

SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: A STUDY OF GOLDEN GRASS ARTISANSHIP IN KENDRAPARA, ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines golden grass (Cyperus Pangorei) artisanship in Kendrapara district, Odisha, highlighting how this traditional craft supports women's economic independence, environmental conservation, and cultural heritage. Based on desk research of academic literature, government reports, and secondary data from 2010-2024, the study uses an integrated framework combining Sustainable Livelihoods, feminist empowerment theory, capabilities approach, and environmental justice. Results indicate that work with golden grass boosts all five livelihood capitals, providing women artisans with flexible incomes while preserving ecological balance through traditional harvesting techniques. Nonetheless, challenges such as limited market access, resource pressures, and skill shortages hinder growth. The findings suggest that indigenous craft traditions can promote comprehensive development in coastal communities when backed by suitable policies and institutions.

Keywords: Sustainable Livelihoods, Women Empowerment, Golden Grass, Traditional Crafts, Odisha, Women's Economic Participation

1. INTRODUCTION

The coastal regions of Odisha, especially Kendrapara district, serve as a compelling example of how traditional ecological knowledge interacts with modern development challenges. Golden grass (*Cyperus pangorei*), locally called "Kaincha" or "Golden Grass," is more than just a natural resource; it has become a key part of women's economic empowerment and community resilience in this area (Mishra, 2014). This native grass species, which grows densely in saline soils and wetlands along the coast of Odisha, has been turned by local artisan communities, mainly women, into detailed handicrafts that have earned recognition both nationally and internationally.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how traditional craft practices can address multiple development challenges at once: environmental sustainability, gender inequality, poverty reduction, and cultural preservation. Unlike typical development efforts that often focus on a single goal, golden grass artisanship offers an integrated approach in which ecological conservation and women's empowerment support and strengthen one another. Kendrapara district, with its unique location between the Bay of Bengal and the Eastern Ghats, faces specific environmental issues, including cyclones, flooding, and soil salinity, that hinder traditional farming methods (Jena & Kouame, 2023). In this setting, golden grass artisanship has developed as a flexible livelihood strategy that provides economic opportunities for women while also helping ecosystems through sustainable harvesting practices.

This research adds to the growing literature on nature-based livelihoods and women's empowerment by presenting a comprehensive theoretical framework that combines multiple perspectives on sustainable development. By analyzing golden grass artisanship through the lenses of sustainable livelihoods, feminist empowerment theory, capabilities approach, and environmental justice, this study provides insights into how traditional practices can shape contemporary development strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, initially developed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), offers a comprehensive approach to understanding poverty and development that extends beyond income measurement (Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 2000). This framework highlights five types of capital assets: human capital (skills, knowledge, health), social capital (networks, relationships, trust), natural capital (land, water, biological resources), physical capital (infrastructure, tools, equipment), and financial capital (savings, credit, income streams). In the case of golden grass artisanship, this framework is especially relevant because it reflects the multifaceted nature of livelihood strategies used by women artisans. Recent applications of the sustainable livelihoods framework to traditional crafts have underscored the importance of understanding how

various forms of capital interact and support one another (Behera, 2017). For example, social capital found in women's self-help groups helps access financial capital through microfinance, while also boosting human capital through skill development and knowledge sharing.

2.2 Gender Empowerment Theory

Gender empowerment theory offers a vital perspective on how economic participation drives broader shifts in women's agency and decision-making power. Kabeer (1999) describes empowerment as the increase in people's ability to make strategic life choices, especially in situations where this ability has been restricted. This process involves three interconnected aspects: resources (material, human, and social), agency (individual and collective action), and achievements (well-being outcomes). Rowlands (1997) expands on empowerment by distinguishing between power over (control over others), power to (ability to act), power with (collective action), and power within (self-confidence and self-awareness). This nuanced view of power is essential for understanding how golden grass artisanship fosters different forms of empowerment. Modern feminist research has increasingly highlighted the role of economic empowerment in advancing gender equality (Duflo, 2012; UN Women, 2019). However, critics contend that economic participation alone does not automatically result in empowerment unless accompanied by shifts in social norms, decision-making processes, and resource access (Cornwall & Edwards, 2014).

2.3 Capabilities Approach

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach offers another crucial theoretical basis for understanding the connection between golden grass artisanship and human development (Sen, 1999). This approach shifts the focus from income and wealth to what people can do and become in terms of their capabilities and functionings. Martha Nussbaum (2000) expanded this approach by highlighting key human capabilities, including practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over one's environment. The capabilities approach is especially relevant to this study because it underscores the inherent value of traditional knowledge and cultural practices, beyond their instrumental role in income generation. Golden grass artisanship can be seen as enhancing multiple capabilities at once: economic opportunities, creative expression, social engagement, and cultural identity (Frediani et al., 2014).

2.4 Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory, as outlined by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993), highlights the importance of social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust in enabling collective action and personal progress. Bourdieu's (1986) view of social capital as a form of cultural reproduction adds another layer by showing how social networks can both open and limit opportunities. In the context of golden grass artisanship, social capital manifests in various forms:

traditional knowledge transfer systems, women's self-help groups, artisan cooperatives, and market networks (Senapati & Ojha, 2019). These social structures not only support economic activities but also serve as platforms for collective empowerment and advocacy.

2.5 Environmental Justice Framework

Environmental justice theory offers a vital perspective on how environmental benefits and burdens are distributed across social groups (Bullard, 2008; Schlosberg, 2007). This framework is beneficial for examining how golden grass artisanship connects with broader environmental and social justice issues in coastal Odisha. The environmental justice framework highlights three main aspects: distributive justice (fair sharing of environmental benefits and burdens), procedural justice (meaningful involvement in environmental decision-making), and recognition justice (respect for diverse ways of life and knowledge systems). Analyzing golden grass artisanship across these aspects helps understand its role in promoting environmental justice.

2.6 Research Gap and Objective

While existing studies examine either women's empowerment through microenterprise (Senapati & Ojha, 2019) or handicraft livelihoods (Dash, 2015) separately, few explore how traditional ecological crafts simultaneously promote gender equity and environmental conservation in climate-vulnerable regions. This study addresses this gap by investigating how golden grass artisanship in Kendrapara contributes to sustainable livelihoods and multidimensional women's empowerment.

2.7 Integrated Theoretical Framework

Building on existing theoretical foundations, this study develops an integrated framework that views golden grass artisanship as a gendered environmental livelihood situated at the intersection of ecological sustainability, economic empowerment, and social justice. The framework recognizes that livelihood strategies are inherently gendered, as women's participation in golden grass work is both enabled and limited by prevailing gender norms and relations. It also emphasizes that environmental resources are socially constructed, with the meaning and value of golden grass shaped by cultural traditions, market forces, and policy interventions. Furthermore, empowerment is seen as multidimensional and context-specific, where economic involvement in artisanship fosters various forms of agency but remains dependent on local social, cultural, and structural conditions. Finally, the framework highlights that sustainability requires an integrated social-ecological approach, acknowledging that the long-term viability of golden grass artisanship depends not only on ecological preservation but also on promoting social equity and justice.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a desk-based research method that combines existing literature, policy documents, and secondary data sources to develop a thorough understanding of golden grass artisanship in Kendrapara, Odisha. Rooted in an interpretive research paradigm, the approach highlights the importance of placing social phenomena within their cultural and historical contexts. The research employs an exploratory case study design (Yin, 2018), which allows for an in-depth analysis of golden grass artisanship as a complex social-ecological phenomenon, thereby facilitating examination of the links between sustainable livelihoods and women's empowerment. Several secondary data sources support this analysis, including peer-reviewed academic articles, government reports and policy documents, NGO studies and evaluations, statistical data from the Census of India and the National Sample Survey Office, documentation from handicraft promotion agencies, and media reports. To analyze these materials, the study uses a thematic synthesis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting common patterns across different data sources. The process is further guided by the integrated theoretical framework developed in this study, enabling a systematic examination of how golden grass artisanship contributes to both sustainable livelihood strategies and women's empowerment in the region.

4. CONTEXT: GOLDEN GRASS ARTISANSHIP IN KENDRAPARA

4.1 Geographical and Environmental Context

Kendrapara district, located in coastal Odisha, spans 2,644 square kilometres and has a population of approximately 1.44 million, according to the 2011 Census. The district features deltaic topography formed by the confluence of the Brahmani, Baitarani, and Mahanadi rivers as they flow into the Bay of Bengal (Das, 2022). The region's unique ecological features create ideal conditions for cultivating golden grass. The grass thrives in saline and waterlogged environments that are unsuitable for traditional crops. This ecological niche has enabled golden grass to become an important non-timber forest product that offers livelihood opportunities without competing with food production systems. Climate change impacts, including increased cyclone frequency, sea-level rise, and changing rainfall patterns, have made traditional agriculture increasingly uncertain in the area (Mishra, 2014). In this context, golden grass artisanship serves as an adaptive livelihood strategy that is more resilient to climate variability.

4.2 Socio-Economic Profile

Kendrapara is classified as one of the economically backward districts of Odisha, characterized by high poverty levels, limited industrial development, and a heavy reliance on agriculture and fishing. The district has a literacy rate of 85.93%, which is above the state average, but significant

gender gaps persist with female literacy at 80.1% compared to male literacy at 91.2% (Census of India, 2011). Women's workforce participation in Kendrapara follows patterns typical of rural India, with high levels of unpaid care work and agricultural activities but limited involvement in formal employment. The rise of golden grass artisanship has created new opportunities for women's economic participation within culturally acceptable frameworks.

4.3 Golden Grass: Ecological and Cultural Significance

Golden grass (*Cyperus pangorei*) is a perennial sedge that naturally grows in the coastal wetlands and saline soils of Odisha. The grass gets its name from its golden-yellow colour when dried, making it ideal for decorative uses. Traditional ecological knowledge systems have long recognized the value of this grass for various purposes, including thatching, basketry, and medicinal uses. The sustainable harvesting of golden grass follows traditional methods that ensure regeneration and ecological balance. Harvesting usually occurs during specific seasons, and traditional rules determine which parts of the plant can be collected and which areas should be left undisturbed for regrowth (Senapati & Ojha, 2019).

4.4 Evolution of Artisan Practices

Golden grass artisanship in Kendrapara has shifted from traditional, practical crafts to modern decorative and artistic items. This change has been driven by factors like government initiatives to promote handicrafts, NGO efforts, market demand for eco-friendly products, and entrepreneurial activities by women artisans. The craft includes several steps: collecting grass, drying it, dyeing (with natural and synthetic dyes), designing, weaving, and finishing. Each step requires specific skills and knowledge that are usually passed down from mother to daughter, forming intergenerational chains of tradition and practice.

5. GOLDEN GRASS ARTISANSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

5.1 Human Capital Development

Golden grass artisanship builds human capital through skill development and capability growth. The craft demands botanical knowledge (grass identification and sustainable harvesting), technical skills (weaving, dyeing, finishing), creative talents (design and innovation), and business savvy (marketing and pricing). Participation boosts women's confidence, communication, and leadership (Swain & Wallentin, 2009). Women involved in the craft often become community resource persons, sharing knowledge about sustainable practices and market connections. Intergenerational knowledge transfer serves as informal education that preserves traditional ecological wisdom while adapting to market needs, strengthening community resilience and cultural continuity.

5.2 Social Capital Formation

Golden grass work is embedded in social networks that facilitate collective action and mutual support. Women's self-help groups organize artisan activities, provide financial assistance, and create platforms for collective bargaining. Artisan cooperatives and producer groups strengthen social capital through formal mechanisms that enable market access and fair pricing, while also serving as platforms for capacity building and political participation (Dash, 2015). During peak production, artisans often work together, sharing workspace, tools, and knowledge. This collaboration boosts productivity and reinforces social bonds.

5.3 Natural Capital Conservation

Sustainable harvesting practices help conserve natural capital. Traditional methods ensure that grass collection does not harm the wetland ecosystem. Artisans follow seasonal calendars, practice rotational harvesting, and rely on community-based management refined over generations. The economic value of artisanship motivates habitat conservation. Communities that depend on this resource have strong incentives to protect the conditions needed for grass regeneration, creating a positive feedback loop between economic gains and environmental protection. Ecological studies show that sustainable golden grass harvesting can support ecosystem health by preventing overgrowth and preserving habitat diversity (Survase & Gohil, 2024), challenging the idea that resource extraction always causes environmental harm.

5.4 Financial Capital Generation

Golden grass artisanship offers flexible income sources that can be tailored to household needs and market opportunities, unlike wage employment's steady but limited income. Income varies depending on product type, quality, market channels, and season. Simple utility products like mats provide steady, modest income, while decorative items fetch higher prices in urban and export markets. SHG-bank linkage programs and microfinance enhance access to financial services by providing working capital and enabling investment in quality improvement, product diversification, and market expansion.

5.5 Physical Capital Development

Participation has enhanced physical capital at both the individual and community levels. Individually, artisans invest in tools, equipment, and workspace upgrades that boost productivity and quality. Improved dyeing techniques, better storage solutions, and enhanced quality control increase market value. Community development includes shared facilities, training institutes, and marketing infrastructure, supported by government and NGO efforts. These act as hubs for knowledge sharing and collective marketing. Development of transportation and communication infrastructure—such as improved roads, mobile networks, and digital payment systems—has expanded market reach and lowered transaction costs.

6. DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

6.1 Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment goes beyond just earning money. The craft offers women an independent income, boosting their bargaining power at home and often leading to greater control over spending, children's education, and investments. The flexible nature of production allows women to manage income alongside domestic duties, unlike formal jobs that require fixed hours. Owning tools, equipment, and raw materials gives women economic independence that is often missing in other rural livelihood options.

6.2 Social Empowerment

Social empowerment happens through mechanisms that boost women's social standing, networks, and ability for collective action. Participating in artisan groups provides opportunities to develop leadership, public speaking, and community representation. Being recognized as skilled artisans challenges gender stereotypes that undervalue women's economic roles. Creative and artistic aspects offer chances for expression and cultural engagement beyond just economic purposes. Intergenerational knowledge sharing enables older women to play important roles as teachers, elevating their status and maintaining their relevance.

6.3 Political Empowerment

Political empowerment is reflected in increased participation in local governance, advocacy, and policy discussions. Women artisans often serve on Panchayat Raj institutions, cooperative boards, and development program committees. Collective organization forms advocacy platforms focused on resource access, market support, and policy reforms. Women's groups have successfully lobbied for improved access to raw materials, skill development, and marketing assistance. Participation also raises women's awareness of their rights and entitlements under government schemes, leading to better utilization of social protection programs.

6.4 Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment involves internal changes in self-perception, confidence, and a sense of control. Acquiring specialized skills and recognition for craftsmanship enhances self-esteem. Creative pursuits provide opportunities for artistic expression, boosting psychological well-being and personal fulfillment. Crafting beautiful, functional products from local materials promotes a sense of achievement and cultural pride. Success in marketing often increases aspirations for themselves and their families, particularly in regard to children's education. This growth in aspirations represents a significant form of psychological empowerment.

7. SUSTAINABILITY DIMENSIONS

7.1 Environmental Sustainability

The environmental sustainability of golden grass artisanship relies on maintaining a delicate balance between resource use and ecosystem preservation. Traditional gathering methods involve a sophisticated understanding of grass growth cycles, seasonal changes, and ecological relationships that support long-term viability. Community-managed resource systems play vital roles in ensuring environmental sustainability. These include traditional rules and regulations governing harvesting, area restrictions, seasonal calendars, and conflict-resolution strategies. The success of these systems depends on community unity and a shared dedication to conserving resources. Climate change brings both challenges and opportunities for the sustainability of golden grass artisanship. While shifts in rainfall patterns and more extreme weather events may affect grass availability, the adaptation strategies developed by artisan communities demonstrate impressive resilience and adaptability.

7.2 Economic Sustainability

The economic sustainability of golden grass artisanship depends on maintaining viable income levels, staying competitive, and fostering product innovation. The craft faces competition from machine-made products and synthetic alternatives, which calls for ongoing improvements in quality and design. Market diversification is a key strategy for economic sustainability. Artisans and support organizations have worked to develop multiple market channels, including local markets, urban retail outlets, export markets, and online platforms. This diversification lessens reliance on any single market segment and enhances resilience against market fluctuations. Value addition through product innovation, quality improvement, and branding has been essential for sustaining economic viability. Developing contemporary designs that appeal to urban consumers while preserving traditional craftsmanship has proven to be a successful adaptation approach.

7.3 Social Sustainability

The social sustainability of golden grass artisanship relies on maintaining the social structures and cultural practices that support craft production and knowledge sharing. Engaging younger generations in craft activities is vital for preserving traditional knowledge and practices. Education and skill development programs need to balance safeguarding traditional knowledge with adapting to modern market demands. This balance is crucial for keeping golden grass artisanship relevant and appealing to younger generations while preserving its cultural authenticity. Gender equality within artisan communities is also an important aspect of social sustainability. While golden grass artisanship has offered significant opportunities for women's empowerment,

ensuring fair benefit sharing and preventing exploitation requires ongoing attention to power dynamics and social relationships.

7.4 Cultural Sustainability

Cultural sustainability involves preserving the cultural meanings, practices, and knowledge systems associated with golden grass artisanship while allowing suitable adaptations to modern contexts. The craft is deeply woven into local cultural practices and identity, making cultural sustainability essential for overall sustainability. Documenting and preserving traditional knowledge are a key strategy for cultural sustainability. This includes not only technical knowledge of grass harvesting and craft-making but also the stories, songs, and cultural practices associated with the craft. Cultural innovation and adaptation help traditional crafts stay relevant in contemporary settings while maintaining their cultural integrity. Developing new designs, products, and uses demonstrates the dynamic nature of cultural practices and their adaptability.

8. CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

Golden grass artisanship in Kendrapara faces multiple challenges that hinder its sustainability and growth. Market issues include fluctuating prices for raw materials and finished products, competition from cheaper machine-made alternatives, and limited access to high-value markets, often leaving artisans exposed to exploitation by middlemen. Resource pressures further threaten production, as urbanization, agricultural expansion, and climate change degrade wetlands, reducing the supply of high-quality grass. Seasonal shortages and the lack of systematic cultivation methods add to these problems. Although artisans have strong traditional skills, they often lack training in design innovation, marketing, and digital literacy, essential skills for adapting to changing consumer preferences. Institutional obstacles, such as limited access to affordable credit, weak policy frameworks, and the absence of quality certification systems, also hinder their progress and credibility. These challenges emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies that enhance ecological sustainability, market access, skill development, and institutional support for golden grass artisanship.

9. OPPORTUNITIES AND POTENTIAL

Golden grass artisanship in Kendrapara has strong potential to advance sustainable livelihoods and women's empowerment. Growing consumer demand for eco-friendly, ethically produced crafts opens new market opportunities, primarily through e-commerce and exports to environmentally conscious regions. Technological innovations such as improved finishing methods, digital design tools, and mobile payment systems can enhance product quality, market access, and efficiency without undermining artisanal authenticity. Supportive policy frameworks, including the National Rural Livelihoods

Mission, handicraft promotion schemes, and cluster development initiatives, create favourable conditions for addressing skill development, infrastructure gaps, and market linkages. At the global level, alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals strengthens the positioning of golden grass artisanship as a model for integrated sustainable development. Research and development offer further opportunities, particularly in sustainable cultivation, product innovation, and impact assessment. Advancing knowledge on ecological management, new product applications, and socio-economic outcomes can not only improve artisans' livelihoods but also provide evidence for scaling up interventions. Collectively, these opportunities highlight the potential of golden grass artisanship to merge environmental sustainability, cultural heritage preservation, and women's economic empowerment within a comprehensive development framework.

10. CONCLUSION

The analysis of golden grass artisanship in Kendrapara, Odisha, highlights its potential as a catalyst for sustainable development by combining environmental conservation, livelihood security, and women's empowerment. Framed within a sustainable livelihood perspective, the craft strengthens all five forms of capital—natural, human, social, physical, and financial by boosting community resilience and reducing vulnerability in environmentally fragile areas. From a gender perspective, artisanship offers women opportunities for income generation, social recognition, and cultural expression, illustrating the multidimensional nature of empowerment shaped by local contexts. Ecologically, the sustainability of golden grass relies on preserving traditional knowledge and community-based management while adapting to pressures from climate change and markets.

The study highlights that golden grass artisanship is more than just an economic activity; it embodies a holistic lifestyle that connects ecological, cultural, and social aspects. As global focus on sustainable development increases, traditional livelihoods such as golden grass artisanship offer valuable insights into alternative paths that emphasize human well-being, environmental health, and social justice. The lessons from Kendrapara's golden grass communities can guide broader discussions on sustainable development strategies that leverage local knowledge and skills while supporting global sustainability goals.

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