

Weaving a New Future: Handloom as a Tool for Women Empowerment

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“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women”

(Kofi Annan)

Abstract—Women have been subjected to inferior status and are generally susceptible in many situations, and in Indian milieu, they are in lower most hierarchy. Thus, the mesh of vulnerability that arises owing to deprivation has to be untangled to address the concern of comprehensive advancement of women. Weaving traditions in India are in existence since ancient times and have been demonstrating numerous distinctive sub-cultures in the country. India is extremely rich in the heritage of handloom products. Manufacturing diligences aid to lessen paucity and unemployment in a multiple ways. The economy of a nation is perceived as a replication of industrial expansion and work force contribution. Earlier, females were not considered as a vital part of the work force; they entered the industry after the introduction of machineries. Women empowerment via handloom lessens poverty by increasing their employment level and assisting them to afford for their families as well as communities. However, it is ironic that we overlook this existing treasure house, for this is indeed the sector that could make the ‘Make in India’ and ‘Skill India’ initiatives work. This paper endeavors to analyze the handloom as a tool for empowering the women. The paper also deals with the different marketing tools enabling the women weavers to firm their feet strongly in the industry. The paper also evaluates the initiatives taken by the government of India to help the women weavers in achieving their economic advancement. The paper attempts to find out various issues and challenges faced by the women weavers in handloom industry. At last, the paper tries to suggest some remedial measures for the upliftment of women weavers in the handloom industry.

Keywords: Women, Handloom, Empowerment, Weavers, Industry.

Introduction

The expression empowerment literally means ‘to invest with power’. A woman, not merely being the half of the populace of India but of the world too, her empowerment is crucial for the development of the Nation. Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru rightly observed it as “that to awaken the people it is the women who must be awakened, once she is on the move the family moves, the nation moves.” The handloom industry has a glorious history and no other country in the world has preserved and uphold this ancient craft in such pure form as India does. In

India, the handloom sector is one of the largest unorganised industries. It is endowing with employment opportunities to 43.31 lakh weavers from the rural, urban and semi urban regions. More than seventy percent of these weavers are women. Thus to achieve the pious objective of women empowerment, handloom sector must be considered as an effective instrument. The Government can utilize this sector as a huge growth driver for female weavers to join the India’s economic workforce, by familiarising them with the latest technology and providing them the grass -root level assistance to overcome the key issues arousing before them. Whenever the handloom industry faces difficulties, the woman has to suffer most since she is the foundation stone of this industry and a huge structure of the industry lies on her shoulders.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the social and economic conditions of women weavers in handloom sector.
2. To study the role of online platforms as a marketing tool to empower the women weavers.
3. Underlining key concerns allied to female weavers in the country.
4. To suggest the remedial measures to overcome the problems of women weavers.

Methodology

In this paper, researchers have conducted descriptive study. The study is based on secondary data. Published materials i.e. Reference books, articles, research papers government reports and census are the main source of secondary data. The present study confines itself to the issues of women weavers and emphasizes to suggest the appropriate solutions to solve their problems.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis tested in this study are as follows-

- i. The handloom sector, women weavers are not receiving the appropriate portion of profit as compared to their intensive labor.

- ii. Competition from mechanized sector is the major problem before handloom industry.
- iii. The government and financing institutions are not playing their role as requisite in the present economic crisis in the handloom sector to empower the women weavers.

Handloom as a tool for women empowerment

Half of population or better half of man in whatever manner one may think women has always been formed a very fascinating class of society. However, at the same time they subjected to so many disadvantages and inequalities in our male dominated society. Their basic human rights are violated. It is believed that “when there is development of women, family develops, the society develops and the country develops”. Hence, empowering the women is decisive for the development of any country. Empowerment denotes 'to invest with power' and power may be refers as the ability to effect the behaviour of the others with or without limitation. Empowerment may be refer as process of responsiveness and capacity building prominent to better contribution, to better decision making power as well as transformative achievement. Women empowerment decreases poverty by enabling them to contribute for their families, communities as well as the whole nation. Economic empowerment via education is also important for the economy of the local community. Empowering women can also improve the economic status of family and rises its food security.

Therefore, it is very essential to secure their basic rights through empowerment. Economic interdependence of women is one of the reason for their exploitation. The empowerment may be of social, political or economic. Women may be economically empowered through handloom industry. Because this sector is important from the perspective of its size and employment potential. It also have massive relevance to agrarian economy like ours because of its interconnection with the agriculture sector. As raw materials in handloom industry agriculture products are being in used hence affords an ever-ready marketplace for agrarian produce.

In the context of production and designing, handloom is totally different from power loom and semi-automatic sector. Handloom is a process of operation by hand of a wooden structure known as loom. According to section 2(b) of The Handloom (Reservation and Articles for Production) Act, 1985 handloom means “any loom other than Power loom”. Hence, handloom is simply a weaving machine. Whenever the handloom is in catastrophic situation, women have been getting end of discernment of all types, nevertheless they have been the main stabilization force in problems in the handloom sector. On the other side, handloom sector affords largest employment opportunity to females, who occupies an inimitable place in this age-old tradition i.e. handloom.

Handloom sector has been directly empowering women. As per the Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019 - 20, this industry involves above 23 lakhs women weavers and allied

workers. This sector is mainly household-based, carried out with labour backed by the whole family. Thus, the engagement of over 70% of women as weavers and allied workers in this sector has guaranteed direct remunerations for them and in this way; it is economically empowering them through financial autonomy. This sector also enhanced self-worth of women both within and outside of their households. According to the handloom census issued by Ministry of Textile Government of India

The number of women weaver in the handloom sector is much more as compared to the men. It can be seen in the following table-

Table 1: Number of handloom workers by gender

Gender	Rural	Urban	Total
Male	7,78,772	1,96,961	9,75,733
Female	22,74,516	2,71,769	25,46,285
Transgender	403	91	494
Total	30,53,691	4,68,821	35,22,512

Empowering women weavers via online marketing tools

Internet is a very significant instrument and it offers a direct access to the weavers to reach up to the customers without any intermediary. It provides the handloom weavers a horizons of new market and customers. The Government and other organisations including private companies and NGOs are taking the initiatives to organise the digital literacy programme for the weavers to join them to the mainstream as well as enabling them to compete with the big business giants. ICTs (Information and communication technologies) are essential devices to boost advancement, they can be rightfully utilised to boost economics contribution of women. The initiatives of Government like Digital India, Skill India and Common Service Centres can play a vital role in helping the women weavers to connect to their customers right from their homes. Here the Mahila e-haat project needs special mention. The project focuses on providing the online marketing platform for women in New Delhi. This project provides opportunity to all Indian women citizens to connect to the project and showcase their product online and be a part of the Digital India Campaign with an ease to manage all the business on mobile phones. The Government of India has also launched a mobile app 'E-Dhaga' which is available in many languages viz: English, Hindi, Bangla, Urdu, Assamese, Odiya etc. It can be downloaded on Mobile Phone and is extremely useful for weaver as she can view the yarn stock in NHDC's depots, Warehouses and CFCs, product catalogue, the supplier list, the shipment status and make online payment etc. Postal Department of India has also started an E-commerce portal which will provide an e-marketplace to sellers, especially rural artisans, self-help groups and women entrepreneurs to sell their products to buyers across the country.

Apart from the Government measures, some of the leading e-commerce companies have also taken the initiatives to help

the handloom weavers to grow their market base and get their deserved share of profit. Amazon India in collaboration with The Ministry of Textiles has launched its e-commerce store for handlooms 'Weavesmart', having more than 3000 weavers currently registered on it. It has earlier also started a project named Kalahat. It has also partnered with various Govt. Bodies like Gujrat Tribal Development Department and U.P. Khadi to help the handloom weavers. Microsoft India has launched a new e-commerce platform re-weave.in for handloom weavers under its Project ReWeave, part of its philanthropic initiatives. This e-commerce platform will help connect artisans to buyers directly, enabling them to expand to newer customers and markets. Recently the well known e-commerce company Flipkart has launched the project 'Flipkart Samarth' which will work in collaboration with NGOs and government bodies to connect to the maximum rural entrepreneurs. It is specially focused on women and specially-abled entrepreneurs, rural artisans, and weavers, who often face obstacles such as lack of access to working capital, poor infrastructure, and inadequate training.

Recently social media has emerged as the latest and most effective platform for product endorsement and selling. Nowadays, rather than only understanding of how to use email, online shopping etc., the internet is more about blogs, facebook, MySpace, whatsapp, YouTube, twitter, etc. These are some of the tools and technology associated with a latest phenomenon known as social media. Social media can be used by the women weavers in handloom industries as a tool to increase the awareness about the handloom products in the society, promote and enhance skills, create new employment opportunities and boost the sale of their product in most economic way. The handloom industry has much to gain from this social media. It is extremely useful for a women weaver as she can reach out to the masses and connect directly to the customer within a while without being exploited by the intermediary.

Social media can be used very effectively for campaigning the handloom product to create awareness among people about the rich heritage of our handloom industry such as "# I wear handloom" campaign started by the Textile Minister Smriti Irani, the 100 Sari pact and #I love handloom etc. to revive the love for handloom in the people. It helps the women weavers of handloom industry to be empowered economically in an efficient way as it reduces the dependency on others owing to many direct and indirect barriers.

Government's Initiative to empower women weavers

The Government of India has designed and implemented various schemes for the welfare of women weavers. The Ministry of Textile and the Office of the Development Commissioner of Handloom are the chief allies of the Government to implement these schemes. Though there are a number of schemes created for the handloom workers such as Skill India, Stand up India, Government e-marketplace, e-haat, a few major schemes have actually reached to the women

weavers to empower them. These are: National Handloom Development Programme, Handloom Weavers Comprehensive Development Scheme, Yarn Supply Scheme and Comprehensive Handloom Cluster Development Scheme. The National Handloom Development Programme provides 100% subsidy to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Below Poverty Line and women weavers for construction of work shed. 412 block level clusters have been sanctioned under the programme until now having a number of 1,71,822 women beneficiaries. It also provides 75% subsidy to women weavers for enrolment under NIOS and IGNOU courses. Under the Stand Up India scheme, a woman entrepreneur can avail a financial assistance upto Rs. 25 lakh for the establishment of new power loom units along with reimbursements of credit guarantee fee up to 1% of the loan amount. Till now, around 300 applications are submitted including 250 from women entrepreneur. Silk production is mainly a household activity practiced by the women. The Government with a ray of hope to generate the productive employment to women launched the Silk Samagra scheme. The Government has also distributed the Buniyadrealing machines to eradicate the silk production by the process of thigh reeling which tribal women mainly do as it is highly infectious, labour intensive and less productive way.

Recently 5th National Handloom Day has been celebrated on 7th August in Bhuvneshwar, Orissa focusing on 'The contribution of handloom to socio economic development of India and to increase income of weavers'. The major intent at the back of the event was to empower women and girls. Bhubaneswar has been chosen as venue for main event due to its rich tradition of Handlooms and as more than 50% of total weaver's population of India resides in Eastern and North Eastern Regions and most of them are women.

Issues and Challenges faced by women weavers in India

The handloom is a sector, which is trapped between subjective insights and objective realisms. The contemporary stage of development of transformation and globalization has posed lot of challenges for the handloom industry in the country. The issues of concern and challenges faced by women weavers in India are as follows:-

1. Handloom weaving involves extensive and enduring hours of work in many harmful positions on traditional looms and handloom weaving instruments that caused stress, body pain, pulmonary problems, reduction in hand-grip strength, eye-strain as well as affected the well-being. Weaving for more than half of the day also caused gynecological complications.
2. Rate of literacy is lower in girls and women. Illiteracy is a factor, which affects women weavers in many ways. Due to illiteracy women weavers unable to use updated technology in the handloom sector, they also deprived to use various marketing tool etc.

3. Teen-age girls are also intricate in weaving processes at the domestic levels and as remunerated waged workers. Even though women perform a major role in all weaving processes and take on labor-intensive undertakings there is no recognition to women's effort as weavers. Women do not have any government identity cards, except in cases where they are members of any Organisation.
4. In most of the weaving families the men turned to alcohol, ignoring work, indulging in child abuse and the women steadily took over the affliction of the entire family. In consequence of which the women grieved with social as well as psychological problems i.e. psychological disorder, frustration, irritation etc.
5. In the name of customs and culture, women are not permitted to work at the time of menstruation. This limitation affects the economic as well as physiological well-being of the women.
6. Trust is also one of the issues of concern for women weavers in handloom industry. As the women do not get the contract for preparation of bulk of handloom material.
7. Though government have been taken various initiatives for the advancement of the handloom sector as crucial for the economic advancement of the country but still there is ineffectual implementation of these initiatives. There is also lack of women centric schemes.
8. Safe and secure transportation as well as safety at work place is also one of the problems faced by the women weavers in the handloom industry.
9. Women left out in the national foreign trade policy and significant roles and this laxity lessens their role to routine tasks and increases disparity between men and women relationships.
10. Women weavers are also not aware about various policies and initiatives taken by the government for the upliftment of handloom sector. Even government departments and implementing organizations associated to handloom suffer from insufficient information and statistics which result in a spreading cavity between policy preparation and application.
11. Other issues such as globalization, mechanization, development of the power loom lack of basic financial literacy are the other major issues of concern.

Conclusion

As we strive towards women empowerment, we should focus at the handloom sector. We should also acknowledge its strengths such as environment friendly production processes and suppleness to transform. The handloom industry has the prospect to play a massive role in empowering women. However, the industry is not being utilized at its full potential to empower the women. Because most of the women involved

in the handloom sector are illiterate and poor economic conditions, which cast doubt on their social security and future ambitions. We have to concede the handloom sector as a valued skill resource and its significance in providing employment prospects to women weavers. Although government has taken various initiatives for upliftment of women weavers but it is ironic that they have not achieved the economic equality as enshrined in the different provisions of the constitution of India. Thus while conducting the research, the researcher came to the conclusion that women weavers in the handloom sector are not receiving the appropriate portion of profit as compared to their intensive labor and there are very few schemes which actually focus on the issues of women weavers.

Remedial Measures

Women empowerment is crucial for the inclusive development of a country. Women should be educated, empowered, given prospects devoid of restrictions, as it is the only way forward. For the upliftment of women weavers following remedial measures are suggested-

1. There is need to work on basic as well as vocational education. Awareness of weavers concerning girls' education is also essential as it can spread their traditional handloom artifact through pioneering thoughts. As Ashram schools, Bridge schools for school dropouts should be established in handloom clusters.
2. As the rapid and economical means of transportation and as well as safety at workplace is the key concern for women weavers so transportation facility should be provided in far flung areas of the country.
3. Owing to restive weaving activities, large numbers of females are suffering from gynecological complications. So to decrease the women casualties, free remedial camps and mobile wellbeing centers should be established in the handloom clusters in all the parts of the country.
4. The Panchayat institutions should afford women responsive environment in the area.
5. The government should renew the textile policies time to time keeping in mind the present situation of the handloom sector as well.
6. Research activities should be undertaken by government units, universities etc that outcomes in innovative technology to upgrade the traditional tools and designs.
7. Since, most of the women weavers are illiterate training should be provided to them for making better quality products. Now day's online platforms have also become an important tool for marketing goods but illiterate women weavers do not know how to use these platforms. So women weavers should also be trained as to use of these online marketing tools. The government should also

find out other alternative marketing tools to sell the handloom products.

8. Women weavers should be brought under the national employment schemes and some women weavers' centric schemes should be launched.
9. Budget should be increased to address the problems of the women working in the handloom industry.
10. Government should ensure by its developmental plans that women weavers get appropriate wages for their hard work. Women weavers with difficulties of deprivation should be provided with specific ration cards.

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