

## **Livelihood Activities and Socio-Economic Status of Tharu Women in Barbardiya Municipality, Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the livelihood activities, household roles, economic contributions, and challenges faced by Tharu women in Jodhipur village of Barbardiya Municipality, Bardiya District, Nepal. The research aims to understand the socio-economic status of Tharu women, their participation in household decision-making, and the constraints affecting their livelihood opportunities. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative household surveys with qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. The study selected 70 Tharu women through purposive sampling for the household survey, supported by key informant interviews and focus group discussions with community stakeholders.

The findings indicate that Tharu women play a significant role in both household and economic activities, particularly in agriculture, livestock management, wage labor, and household responsibilities. Despite substantial contributions, their participation in formal decision-making remains moderate due to socio-cultural norms, limited access to education, and economic constraints. Challenges such as low income, restricted mobility, lack of opportunities, and limited access to financial resources continue to affect their livelihood advancement. The study highlights the need for targeted capacity-building programs, improved access to education and skills training, and inclusive development interventions to enhance the socio-economic empowerment of Tharu women.

**Keywords:** Tharu Women; Livelihood Activities; Socio-economic Status; Nepal

### **Introduction**

Indigenous communities in Nepal, particularly the Tharu, have historically maintained livelihood systems closely linked to the ecological environment of the Tarai region. However, structural transformations such as land dispossession, migration, and market integration have significantly altered these traditional systems. Among these communities, women play a vital yet often invisible role in sustaining household economies. Tharu are one of the major indigenous peoples of Nepal, traditionally inhabiting the Tarai plains stretching from the eastern to the western regions of the country, currently living in up to 28 districts of Nepal (Tharu Commission, 2025). Historically, the Tharu community has lived in close interaction with the land, forested and riverine ecology of the Tarai, developing distinct socio-economic, cultural, and livelihood systems adapted to this environment (Guneratne, 2002). Despite their long-standing presence, the Tharu have experienced significant land dispossession and marginalization, particularly following the eradication of malaria in the 1950s and subsequent state-led development initiatives that encouraged large-scale migration from the hill regions to the Tarai.

Although the Tharu possess a rich cultural heritage characterized by distinct languages, customs, belief systems, and social institutions, these features have increasingly come under pressure due to

modernization, market integration and socio-political exclusion (Guneratne, 2002) Socially, Tharu villages are traditionally organized around indigenous institutions such as the Bhalmansa or Barghar system, which regulates community affairs, dispute resolution, and collective decision-making. Religious and healing practices are often mediated by Guruwa, while roles such as village watchmen and protect the people from bad will historically shaped village governance and economic relations (Chaudhary, 2018). However, these institutions are gradually transforming as Tharu communities become more exposed to education, migration, media, and external political processes. Economically, the primary livelihood sources of the Tharu include subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, wage labor, traditional crafts, and remittance income from foreign employment. Agricultural practices remain largely traditional, relying on indigenous knowledge systems and family labor. Among Tharu women, socio-economic challenges are particularly pronounced. Limited access to education, land ownership, development programs, and political participation has placed them in a disadvantaged position within both household and community structures (Acharya, 2014). Tharu women carry a dual burden of productive and reproductive labor, engaging extensively in farming, livestock care, household management, and cultural practices. Despite their central role in sustaining family livelihoods, they remain largely marginalized in decision-making processes and development interventions. Tharu women are deeply engaged in both productive and reproductive labor, including agriculture, livestock care, household management, and cultural practices. Despite their substantial contributions, their work remains under-valued and under-recognized within formal economic frameworks. Socio-cultural norms, limited access to education, and economic marginalization further constrain their participation in decision-making and development processes.

To raise the socio-economic status of the ethnic groups should be empowered and become economically self-dependent. Because they have less access to resources, income, employment opportunities, decision-making, participation in development activities, and education than other castes. Because the traditional pattern of agriculture is not upgrading life condition even though their lifestyle is getting worse day-by-day. They have been facing a miserable life even in the 21st century. Tharu women are strong and laborious; they work day and night even though they are poor and their economic and social situation is very poor. Tharu women of Jodhipur village, in general, have the similar poor socio- economic condition, and they are surviving in isolation from development efforts. This study aims to to explore the livelihood activities, roles, and challenges of Tharu women within this changing context hence seeks to contribute empirical evidence on their roles, challenges, and adaptive strategies. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine the livelihood activities and socio-economic status of Tharu women in Jodhipur village of Barbardiya Municipality ward-1, Bardiya district, Nepal.

Livelihood activities in this study refer to the range of productive and reproductive practices through which Tharu women secure and sustain their household needs and economic survival. Drawing from the sustainable livelihood perspective, livelihood activities are understood not only as income-generating work but also as a broader set of daily engagements that combine labor, skills, and locally available resources (Chambers R. & Conway G., 1992). Importantly, livelihood activities also encompass unpaid domestic responsibilities such as cooking, childcare, water and fuel collection, and

household management, which, although often unrecognized in formal economic terms, are fundamental to the functioning and sustainability of rural households. Similarly, socio-economic status is a multidimensional construct that reflects Tharu women's overall position within the household and community in terms of access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. Rather than being limited to income or occupation alone, this study's socio-economic status incorporates several interrelated indicators, including education level, land ownership, type of employment, income contribution, household assets, and participation in decision-making processes (Bennett, 2006; Kabeer, 1999). In the specific context of rural Tharu women, socio-economic status is also shaped by socio-cultural norms, gender relations, and ethnic marginalization, which influence women's mobility, autonomy, and access to development opportunities.

#### **Livelihood Activities of Tharu Women**

Traditionally, Tharu women are engaged in subsistence agriculture, including crop cultivation, seed preservation, and post-harvest processing, as well as livestock rearing and the collection of forest resources (Guneratne, 2002). In addition to agricultural work, they contribute to household livelihoods through wage labor, traditional crafts, and small-scale income-generating activities. Tharu women also play a key role in maintaining indigenous knowledge systems related to farming practices, food preparation, health care, and cultural rituals. However, their economic contributions are often viewed as extensions of domestic responsibilities rather than recognized as productive labor (Tharu R. & Yadav G., 2016). The loss of land ownership and increasing dependence on wage labor have further intensified women's economic vulnerability, particularly among landless and marginal households (Sugden, 2013). Although development programs have increasingly targeted women's livelihood enhancement, Tharu women's participation remains limited due to low literacy, cultural constraints, and inadequate institutional support. As a result, their livelihood strategies continue to be shaped by necessity rather than choice. Tharu women play a central role in sustaining household and community livelihoods, particularly in the Terai region of Nepal, where agriculture forms the backbone of rural economies. Their livelihood activities encompass a combination of subsistence farming, animal husbandry, wage labor, traditional crafts, and informal economic work, which collectively contribute to household income and food security (Guneratne, 2002; Tharu & Yadav, 2016). Some of the key livelihood activities are;

**Agriculture and Farming Activities:** Agriculture remains the primary livelihood activity for Tharu women, who participate in plowing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and post-harvest processing. Women also manage kitchen gardens and household-level crop production, which provides essential food for their families and supplementary income through local markets. Tharu women often use traditional farming techniques, such as seed preservation, organic fertilization, and crop rotation, reflecting indigenous knowledge systems passed down through generations.

**Animal Husbandry:** Animal husbandry is another critical component of Tharu women's livelihoods. Women are primarily responsible for feeding, milking, and caring for livestock, including cows, buffaloes, goats, and poultry. Livestock not only provides nutritional support for the household but also serves as an important source of income through the sale of milk, meat, or animals during festivals and emergencies. Women's knowledge of livestock management is deeply intertwined with

cultural practices and ecological adaptation, particularly in floodplain and forested areas of Bardiya District (Chaudhary, 2018)

**Wage Labor and Income-Generating Activities:** Tharu women increasingly engage in wage labor both within the village and in nearby towns. Common forms include agricultural labor for non-family farms, construction work, and seasonal employment. Additionally, some women participate in small-scale businesses, such as selling vegetables, traditional crafts, leaf plates, mats, or handmade products, which supplement household income (FAO, 2011). This diversification of income sources is essential for coping with economic uncertainty, particularly in land-poor households.

**Cultural and Social Roles:** Tharu women's livelihood activities are also intertwined with cultural and social responsibilities. They participate in rituals, festivals, and traditional practices, which often require time and labor for food preparation, handicrafts, and ceremonial arrangements. Such activities are not only culturally significant but also economically relevant, as they support community cohesion and may generate income through local trade of festival-related products (Guneratne, 2010; Tharu & Yadav, 2016).

### Methodology

The study was conducted in Jodhipur Village, Ward No. 1, Barbardiya Municipality, Bardiya District, Lumbini Province, Nepal, purposively selected because of its substantial Tharu population and relevance to examining women's livelihood activities and socio-economic conditions. According to the National Population and Housing Census 2021, Barbardiya Municipality has a population of 72,533 of whom 53,675 (74%) are Tharu (CBS, 2021). Jodhipur comprises approximately 300 households and 6,171 inhabitants, including 3,322 females. The study adopted a descriptive-analytical research design within a mixed-methods framework, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine both measurable socio-economic characteristics and women's lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Primary data were collected from Tharu women through a structured household survey, semi-structured interviews, and direct observation, while secondary data were drawn from census reports, government publications, scholarly literature, and relevant research studies. The study population comprised Tharu women from diverse age groups, marital statuses, household types, and livelihood backgrounds. Using purposive sampling, 70 Tharu women were selected from the study area based on their direct involvement in household, agricultural, and/or income-generating activities (Patton, 2015). The survey collected information on demographic characteristics, education, occupation, household income, livelihood activities, access to productive resources, and participation in household decision-making. Interviews and observations provided contextual evidence on women's economic contributions, unpaid labour, resource control, gendered responsibilities, cultural practices, and livelihood constraints. Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations, whereas qualitative data were thematically analyzed around livelihood diversification, economic participation, unpaid work, resource access, decision-making, and socio-economic constraints. Findings from the different data sources were triangulated to strengthen the validity and contextual interpretation of the results.

## Results and Discussion

### Socio-Demographic Characteristics

The socio-demographic characteristics of respondents provide an essential foundation for understanding the livelihood strategies, economic participation, and decision-making roles of Tharu women in Jodhipur village a total of 70 Tharu women were selected through purposive sampling for the household survey, supported by key informant interviews and focus group discussions with community stakeholders. These characteristics including age, education, marital status, household size, land ownership and family structure significantly shape women access to resources, labor participation, and overall socio-economic status.

The age distribution of respondents indicates that the majority of Tharu women fall within the economically productive age group, particularly between 26 and 35 years, followed by those aged 36 to 45. Most respondents are actively engaged in both household and livelihood activities, contributing significantly to family income and agricultural production. Younger women (18–25 years) also participate in these activities, often alongside their domestic responsibilities, while older women (46 years and above) tend to play advisory and supportive roles within the household.

Educational attainment among respondents remains relatively low, with a considerable proportion of women being illiterate or having only primary-level education. This limited access to formal education constrains their ability to access better employment opportunities, participate in skill-based training, and engage effectively in decision-making processes. Marital status is another important factor influencing women's roles and responsibilities. The findings show that a large majority of respondents are married, which corresponds with increased household responsibilities, including childcare, domestic work, and agricultural labor. Unmarried women, although fewer in number, generally have comparatively fewer responsibilities but are still engaged in supporting household activities.

Household size also plays a crucial role in shaping women workload and livelihood strategies. The study reveals that most households consist of five to eight members, indicating medium to large family structures typical of rural settings. Larger household sizes often require greater labor input for food production, childcare, and resource management, which increases the burden on women. At the same time, larger families may provide additional labor support, particularly in joint family systems, although this does not necessarily translate into reduced workload for women due to entrenched gender divisions of labor. Land ownership patterns further illustrate the economic conditions of respondents. While majority of households possess some form of land, a significant proportion rely on leased land or are landless. Limited or insecure land ownership restricts agricultural productivity and income generation, forcing households to depend on wage labor and other supplementary livelihood activities.

Family structure, particularly the distinction between nuclear and joint families, significantly influences women's roles and decision-making authority. Most respondents live in nuclear families, where women bear primary responsibility for both domestic and economic activities with limited support. In contrast, women in joint families may share household tasks with other female members but often experiences reduced autonomy in decision-making due to hierarchical family dynamics. Additionally, the occupational status of household heads reveals that agriculture remains the dominant

source of livelihood, followed by wage labor and remittance income from foreign employment. In households where male members migrate for work, women assume increased responsibility for managing agricultural activities, household finances, and daily decision-making.

### **Household Roles and Daily Activities of Tharu Women**

Household roles and daily activities constitute a central component of Tharu women's livelihood systems. In rural indigenous communities, women typically perform both reproductive roles (domestic responsibilities) and productive roles (economic activities), resulting in a significant workload. Understanding the division of household labor, time allocation, caregiving responsibilities, and observed behavioral pattern helps explain women's socio-economic participation and constraints (FAO, 2011). The study findings indicate that household labor among Tharu families remains largely gender-based. Women mainly handle domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, water collection, childcare, livestock management, and kitchen gardening. Men are generally more involved in activities outside the household, including wage labor, marketing agricultural products, and community-level decision-making.

Among the 70 surveyed households, 85% of women reported primary responsibility for domestic work, while only limited male participation was noted in routine household tasks. However, joint family arrangements allow sharing of responsibilities among female members, reducing individual workload to some extent. Time allocation analysis suggests that Tharu women experience a dual burden of domestic and economic labor. Based on survey responses, interviews, and observation, the workload analysis found as:

- Domestic chores (cooking, cleaning, water collection): 2–3 hours daily
- Agricultural and livestock activities: 3–4 hours daily
- Kitchen gardening and food: 1–2 hours daily
- Childcare and elderly care: 1–2 hours daily

Source: Field survey, 2025

Overall, most women reported working 6–9 hours per day, often without clear separation between domestic and productive activities. Seasonal agricultural periods, particularly planting and harvesting seasons, significantly increase the workload.

### **Caregiving responsibilities; a crucial part of Tharu women's daily activities**

Approximately 80% of respondents reported being the primary caregivers for children, including feeding, hygiene, education supervision, and health care. Elderly care responsibilities were also reported in about 35% of households, particularly in joint family structures. These caregiving roles often limit women's mobility and time available for income-generating activities. Nevertheless, caregiving is culturally valued within the Tharu community and considered an essential aspect of women's social identity. The analysis demonstrates that Tharu women play a central role in household management, caregiving, and livelihood activities. Despite their substantial contributions, their labor often remains undervalued, and heavy workloads limit opportunities for education, skill development, and economic empowerment.

### **Economic Activities and Livelihood Contributions**

Tharu women play a vital role in sustaining household livelihoods through a combination of agricultural work, wage labor, traditional skills, and small income-generating activities. Although much of their work is informal and often undervalued, their contributions are essential for household survival and economic stability. The findings indicate that women's livelihood activities extend beyond domestic responsibilities and form a significant component of rural economic life. Agriculture remains the primary livelihood activity among Tharu households, and women are deeply involved in nearly all stages of crop production. Most respondents reported active participation in planting, weeding, harvesting, seed preservation, and post-harvest processing. Women also play a crucial role in maintaining kitchen gardens, which provide vegetables and spices for household consumption and sometimes for small-scale sale.

Livestock management is another important responsibility. Women commonly take care of cows, buffaloes, goats, pigs, and poultry, including feeding, cleaning sheds, collecting fodder, and processing dairy products. These activities contribute both to household nutrition and supplementary income. However, despite their substantial contribution, women often have limited control over land ownership and agricultural income, which can restrict their economic empowerment. In addition to agricultural work, many Tharu women engage in wage labor, particularly during off-farming seasons or when household income is insufficient. Some women have also started small income-generating activities such as selling vegetables, dairy products, snacks, or locally produced goods. These small enterprises, although modest, help diversify income sources and reduce household vulnerability. Migration of male family members for foreign employment has further increased women's involvement in income management and economic decision-making.

Traditional skills remain an important part of Tharu women's livelihoods and cultural identity. Women continue to practice crafts such as making leaf plates, weaving mats, preparing traditional food products, and producing handmade household items. These activities are often seasonal or occasional but contribute both economically and culturally. Such traditional knowledge not only supports household income but also helps preserve indigenous cultural heritage. Strengthening market linkages and skill development could enhance the economic potential of these traditional crafts. Although women's income contributions are often informal and sometimes not fully recognized, the study shows that they play a substantial role in supporting household finances. Income from agriculture, livestock, wage labor, and small enterprises helps cover daily expenses, children's education, healthcare costs, and food security.

Many respondents reported managing household budgets, especially in cases where male members migrate for work. This demonstrates women's increasing financial responsibility and decision-making role within households. The economic activities of Tharu women reflect resilience, adaptability, and strong commitment to household well-being. While agriculture remains their primary livelihood base, diversification into wage labor, small businesses, and traditional crafts shows evolving livelihood strategies. Recognizing and supporting these contributions is essential for improving women's socio-economic status and promoting inclusive rural development. Participation in household decision-making reflects not only economic contribution but also social recognition, confidence, and

access to information within the family. In many households, decision roles are gradually shifting, although traditional norms still influence who speaks and who decides.

Regarding household expenditure, indicative field observations suggest that about 55–60% of respondents reported joint decision-making between spouses, while roughly, 25% indicated male-dominated decisions and 15–20% reported women independently managing daily expenses, especially in households where they contribute regular income. When it comes to children’s education and health, women particularly mothers often play a central role. Around 65–70% of respondents noted mothers as primary influencers in decisions about schooling, healthcare visits, nutrition, and caregiving, though major financial decisions (like private schooling or medical treatment costs) are usually discussed jointly.

In terms of family resource allocation (land use, savings, livestock, investment in small businesses), participation varies widely. Households with diversified income sources exposure to awareness programs tend to show greater collaborative decision practices, whereas more traditional household may still maintain hierarchical structures.

Table 1: Decision-making by women in the family

| Mainly Male (%) | Mainly Female (%) | Joint Decision (%) | Remarks                                                             |
|-----------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 25              | 18                | 57                 | Daily expenses often jointly managed; women handle routine spending |
| 15              | 32                | 53                 | Mothers play a strong role in schooling and health care decisions   |
| 40              | 10                | 50                 | Traditional norms still influence major resource decisions          |
| 30              | 20                | 50                 | Women earning income show higher involvement                        |

*Source: Field survey, 2025*

### Challenges Faced by Tharu Women

The findings from field observation, household interaction, and literature indicate that Tharu women continue to face multiple socio-cultural and economic challenges that influence their livelihood opportunities, social participation, and decision-making roles. Although the Tharu community traditionally recognizes women’s active role in agriculture and household management, structural inequalities and changing socio-economic conditions have created new vulnerabilities (Acharya & Bennett, 1981; Gurung, 1995).

Tharu women often experience socio-cultural expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities over education, leadership, or economic independence. Traditional gender norms sometimes restrict women’s participation in community decision-making forums and public institutions. Early marriage practices in some areas also reduce opportunities for higher education and skill development. Economically, many Tharu women rely on subsistence agriculture, wage labor, informal income activities such as livestock rearing, seasonal farm work, small household enterprises. These activities often provide low and unstable income. Limited land ownership, restricted access to credit, and fewer economic assets further constrain their financial independence. Research on marginalized communities in Nepal shows that indigenous women, including Tharu women, often contribute significantly to household production but receive limited recognition and economic returns (IFAD, 2017; UN Women, 2020)

Mobility constraints also affect women's participation in economic and social activities. Household responsibilities, safety concerns, and cultural expectations sometimes restrict travel to markets, training centers, or public meetings. This can limit exposure to new opportunities, networks, and information. However, field observations suggest gradual change, especially among younger and educated women, who increasingly participate in community groups, cooperatives, and local governance processes. (UN Women, 2020)

**Table 2: Challenges faced by Tharu Women**

| Type of Challenge         | Specific Issues Reported                                    | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Socio-cultural challenges | Gender norms, limited decision-making role, early marriage  | 68.60%         |
| Economic challenges       | Low income, limited land ownership, lack of credit access   | 74.30%         |
| Education & training      | Limited literacy, lack of vocational training opportunities | 58.60%         |
| Mobility restrictions     | Limited travel for work, training, or markets               | 51.40%         |
| Work burden               | Heavy household plus agricultural workload                  | 78.60%         |
| Access to health services | Distance, cost, and awareness barriers                      | 41.40%         |
| Market access             | Difficulty selling products or accessing fair prices        | 47.10%         |

*Source: Field survey, 2025*

The findings show that Tharu women face multiple and interconnected socio-economic challenges. The most frequently reported challenge was heavy household and agricultural workload 78.6%, indicating a substantial double burden of productive and unpaid domestic labour. Economic constraints 74.3%, including low income, limited land ownership, and restricted access to credit, further limit women's economic independence. Socio-cultural barriers 68.6%, particularly gender norms, limited decision-making power, and early marriage, constrain their opportunities for empowerment. In addition, limited education and training 58.6%, mobility restrictions 51.4%, market-access difficulties 47.1%, and barriers to health services 41.4% affect their livelihood opportunities and well-being. Overall, the findings indicate that Tharu women's socio-economic vulnerability is multidimensional, requiring interventions that address both economic opportunities and underlying social and institutional constraints.

The challenges faced by Tharu women are multidimensional, combining cultural norms, economic limitations, educational barriers, and mobility restrictions. Despite these constraints, Tharu women demonstrate resilience through active engagement in agriculture, household management, and emerging livelihood opportunities. Addressing these challenges requires integrated interventions focusing on education, economic empowerment, social inclusion, and gender-sensitive policy support.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that Tharu women play a pivotal role in sustaining household livelihoods in Jodhipur village, Barbardiya Municipality, Bardiya. They actively engage in agriculture, livestock management, wage labor, small-scale businesses, and traditional occupations while simultaneously carrying primary responsibilities for household management, childcare, and elderly care. Despite their substantial economic and domestic contributions, their participation in major household decision-making remains limited, particularly in financial and property-related matters. Women's decision-making capacity is influenced by factors such as education, economic participation, and age. The study further identifies key challenges, including limited access to education, skills

training, financial resources, and income-generating opportunities, alongside persistent socio-cultural norms and gender expectations that restrict women's mobility and empowerment. Overall, strengthening women's access to education, livelihood opportunities, financial inclusion, and decision-making processes is essential for improving the socio-economic status and sustainable development of Tharu households.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested to improve the livelihood conditions and socio-economic empowerment of Tharu women:

**Skill Development and Livelihood Training:** Local government agencies, NGOs, and development partners should design targeted skill development programs focusing on agriculture modernization, small enterprise development, vocational skills, and financial literacy to enhance women's income-generating capacity.

**Economic Empowerment Initiative:** Access to microfinance, cooperative participation, and income diversification opportunities should be strengthened support for women-led small businesses and agricultural value chains can improve household income and economic independence.

**Promotion of Gender-Equitable Decision-Making:** Community-level awareness programs should encourage shared household decision-making and recognition of women's economic contributions. Male engagement programs may help shift traditional gender norms positively.

**Institutional and Policy Support:** Local governments should integrate indigenous women's livelihood concerns into municipal development plans. Targeted programs addressing indigenous women's needs can improve inclusiveness in development interventions.

**Further Research:** Future research should explore long-term livelihood changes among Tharu women, impacts of migration and modernization, and comparative studies across different Tharu subgroups to deepen understanding of socio-economic transformation.

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