institutional Issues</b>	<b>Impact on Women</b>
Heavy domestic workload	Physical fatigue and time poverty
Poor transport facilities	Limited market access
Low awareness of schemes	Underutilization of government support
Procedural difficulties	Exclusion from welfare benefits

Overall, rural women in the Palengi villages continue to face interconnected economic, social, and institutional challenges. These issues reinforce each other and restrict women’s ability to improve their

livelihoods. Addressing land rights, wage equality, credit access, and institutional support is essential for ensuring inclusive rural development and meaningful empowerment of women in the region.

### 6. Health Issues Among Rural Women in the Palengi Area

Health problems have emerged as a serious concern among women in the Palengi villages of Sivasagar district. In recent years, cases of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease have been increasingly reported. These illnesses affect women across different age groups, particularly middle-aged women who are actively engaged in both agricultural and domestic work. Long working hours, physical strain, and stress contribute to the rising health burden.

Maternal health issues remain another major challenge. Many women experience complications during pregnancy and after childbirth. Limited access to regular medical check-ups and nutritional support increases health risks for both mothers and children. In economically weaker households, women often compromise their own health needs due to financial constraints. This leads to delayed treatment and long-term health problems.

Malnutrition continues to affect women in the study area. Despite being responsible for food preparation, women often consume inadequate and imbalanced diets. Priority is given to feeding other family members, especially children and male earners. As a result, women suffer from weakness, anaemia, and low immunity. Poor nutrition reduces their ability to perform daily work efficiently and affects overall well-being.

**Table 1: Common Health Problems Reported Among Rural Women**

Health Issues	Key Contributing Factors
Diabetes	Poor diet, stress, lack of regular health check-ups
Heart disease	Physical strain, limited awareness, delayed treatment
Maternal health problems	Inadequate prenatal and postnatal care
Malnutrition	Poor diet quality, food insecurity

Limited access to health facilities further worsens the situation. Health centres are often located far from villages, making it difficult for women to seek timely medical care. Transport facilities are inadequate, and emergency services are rarely available. Women usually depend on male family members to accompany them to health centres, which delays treatment.

Financial constraints also play a significant role. Medical expenses are often considered a low priority compared to household needs. Many families rely on local healers or over-the-counter medicines instead of professional medical care. Lack of health insurance awareness further limits access to proper treatment.

Women’s health is frequently neglected due to heavy domestic responsibilities. Daily routines leave little time for rest or self-care. Women often ignore early symptoms of illness until conditions worsen. This neglect directly affects their productivity in agriculture and household work.

**Table 2: Barriers to Accessing Health Care Services**

Barriers	Impact on Women’s Health
Distance to health centres	Delayed medical attention
Poor transport facilities	Limited access during emergencies
Financial constraints	Incomplete or avoided treatment
Low health awareness	Late diagnosis of diseases

The combined effect of poor nutrition, heavy workload, and limited health care access creates a cycle of ill health among rural women. This cycle not only affects individual women but also impacts household welfare and agricultural productivity. Poor health reduces work capacity and increases dependency on other family members.

Improving women’s health requires targeted interventions. Strengthening primary health care services, improving nutrition awareness, and ensuring affordable medical support are essential steps. Community-level health awareness programmes and better outreach can help women prioritize their health needs. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing the quality of life and long-term development of rural women in the Palengi area.

## 7. Role of Self-Help Groups and Government Schemes

### Role of Self-Help Groups and Government Schemes in Women’s Development

Self-Help Groups have played an important role in improving the economic and social position of women in the Palengi villages. Through SHGs, women have gained opportunities to participate in collective savings, small-scale production, and community-based activities. These groups have provided a platform where women can come together, share experiences, and support one another. Participation in SHGs has helped many women develop a sense of financial responsibility and confidence.

Women associated with SHGs in the study area are mainly involved in weaving, small-scale farming, and awareness programmes. Weaving and handloom activities provide supplementary income, especially during non-agricultural seasons. Farming-related SHG activities include group cultivation and support in agricultural tasks. Awareness programmes focus on health, sanitation, and basic financial practices. These activities have improved women’s participation in both economic and social spheres.

Savings is a key feature of SHGs. Regular savings, even in small amounts, help women build a habit of financial planning. Mutual support among members allows women to manage emergencies without depending entirely on informal moneylenders. However, the financial capacity of SHGs remains limited. Many groups lack sufficient capital to expand activities or invest in better tools and technology.

**Table 1: Key Activities Undertaken by Women through SHGs**

SHG Activities	Benefits to Women
Weaving and handloom work	Supplementary income generation
Small-scale farming	Shared labour and reduced risk
Savings and credit	Financial discipline and security
Awareness programmes	Improved knowledge and confidence

Government welfare schemes have also contributed to women’s development in the area. Schemes such as PM Kisan Samman Nidhi provide financial support to farming households. PMAY-G has helped improve housing conditions by providing assistance for rural housing. The Arunodoi scheme offers direct financial support to economically weaker families, with women as primary beneficiaries in many cases. These schemes help women meet basic needs and reduce economic stress.

Despite their potential benefits, gaps remain in implementation and awareness. Many women are not fully informed about eligibility criteria or application procedures. Complex documentation requirements and limited guidance at the local level create barriers to access. In some cases, benefits are received indirectly through male family members, reducing women’s control over resources.

**Table 2: Government Schemes and Their Impact on Women**

Government Scheme	Nature of Support	Key Limitations
PM Kisan Samman Nidhi	Financial assistance	Limited awareness
PMAY-G	Housing support	Procedural delays
Arunodoi	Direct cash support	Partial coverage

The education level of women in the Palengi area is moderate. Most women have basic schooling but lack higher education or vocational training. This limits their ability to access information related to government schemes, banking services, and alternative livelihood options. Limited digital literacy further restricts their engagement with online platforms and services.

Moderate education levels also affect women’s participation in decision-making processes. Women often depend on others for information and documentation. This dependency reduces their confidence and autonomy. Improving education and skill training can enhance women’s ability to benefit from development programmes.

Overall, SHGs and government schemes have created opportunities for women’s empowerment in the Palengi villages. However, their impact remains uneven. Strengthening SHGs, improving awareness, simplifying procedures, and expanding education and skill development are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive development for rural women.

## 8. Rural Development and Environmental Challenges

### Rural Development and Environmental Challenges in the Palengi Area

Rural development in the Palengi area of Sivasagar district faces several structural constraints. Unemployment remains a persistent issue, especially among women and youth. Limited non-farm employment opportunities force households to depend heavily on agriculture and daily wage labour. Seasonal nature of agricultural work further increases income insecurity. During off-seasons, many families struggle to meet basic needs.

Poor road connectivity affects daily life and economic activity. Several internal village roads remain poorly maintained. During the rainy season, movement becomes difficult. This restricts access to markets, health centres, and educational institutions. Women are particularly affected, as they depend on nearby facilities for household management, health care, and income activities. Poor transport also increases women’s workload and time burden.

Access to clean drinking water is another major concern. In many households, women are responsible for collecting water. Limited availability of safe water sources increases health risks and consumes valuable time. Water scarcity during dry months adds to daily stress. Poor water quality contributes to water-borne diseases, which further affect women’s health and productivity.

Low agricultural productivity continues to limit rural development. Traditional farming practices, small landholdings, and limited access to modern inputs reduce crop yields. Climate variability has increased uncertainty in farming outcomes. Women, who are deeply involved in agricultural operations, face greater physical and economic pressure during crop failures.

**Table 1: Major Rural Development Constraints in the Palengi Area**

Development Issues	Impact on Rural Life
Unemployment	Income insecurity and dependence on agriculture
Poor road connectivity	Limited access to markets and services
Lack of clean drinking water	Health risks and increased workload for women

Low agricultural productivity	Reduced household income
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Environmental challenges have further intensified development problems. Soil degradation has emerged as a serious concern due to continuous cultivation and limited soil conservation practices. Declining soil fertility affects crop yields and increases input costs. Women, who are engaged in fieldwork, bear the physical burden of declining productivity.

Water pollution has become noticeable in recent years. Use of chemical fertilizers, improper waste disposal, and runoff during rains affect local water bodies. Polluted water impacts both household use and agriculture. Women are often the first to experience the consequences, as they manage water for cooking, cleaning, and livestock care.

Climate change has increased agricultural risks in the region. Irregular rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and extreme weather events affect crop cycles. These changes increase uncertainty and stress among farming households. Women play a key role in adapting to these changes by managing food supplies and household resources during difficult periods.

Noise and air pollution are emerging concerns due to increasing human activities and vehicular movement. Though not severe, these issues affect the rural environment and health. Women and children are more vulnerable to respiratory problems and stress-related conditions.

**Table 2: Environmental Challenges and Their Impact on Women**

Environmental Issues	Effects on Women’s Livelihood
Soil degradation	Increased labour and reduced farm output
Water pollution	Health risks and water scarcity
Climate change	Higher workload and income uncertainty
Air and noise pollution	Health discomfort and stress

These rural development and environmental challenges are closely interconnected. They disproportionately affect women because of their dependence on natural resources and their responsibility for household management. Addressing these issues requires integrated development strategies focusing on infrastructure improvement, environmental protection, and women’s participation in planning processes. Sustainable rural development in the Palengi area cannot be achieved without recognizing and addressing the specific challenges faced by women.

## 9. Findings

**The study highlights the following findings:**

1. Rural women actively contribute to agriculture and household-based economic activities.
2. Lack of land ownership and low wages limit women’s economic security.
3. Health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, maternal problems, and malnutrition are common.
4. SHGs play a positive role but need stronger institutional support.
5. Government schemes provide partial support but require better implementation.
6. Environmental and infrastructural challenges continue to affect women’s livelihoods.

The study reveals several important findings related to the livelihood conditions of rural women in the Palengi villages of Sivasagar district. Women play an active role in sustaining household economies and agricultural production. They participate in farming activities such as sowing, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest work. Along with agricultural labour, women are also involved in household-based income activities, including weaving and small-scale enterprises. Their contribution is continuous and essential,

yet often remains unrecognized.

A major finding of the study is the lack of economic security among rural women. Most women do not own land in their names. This limits their access to institutional credit, agricultural benefits, and land-linked government schemes. Low wages further reduce their income. Women frequently receive lower payment compared to men for similar agricultural work. Seasonal employment also creates uncertainty and financial stress, especially during non-agricultural periods.

Health-related issues are common among women in the study area. Cases of diabetes and heart disease have increased in recent years. Maternal health problems and malnutrition continue to affect women, particularly those from economically weaker households. Poor nutrition, heavy workload, and limited access to health care services contribute to these conditions. Health problems reduce women’s work capacity and negatively affect their quality of life.

**Table 1: Key Socio-Economic Findings**

Key Areas	Major Observations
Livelihood activities	High involvement in agriculture and household work
Land ownership	Very limited among women
Wage structure	Low and unequal wages
Income security	Seasonal and unstable

Self-Help Groups have emerged as an important support mechanism for women. Participation in SHGs has helped women improve savings habits and gain some financial independence. SHGs also provide social support and opportunities for awareness building. However, the study finds that SHGs lack sufficient institutional and financial backing to expand livelihood activities effectively.

Government welfare schemes such as PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, PMAY-G, and Arunodoi have provided partial relief. These schemes help meet basic needs and improve living conditions. However, issues related to awareness, coverage, and implementation reduce their overall impact.

Environmental and infrastructural challenges continue to affect women’s livelihoods. Poor road connectivity, water scarcity, soil degradation, and climate-related risks increase women’s workload and economic vulnerability. These challenges highlight the need for integrated development approaches.

**Table 2: Health, Institutional, and Environmental Findings**

Areas	Key Findings
Health conditions	Rising non-communicable diseases and malnutrition
SHG support	Positive impact but limited scale
Government schemes	Partial benefits with implementation gaps
Environmental issues	Increased livelihood risks

Overall, the findings show that rural women are central to rural livelihoods, yet face multiple constraints that limit their economic and social advancement.

## 10. Conclusion

Women in the Palengi villages of Sivasagar district play a vital role in sustaining rural livelihoods. Their contribution to agriculture and community activities is significant. However, socio-economic constraints, health issues, and environmental challenges limit their overall development.

There is a need for targeted interventions focusing on women’s land rights, health care access, skill development, and financial inclusion. Strengthening SHGs, improving infrastructure, and ensuring

effective implementation of government schemes can improve women's livelihoods. Sustainable rural development in Assam cannot be achieved without addressing the challenges faced by rural women and recognizing their role in the development process.

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