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# A Socio-Economic Study of Mat-Making in Kundalpal Village, West Bengal

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**Abstract:** *Once a household-based tradition, the making of Madurkathi mats has increasingly become a vital source of livelihood in rural West Bengal. This study investigates the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental aspects of mat-making in Kundalpal village, Paschim Medinipur, with a focus on women artisans. It looks at how such traditional crafts support income generation, empower women, and help sustain cultural heritage. Despite their importance, there is little research exploring how handicrafts connect livelihoods, sustainability, and gender empowerment at the grassroots level. Findings show that while mat-making boosts women's financial autonomy and social engagement—particularly through Self-Help Groups (SHGs) the sector struggles with several constraints. These include poor market access, reliance on middlemen, insufficient infrastructure, and competition from machine-produced alternatives. Although the Geographical Indication (GI) tag has enhanced the craft's visibility and market value, many artisans have yet to fully benefit. The paper underscores the need for stronger institutional backing, better market integration, and active community involvement to ensure the long-term viability of this traditional practice.*

**Keywords:** *Madurkathi Handicrafts, Women's empowerment, Rural livelihoods, Sustainable development, West Bengal.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Rural entrepreneurship is now widely recognised as an important means to improve economic conditions in developing countries, especially where local resources and manpower are available but underutilised (Stathopoulou et al., 2004; Venugopal et al., 2024; Ramya et al., 2024). In many rural regions, agriculture has long been the main livelihood, with people also moving to urban areas in pursuit of better employment. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the instability and risks tied to such migration, as large numbers of workers lost their jobs and faced difficulties returning to their home communities (Shandilya et al., 2024; ILO, 2020). During these crises, women were frequently hit hardest either remaining in villages or relying on male relatives, often excluded from income-generating work. This highlights the persistent gender disparities that continue to affect countries such as India (Narayan, 2019; Kabeer, 2012).

In recent years, women's involvement in economic activities has steadily increased. This shift has been driven by government programs, self-help groups, and microfinance efforts aimed at fostering financial independence and confidence among women (Agarwal et al., 2018; NABARD, 2019; World Bank, 2021). Women's entrepreneurship is now recognized not only as a source of income but also as a pathway to empowerment, enabling greater participation in household decisions and enhancing social standing (Minniti, 2010). Despite this progress, significant barriers remain, including limited education, restricted access to credit, societal constraints, and insufficient knowledge of markets (Swati, 2018).

Entrepreneurial orientation characterized by innovation, initiative, and willingness to take risks—is widely seen as crucial for business success (Lumpkin et al., 1996; Kyal et al., 2021). These traits are particularly valuable in traditional industries such as handicrafts, where originality and distinctiveness are central. Handicrafts go beyond mere utility; they embody cultural heritage, tradition, and community identity. As a result, they hold unique market appeal and attract interest from both domestic and international consumers (Scrase, 2003; UNESCO, 2005).

The handicraft sector plays a vital role in rural economies, especially for women, offering home-based work with minimal startup costs and flexible schedules (Datta et al., 2012). Many women engage in producing and selling crafts at local markets and fairs. Yet, they often rely on informal sales networks and encounter challenges such as inadequate marketing support, limited funding, and competition from mass-produced goods. These difficulties intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when market closures and disrupted supply chains severely impacted sales (Mallikarjun, 2025).

Sustainable livelihoods have gained attention in recent years, particularly in developing nations where farming alone no longer ensures stable incomes (Chambers et al., 1992; Scoones, 1998). In this context, handicrafts contribute significantly by generating supplementary income and safeguarding traditional craftsmanship. However, artisans face growing pressure from globalization and industrial production, which threaten their survival (Mallikarjun, 2025; UNCTAD, 2010). To ensure their long-term viability, it is essential to improve market access, expand financial assistance, and provide skill development opportunities.

India boasts a deep-rooted handicraft tradition that reflects its rich cultural diversity and historical legacy. These crafts are typically inherited across generations and are deeply intertwined with local customs and beliefs (Dhamija, 2003). They also support rural employment and often involve entire families in production. Encouraging such crafts can help reduce unemployment and promote regional development (Singh et al., 2008). A notable example is the Madur mat-weaving tradition in Sabang, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal. Primarily organized through self-help groups, this craft engages many women who gain income, build self-assurance, and improve their living standards. At the same time, it helps preserve the area's cultural identity.

#### *The Impact of Local Handicrafts on Women's Empowerment*

Local handicrafts contribute significantly to women's empowerment, particularly in rural regions where job options are scarce. Engaging in handicraft-based entrepreneurship enables women to generate household income and achieve greater financial independence (Agarwal et al., 2018). Across both rural and urban communities, more women are turning to small-scale enterprises to enhance their living conditions and support their families. Although cultural and societal norms often pose challenges, women continue to take part in economic activities such as farming, trading, and crafting. Yet, their entry into entrepreneurial roles is frequently hindered by limited access to education, credit, and market networks (Swati, 2018). In India, despite legal rights and growing professional opportunities for women, their economic contributions have long been overlooked. Recently, however, there has been a visible rise in female participation across various sectors, including those traditionally dominated by men (Narayan, 2019).

Handicraft production is especially well-suited to women's circumstances, as it can be done at home with low startup costs and adaptable working hours. This flexibility allows them to manage domestic duties while earning an income. Still, women entrepreneurs encounter multiple obstacles—psychological, social, cultural, and financial—that affect their ability to launch and maintain successful ventures (Swati, 2018). Motivations for joining the handicraft sector vary. Many women seek better living standards, financial autonomy, and ways to apply their skills, while others aim for long-term economic stability (Afrin et al., 2008). Additional drivers include encouragement from family, personal confidence, and the need to address unemployment. Involvement in handicrafts strengthens women's influence in household decisions and boosts their self-esteem and standing in the community. Participation in local markets and craft fairs also exposes them to business knowledge and consumer trends, helping build essential entrepreneurial abilities. As a result, handicrafts serve not only as a source of income but also as a pathway to broader social and economic empowerment.

For lasting progress, women artisans need improved access to training, mentorship, financial services, and market linkages. Strengthening these support systems can unlock their full potential, enabling them to thrive as entrepreneurs and play a greater role in advancing rural development.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *A. Rural Entrepreneurship and Economic Development*

Rural entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as a key driver of economic growth and efficient use of local resources. Research indicates that rural regions hold substantial human and natural capital that can be harnessed for productive economic purposes (Stathopoulou et al., 2004; Venugopal, 2024; Ramya et al., 2024). Yet, rising population density, declining availability of farmland, and the spread of agricultural mechanization have led to widespread underemployment in farming. As a result, many rural populations—particularly those residing in wetlands and marshy regions—have turned to alternative sources of income. One such source is the cultivation of wetland plants like Madur kathi, a traditional crop that supports local livelihoods and also fuels development in the handicraft industry.

### *B. Migration and Gender Inequality*

Migration has long served as a key livelihood strategy for rural communities. Yet, evidence suggests that such mobility frequently brings economic and social risks. The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare these vulnerabilities, with many migrant workers losing jobs and facing uncertain conditions. Women, in particular, were often restricted to household duties or involved in unpaid labor, underscoring the ongoing disparity in their economic engagement (Narayan, 2019).

Women Entrepreneurship and Institutional Support Government programs, self-help groups, and microfinance institutions have played a significant role in advancing .

#### *C. Women's entrepreneurship and Institutional support*

according to multiple studies. These support systems have enabled women to build confidence, secure funding, and engage in income-generating ventures (Agarwal & Lenka, 2018). Over time, this has contributed to a steady rise in women's involvement across both conventional and emerging economic sectors (Shilpa, 2018).

#### *D. Entrepreneurial Orientation in Handicrafts*

Entrepreneurial Orientation in Handicrafts Success in enterprise often depends on entrepreneurial orientation characterized by innovation, initiative, and willingness to take risks (Kyal et al., 2021). In the handicraft industry, these traits are vital for creating new designs, responding to market shifts, and maintaining competitiveness. For instance, traditional mat weaving has transitioned from a domestic practice to an organized craft-based livelihood in numerous rural regions. Handicrafts, Agro-Techniques, and Sustainable Livelihoods.

#### *E. Handicrafts, Agro-Techniques, and Sustainable Livelihoods*

The handicraft sector plays a crucial role in fostering sustainable livelihoods, particularly in developing nations. It generates employment while also safeguarding cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge. Research also points to the benefits of enhanced agricultural techniques in boosting yields from raw materials such as madurkathi. As a perennial crop, it allows for multiple harvests annually, ensuring a steady supply of inputs and consistent income for rural families (Jana et al., 2014). Even older members of farming households can contribute to mat production and earn daily wages, making this a broadly inclusive economic activity. Nonetheless, artisans confront obstacles including restricted market access, financial limitations, and competition from mass-produced goods (Mallikarjun, 2025). These difficulties intensified during the pandemic, when reliance on local markets resulted in reduced earnings (Mallikarjun, 2025).

#### *F. Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs*

Women entrepreneurs often face multiple barriers that limit their economic participation, ranging from societal norms and cultural expectations to psychological pressures and lack of financial resources (Swati, 2018). In spite of these hurdles, many women pursue entrepreneurship driven by aspirations for financial autonomy, better living conditions, and encouragement from family members (Afrin et al., 2008).

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study approach to explore the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental aspects of the Madurkathi craft in Kundalpal village, located in West Bengal's Paschim Medinipur district. A qualitative method is well suited to this research, as it enables a detailed exploration of traditional knowledge, personal experiences, and community-centered livelihood strategies (Creswell, 2014).

The selection of the study site followed a thorough analysis of existing literature, including publications from government bodies, scholarly articles, and reports by development organizations. These materials underscore the significance of rural handicrafts as sustainable sources of income and their contribution to women's empowerment and local economic growth (Agarwal et al., 2018). Earlier research also points out that crafts such as Madurkathi are deeply connected to wetland farming systems and offer vital employment in areas where agricultural work is insufficient.

Primary data were gathered during field visits to Kundalpal, where mat weaving is a widespread household activity. The researcher engaged directly with local artisans, with a particular focus on women involved in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), who are key participants in the production process. These SHGs operate as cooperative units, enabling women to produce mats collectively in response to market needs and resource availability, thus supporting family incomes and enhancing economic resilience (Afrin et al., 2008).

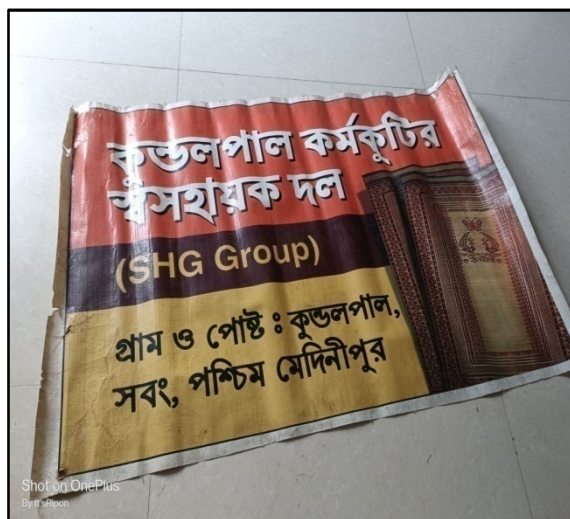


Fig 1 SHG in Kundalpal Village, Paschim Medinipore

To guarantee the study's depth and dependability, a variety of qualitative data collection methods were employed. Groups of six to ten people participated in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to learn about common experiences, community collaboration, and group decision-making. To get comprehensive information on production methods, revenue trends, obstacles, and opportunities for the craft industry, semi-structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with artisans, master craftsmen, and local stakeholders. These interviews offered insightful information on the limitations experienced by female artisans and the gender aspect of rural entrepreneurship (Agarwal & Lenka, 2018).



Fig 2 Discussing about Madurkathi making

Participant observation was also used to closely follow the full process of Madurkathi production from harvesting and drying to dyeing, weaving, and finishing. These observations helped confirm the information shared by participants and provided insight into the hands-on elements of the craft. The researcher applied ethnographic methods by immersing themselves in the community, observing local customs, cultural traditions, and daily activities tied to mat-making. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how the craft is intertwined with the village's social and cultural identity.



Fig 3 Discussion about quality

A closer look at particular women craft makers revealed changes both in their own lives and within their groups when working in traditional crafts. Stories shared by older community members and skilled weavers helped map how Madurkathi developed over time, showing its role in village life. Instead of just numbers, real voices came through recordings and images, adding depth to what was learned. What emerged stood beyond facts - it carried memory, texture, presence.

From journals to official records, second-hand materials like academic papers, published books, and digital archives offered context around craft economies, ecological balance, because they carry deep-rooted social meaning. Research shows handmade goods using plant-based materials support long-term environmental targets while nurturing local livelihoods through eco-conscious methods. Information gathered firsthand mixed together with outside resources built a fuller picture, since varied inputs help confirm findings from different angles.

#### Women Gaining Strength Through Madurkathi Craft in Kundalpal Village

From village homes to market stalls, West Bengal's handmade goods carry stories shaped by seasons, soil, and skill passed down through years. Not far from rivers where reeds grow thick, weaving mats from madurkathi rushes feeds families - hands busy, income steady. These woven pieces do more than sit on floors - they hold meaning, memory, work. While cities change fast, quiet corners keep making things by hand, one stitch at a time. Women often lead this effort, fingers moving sure, shaping life from slender strips of nature's grass.

Bamboo strands woven tight - mats once tucked under bodies during prayers or rest in old Bengal homes. When heat clung thick in the air, these Madurkathi weaves stayed cool against skin. Not long ago, women made them just for kin; now shops stack bundles bound for cities. Hands still knot reeds the way their mothers taught, though money changes hands where tradition once passed free. From sunrise to sunset, hands in Kundalpal shape reeds into mats, one by one. Not just work, but life woven through daily routines of gathering, twisting, coloring. Some gather cane at dawn; others sit bent over looms by afternoon light. Knowledge passes quietly - child watches elder, then tries. Threads link people as much as patterns. Cooperation grows without announcement, built stitch after stitch. Each role distinct, yet no piece made alone.

*Women shape much of the work behind Madurkathi mats, often leading the making process.*

Some craft alone; others join small groups tied to local collectives. Earning money through weaving lifts their standing at home and beyond. This steady role in production opens doors to greater voice in family choices. Research links such efforts to stronger influence among women managing household matters (Afrin et al., 2008; Agarwal & Lenka, 2018). Women who make mats find a way to care for their homes while also earning income, since the craft fits into daily routines. *At home, with basic tools and nearby resources, they weave* steadily through the day. A woman once said, "While managing children and chores, I still make something valuable - this makes me feel strong." Work like these matters deeply where rigid jobs are hard to come by. What stands out is how small opportunities create space for dignity.

Money-wise, making Madurkashi mats brings extra cash into homes, especially where farming jobs are hard to find. Growing mat-sedge thrives in damp fields, turning unused patches of land into sources of income for village families. Still, problems pop up - prices jump around too much, sellers rely heavily on traders, tools stay outdated, while factory-made items push against handmade ones. Seeing Madurkathi earn a Geographical Indication tag lifted both how much it's worth and who knows about it. Because of that shift, makers feel more driven to stick to high standards while trying fresh patterns. With plants pulled straight from nature fuelling each piece, and methods avoiding harm to surroundings, the work fits quietly into wider efforts favouring earth-conscious ways.

Still, Kundalpal village shows how crafts such as Madurkathi lift up women, shape community progress, keep heritage alive - yet build lasting economies too.



Fig 4 Women Empowerment (1)



Fig 5 Women Empowerment (2)

### Objectives of the Study

- To analyse the socio-economic status of Madurkathi artisans, focusing on income, livelihoods, and women's roles.
- To examine the cultural and environmental importance of Madurkathi craft, including its tradition, sustainability, and market potential.

## IV. MAJOR FINDINGS

### A. Social Aspects

The research shows that mat-making in Kundalpal village is closely tied to the local social framework. Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are instrumental in bringing women artisans together and improving their economic status. The craft fosters collaboration among families, who often take part in different stages of production. Women's active involvement has led to greater financial autonomy and empowerment. Mats also carry deep cultural and religious significance, commonly used in ceremonies, rituals, and everyday life. This tradition supports the transmission of ancestral knowledge and strengthens community ties across generations.

### B. Economic Aspects

Mat-making is a key source of income for rural households, particularly for women and small-scale farmers. Production typically takes place at home and relies heavily on manual labor and traditional techniques. Fluctuations in the availability and price of raw materials directly impact output and earnings. The Geographical Indication (GI) tag granted to Madurkathi products has boosted their market recognition and value. However, intermediaries often control distribution, limiting the share of profits that reach the artisans. Despite these obstacles, there is strong potential for growth through market diversification, product innovation, and improved access to broader consumer bases.

### C. Environmental Aspects

The Madurkathi craft is largely sustainable, using natural materials such as reeds and grasses. Still, concerns exist over declining resources, climate change effects, and harvesting methods that may not be environmentally sound. The process also involves water consumption and, in some cases, chemical dyes, which can harm the environment if not properly regulated. Production is further affected by seasonal changes, particularly during the monsoon and winter months. With appropriate conservation strategies, however, the sector can develop into a more resilient and eco-conscious industry.

## V. PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

### A. Problems

Several challenges hinder the growth of the mat-making industry in Kundalpal. Poor transport links and weak infrastructure restrict market access. Artisans often rely on middlemen due to limited outreach, which reduces their income. There is also a decline in the cultivation of raw materials, threatening long-term production. A lack of modern tools, training, and skill enhancement opportunities limits efficiency and quality. Additional barriers include inadequate communication networks and low awareness of government support programs

### B. Prospects

In these difficulties, the sector holds significant promise. Digital platforms and expanded trade networks offer new avenues for market growth.

Training initiatives can improve craftsmanship and encourage innovation. Rising consumer interest in sustainable and handmade goods creates favourable conditions for Madurkathi products. Strengthening SHGs and supporting community-led production models could enhance economic outcomes and ensure lasting development.

### C. Recommendations

Improving infrastructure and transportation is crucial for sector advancement. Enhanced government support through funding, training, and effective policy implementation can make a meaningful difference. Promoting online sales, exhibitions, and direct marketing channels would help reduce reliance on intermediaries. Encouraging design innovation, eco-friendly practices, and technical upgrades will enable artisans to meet contemporary market demands while preserving traditional skills.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study on mat-making in Kundalpal village, Paschim Medinipur, underscores the close relationship between traditional craftsmanship, rural livelihoods, and socio-cultural identity. Madurkathi production is more than an economic activity; it is a culturally rooted practice passed down through generations. It plays a vital role in sustaining the local economy, especially by creating employment for women and marginalized groups, thereby boosting household incomes and community resilience. Socially, the craft reinforces cooperation, collective responsibility, and social cohesion. SHGs have been pivotal in organizing production, raising awareness, and advancing women's empowerment. Female artisans have become central figures in both economic and social spheres, gaining financial independence and greater influence within their homes. The continued use of mats in festivals, rituals, and daily routines helps preserve indigenous traditions and cultural heritage. From an economic standpoint, while mat-making provides a steady supplementary income, it faces structural hurdles such as dependence on intermediaries, unstable demand, rising material costs, and limited market reach. Although the GI tag has enhanced the product's visibility and value, not all artisans benefit equally due to gaps in awareness, marketing ability, and infrastructure. Environmentally, the craft remains largely sustainable due to its use of natural plant-based materials. However, threats from climate variability, overharvesting, and chemical use could undermine ecological balance over time. Seasonal disruptions, especially during rainy and cold seasons, also affect production timelines and quality. Adopting sustainable resource management is therefore essential to ensure both environmental protection and consistent output. Despite its strengths, the sector continues to struggle with poor infrastructure, limited connectivity, outdated technology, and insufficient financial backing. These issues constrain productivity, innovation, and market expansion. Additionally, shifting consumer trends toward machine-made and synthetic alternatives pose a growing challenge to the survival of this traditional craft. 1. Ensuring the long-term viability and expansion of mat-making in the region calls for a comprehensive strategy. Enhancing connections to markets, supporting digital and online sales channels, upgrading infrastructure, and offering financial support via microcredit initiatives can greatly strengthen the sector. Training programs focused on skill enhancement, encouraging design innovation, and facilitating access to national and international markets can enable artisans to meet modern market needs without compromising traditional craftsmanship. Equally important is coordinated action among government bodies, non-profits, and local communities to build an environment that actively supports artisan development. 2. In summary, the practice of mat-making in Kundalpal village embodies a meaningful fusion of cultural heritage, economic livelihood, and environmental sustainability. Despite facing various challenges, the craft offers significant opportunities for rural advancement, empowerment of women, and the safeguarding of cultural identity. With well-designed policies, access to technology, and active community involvement, this traditional industry can transform into a sustainable and economically robust enterprise, all while retaining its cultural significance.

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