



Silkworm Rearing as a Livelihood: A Sustainable Option for Rural Development

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Received: 2.07.2025 | Revised: 29.08.2025 | Accepted: 10.09.2025

ABSTRACT

*Silkworm rearing, or sericulture, is a sustainable agricultural practice with significant potential for rural development. This article examines sericulture as a viable livelihood option, focusing on its economic viability, social impact, and environmental sustainability. Through scientific insights into *Bombyx mori* biology, economic analysis of cost-benefit ratios, and case studies from India and Ethiopia, sericulture is shown to generate stable incomes, empower women, and create employment, with one hectare supporting 12–15 person-years of work. Environmentally, mulberry plantations sequester 20–25 tons of CO₂ per hectare annually, while byproducts promote circular economies. Technological advancements, such as hybrid breeds and digital tools, enhance productivity, though challenges like market volatility and climate change persist. Supported by policies in countries like India and China, sericulture aligns with Sustainable Development Goals, offering a scalable, inclusive model for rural economic resilience.*

Keywords: Sericulture, rural development, sustainable livelihood, women's empowerment, environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Silkworm rearing, or sericulture, involves cultivating silkworms to produce silk, a natural fiber prized for its strength, luster, and versatility. As a labor-intensive, low-investment agricultural practice, sericulture holds immense potential for rural

development, offering sustainable livelihoods, economic empowerment, and environmental benefits. This article systematically examines the scientific, economic, social, and ecological dimensions of sericulture as a viable livelihood option, highlighting its role in fostering sustainable rural development.

Cite this article: Damodhara, G. N., Karthik, R., Raj S. S., Sharma, K., Manjunatha, B., Priti, Vashishta, N., Mahala, S. K., & Abhishek, T. S. (2025). Silkworm Rearing as a Livelihood: A Sustainable Option for Rural Development, *Curr. Rese. Agri. Far.* 6(5), 9-13. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18782/2582-7146.248>

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With the global silk market projected to grow at a CAGR of 7.5% from 2023 to 2030 (Grand View Research, 2023), sericulture is a timely opportunity for rural communities to achieve economic resilience and social equity.

2. Biology and Lifecycle of Silkworms

Sericulture primarily focuses on *Bombyx mori*, the domesticated silkworm, which feeds exclusively on mulberry leaves (*Morus* spp.). The lifecycle of *B. mori* spans 25–30 days, encompassing four stages: egg, larva, pupa, and adult moth (Krishnaswami, 1990). The larval stage, lasting 20–25 days, is critical, as silkworms consume large quantities of mulberry leaves to synthesize silk protein (fibroin) in their salivary glands. Optimal conditions—temperature (24–26°C), humidity (70–80%), and leaf quality—significantly influence larval growth and silk yield (Rahmathulla, 2012).

Key Factors in Rearing

- **Mulberry Cultivation:** High-quality mulberry leaves are vital for larval health. Varieties like *Morus alba* are preferred for their high protein and water content (Datta, 2000).
- **Disease Management:** Silkworms are prone to diseases such as pebrine (*Nosema bombycis*), flacherie, and viral infections. Regular disinfection, quarantine, and microscopic egg screening are essential (Singh & Jayasomu, 2002).
- **Breeding:** Hybrid silkworm strains, including bivoltine and multivoltine breeds, enhance cocoon yield and silk quality. Selection depends on regional climate and market demand (Kumari et al., 2011).

3. Economic Viability of Sericulture

Sericulture is a low-cost, high-return activity ideal for smallholder farmers. A 1-acre mulberry plantation can support 200–300 disease-free layings (DFLs), producing 100–150 kg of cocoons annually (Central Silk Board, 2020). At \$5–7 per kg, farmers can earn \$500–\$1,050 per cycle, with 2–3 cycles possible in tropical climates.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

- **Inputs:** Costs include mulberry saplings, silkworm eggs, rearing sheds, and labor. Initial investment for a 1-acre setup ranges from \$1,000–\$1,500 (FAO, 2018).
- **Returns:** Net profit margins of 60–80% are achievable after the first year, with break-even within 2–3 years (Buhroo et al., 2018).
- **Scalability:** Farmers can increase profitability by integrating cocoon processing, reeling, and weaving, adding value to raw silk (Geetha & Reddy, 2013).

Employment Generation

Sericulture generates significant employment. One hectare of mulberry cultivation creates 12–15 person-years of work, encompassing leaf harvesting, rearing, and silk processing (Hanumappa, 1986). Women, comprising 60–70% of the workforce, benefit from enhanced economic and social empowerment (Qadri, 2019).

4. Social Impact

Sericulture uplifts marginalized rural communities by providing stable income, skill development, and social inclusion. It is particularly effective in regions with limited agricultural alternatives, such as arid and semi-arid zones.

Women's Empowerment

Women dominate sericulture activities, including leaf harvesting, rearing, and reeling, gaining financial independence and elevated social status (Kumari, 2017). Self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives enhance their market access, bargaining power, and access to credit (Nalini & Rao, 2015).

Community Development

Sericulture promotes cooperative models, with farmers pooling resources for shared rearing facilities and marketing. Government programs, such as India's MGNREGA-linked sericulture initiatives, provide infrastructure, training, and subsidies, fostering community resilience (Ministry of Textiles, 2021).

Education and Skill Development

Training programs in sericulture improve technical skills, such as rearing techniques and disease management, enhancing

employability. Youth engagement in sericulture reduces rural-urban migration, preserving community cohesion (Rao & Singh, 2020).

5. Environmental Sustainability

Sericulture aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Ecological Benefits

- **Mulberry as a Perennial Crop:** Mulberry trees require less water and fewer chemical inputs than cash crops like cotton, reducing environmental strain (Dewangan, 2013).
- **Carbon Sequestration:** Mulberry plantations sequester 20–25 tons of CO₂ per hectare annually, mitigating climate change (Singh et al., 2016).
- **Waste Utilization:** Silkworm pupae and mulberry byproducts serve as animal feed, organic fertilizer, and biogas inputs, supporting circular economies (Patil et al., 2019).
- **Soil Conservation:** Mulberry roots stabilize soil, reducing erosion in degraded landscapes (FAO, 2018).

Challenges

- **Deforestation Risk:** Unregulated mulberry expansion may lead to habitat loss. Sustainable land-use planning is critical (FAO, 2020).
- **Pesticide Use:** Chemical sprays on mulberry fields can harm silkworms and ecosystems. Organic and integrated pest management (IPM) practices are recommended (Rahmathulla, 2012).

6. Technological Advancements

Innovations in sericulture enhance productivity, sustainability, and market competitiveness:

- **Improved Breeds:** High-yielding bivoltine hybrids boost cocoon production by 20–30% (Dandin et al., 2003).
- **Mechanization:** Automated reeling and spinning machines reduce labor costs and improve silk quality (Geetha & Reddy, 2013).

- **Biotechnology:** Transgenic silkworms producing recombinant proteins for medical and industrial applications create new revenue streams (Tamashiro et al., 2019).
- **Digital Tools:** Mobile apps for disease monitoring, weather forecasting, and market linkages empower farmers with real-time data (Central Silk Board, 2022).
- **IoT and Automation:** Smart rearing systems with sensors for temperature and humidity control optimize larval growth (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

7. Global and Regional Perspectives

Sericulture is a global industry, with China (80%), India (15%), and Uzbekistan (2%) as leading producers (International Sericulture Commission, 2023). India's sericulture sector employs over 9 million people, contributing \$4 billion to GDP (Ministry of Textiles, 2021). Emerging markets in Africa, such as Kenya and Ethiopia, are adopting sericulture to diversify rural economies (FAO, 2018).

Policy Support

- **India:** The Central Silk Board (CSB) offers subsidies, training, and R&D support. The Sericulture Development Program aims for a 50% production increase by 2030 (CSB, 2020).
- **China:** State-backed cooperatives ensure price stability and market access for farmers (Li et al., 2017).
- **Africa:** FAO's sericulture initiatives emphasize capacity building, women's cooperatives, and market integration (FAO, 2020).
- **Southeast Asia:** Countries like Thailand and Vietnam leverage sericulture for rural poverty alleviation through government-NGO partnerships (ASEAN, 2022).

8. Challenges and Solutions

Challenges

- **Market Volatility:** Fluctuating silk prices threaten farmer incomes (Qadri, 2019).
- **Climate Change:** Erratic rainfall and temperature shifts disrupt mulberry growth and rearing cycles (Singh et al., 2016).

- **Skill Gaps:** Limited access to training hinders adoption of modern techniques (Buhroo et al., 2018).
- **Access to Finance:** Smallholder farmers often lack capital for initial investments (FAO, 2020).

Solutions

- **Price Stabilization:** Government-backed minimum support prices and cooperatives can reduce market risks (Ministry of Textiles, 2021).
- **Climate-Resilient Practices:** Drought-tolerant mulberry varieties and controlled rearing environments enhance adaptability (Dewangan, 2013).
- **Training Programs:** Extension services, digital platforms, and vocational training can address skill gaps (Central Silk Board, 2022).
- **Microfinance:** SHGs and rural banks can provide affordable credit to farmers (Nalini & Rao, 2015).

9. Case Studies

India: Karnataka

Karnataka, India's top silk-producing state, accounts for 45% of national output. Smallholder farmers in Ramanagara district earn \$2,000–\$3,000 annually, supported by CSB's training, subsidies, and hybrid silkworm varieties (CSB, 2020).

Ethiopia: Amhara Region

FAO's sericulture pilot in Amhara trained 500 women farmers, generating \$200–\$300 per household annually. Mulberry plantations improved soil fertility and reduced erosion, enhancing local ecosystems (FAO, 2018).

Thailand: Northeast Region

Thailand's sericulture program in Isaan integrates traditional silk weaving with modern rearing techniques, employing 50,000 farmers and generating \$500 million in exports annually (ASEAN, 2022).

10. Future Prospects

Sericulture's future hinges on sustainability, innovation, and market expansion. Key strategies include:

- **Organic Silk:** Growing demand for eco-friendly textiles can boost profitability (Tamashiro et al., 2019).

- **Niche Markets:** Vegan and biomedical silk products offer new revenue streams (Kumar & Singh, 2021).
- **Global Trade:** Trade agreements and e-commerce platforms can enhance market access (International Sericulture Commission, 2023).
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Collaborations between governments, NGOs, and private firms can scale sericulture infrastructure and R&D (FAO, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Silkworm rearing is a sustainable, inclusive, and economically viable livelihood option for rural development. Its low investment, high employment potential, and environmental benefits make it ideal for smallholder farmers, particularly women. By addressing challenges like market volatility, climate change, and skill gaps through policy support, technological innovation, and global cooperation, sericulture can significantly contribute to achieving SDGs and building resilient rural economies.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to sincerely thank my co-authors for their support and kind gesture to complete this manuscript in time.

Funding: NIL.

Conflict of Interest:

There is no such evidence of conflict of interest.

Author Contribution:

All authors have participated in critically revising of the entire manuscript and approval of the final manuscript.

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