

## WOMEN IN HANDLOOM INDUSTRY- THEIR ROLE AND PROBLEMS

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### ABSTRACT

In today's scenario, women empowerment has become a major concern at both national and international levels. If we talk about India, this concern i.e. empowerment of women has to be focused majorly in non-formal sectors, where women are working predominantly. One such sector is the handloom sector. With over 4.3 million people directly and indirectly involved in the production, the handloom industry is the second largest after agriculture where we find largest economical activities. Industrialization in India proved to be a doom for our handloom and khadi due to introduction of power loom. It majorly affected the life of women, which was the main work force in the handloom sector as compared to men. As Jawaharlal Nehru rightly said that "the greatest revolution in a country is the one that affects the status and living conditions of its women (Sen Gupta, 1974). In handloom industry we have about 78% of women workers wherein, Sikkim has the lowest and Assam has the highest number of women

workers. The women workers are generally illiterate and poor which prove to be the two major factors strongly affecting the livelihood of these women. Thus, the economic status of these handloom women weavers should be raised in the present scenario. The main purpose to conduct this study is to throw a light on the conditions of women weavers through the years and suggest some action plans to combat this depreciation. The data from published material such as government reports, plan documents, articles, reference books has been collected and presented herein to form an unbiased conclusion.

**Keywords** - Handloom industry, women empowerment, women weavers, skill development.

### INTRODUCTION

Handloom sector is one of the largest occupation generator next to agriculture in India. This occupation involves brilliant craftsmanship which is passed on to generations but the ones who follow this profession and tradition have been the victims of a staunch hierarchical system. They have been witness to the extreme forms of exploitation and harassment. After India got independence, it was expected that this act of handloom weaving would survive with full decoration again and thus development on the status of handloom weavers will occur. On the contrary, there was a drastic downfall of economic condition of handloom weavers as it was before. Currently, the handloom workers are seen to be poorest, least respected, living in debts, socially deprived, economically unstable and living almost as if like an island in the Indian society. In many parts of India, handloom weaving lost its pride, fame and prosperity. Broadly it is a men's domain but at this point of time women stepped out and we must acknowledge their significant role in handloom sector. For the Indian handloom sector women handloom workers are one of its biggest assets. Also, women are the pillars of weaving community. Though women were given big opportunity to work in handloom sector, but they are found victims of subjugation in the family as well as society. Due to poor economic conditions women workers in the handloom sector are generally illiterate or semi-literate. Illiteracy is one of the reasons that the women workers who belong to weaving family are not allowed to go and learn beyond the weaving skill and all their life and identity etc. come from handloom weaving only. Ultimately there is no financial security and social protection for these workers. On the other hand, the burden is mainly on these women handloom weavers. They have also been subject to domestic violence too. It has been noticed that whenever the handloom is in crisis women have been at the receiving end, even though they have been the main force of stabilization through years of problems and crisis in the handloom sector. In large parts of India, the participation of women in handloom sector is inevitable and an unutterable achievement, still there is no recognition given to their work.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The government of India in 1987, started a Decentralized Training Program (DTP) to enhance the skills of skilled handloom workers in weaving, design technology and dyeing which helped in enhancing their productivity and resulting in better marketability of their products. The scheme was later modified in 1995 and 2000. This scheme was subsumed by the ministry of textiles in (2007-2012) in the eleventh five year plan in the new Integrated Handloom Development scheme. Weaving service centers (WSC) in collaboration with state government implemented these schemes. According to the EPRA International Journal by B. Prem Sundar and J. Kannan, in the year 1989-1999 to 2002-03, a total of 10525 weavers, designers and dyers had been trained in 15 selected states. In the modern industrial societies, the status of women deteriorated still further. Women always work at home, but she is never paid for it hence considered unemployed. There are two terms "working women" and "mere housewife" indicating

work outside home and work done at home. Thus, it has been found that man is the main producer and called "breadwinner" whereas women despite of working at home was given title of "dependent". Pregnancy is oftenviewed as a period of physical disability. It has been found that women in handloom sector work hours and hourscontinuously during pregnancy too. No benefit is provided to the pregnant women workers.

## **OBJECTIVES**

1. Facilitating an enabling environment for over-all development of women weavers in difficult circumstances.
2. Highlighting important issues related to women weavers in India.
3. Identifying appropriate solutions for overcoming the issues of women weavers especially those working at homebasedindustry.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a descriptive study based on thesis and dissertations by various research scholars and is collectedthrough published material such as government reports, plan documents, articles, reference books. The study limitsitself to women weaver's issues and focuses on suggesting solutions to solve their problems.

## **CONDITIONS AND PROBLEMS OF HANDLOOM WOMEN WORKERS**

Thinking of weaving as a safe and secure option, women workers, who form majority of the workforce, preferweaving, thinking it would lift them off poverty and misery. These women usually end up working 12 hours a day, 30days a month, throughout the year. Their work, unlike all other professions, gets doubled up around festivities likeDiwali or Eid. They do not enjoy work benefits like paid leaves, picnic, cinema, etc. The only source of entertainmentthey have is their radios or entertaining music, as the only source in their lifetime to lift them out of theirhandlooms' glaringly monotonous sound. The most important reason for putting up with so much of hard work is to provide their families bread and butter and sponsor the education of their children, so that they don't end up in sucha misery. However, in case of female child, they earn money to marry them in well off families. It is the only solutionto their up-gradation. Another aspect of their motives is to save up some money up till their retirement so as to visitsacred places like Kashi, Rameshwaram, Varanasi, Haridwar etc. Despite differences in culture and traditional stylesof clothing, their apathy and reasons of earnings are the talks of common womanhood in India. Their cultures mightbe different but needs and wants are cent percent similar. They worship their looms as and even more than theyworship their Gods and Goddesses. The women working in handloom sector experience a lot of physical and mental hardships during work. Menstruationtrumps the list of physiological problems faced by these women. During this time of the month, theyare forced to avoid work due to existing myths and taboos. Another problem which these women face is thegynecological problems which are a result of more than 12 hours of weaving in a day. Their low wages drain uppaying debts and they remain in the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation. Their struggle is toiled, yet the resultsare meager. In most parts of the country where weaving is the main source of income, it has been observed that theman of the family turns to alcohol, gambling etc. and neglect work, which forces the women of the family togradually take over the entire burden. As a result, they struggle with sociopsychological problems such as mentaldisorder, anger and rage over frustrations etc.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

Government has been implementing and initiating various schemes and programs, like Government Insurancescheme for Handloom weavers, Mahatma Gandhi BunkarBimaYojna (MGBBY) but most of them are either notenough or do not reach the root of the problem. Some measures if taken, can lead to upliftment of female weavers. These are some baby steps to cut down the problems and bring them out of the vicious circle of poverty anddepression. One should note that there is need to develop educational infrastructure. The vocational education isalso required for the awareness of weavers towards girl's education as well as weavers can diversify their traditionalhandloom product through innovative ideas. Some of the other suggestions that government could ponder upon,are listed as below:

1. All the Women workers working in this sector should be recognized as contributors and be included in the various schemes and programs in their own individual capacities.
2. The government should have a specific budget for specific growth and development programs and allocations forWomen handloom weavers and allied workers in the national budget.
3. The government should introduce literacy programs to improve the standard of living for these workers and tohelp them understand and escape the clutches of master weavers and shed workers.
4. As a result of overworking, large numbers of women weavers are suffering from gynecological problems. In order to lessen the women casualties and provide them with better working conditions, free medical camps and mobilehealth centers should be established in all parts of India.

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- 5. Just as we have Ashram schools for the scheduled tribes, the government should introduce Bridge schools for the school dropouts in handloom clusters and villages.
- 6. The government should also add Handloom women workers under the national employment guarantee scheme.
- 7. The minimum wages act should be amended to include and enable women to get proper and appropriate wages for their work, with respect to the inflationary trends.
- 8. Women handloom workers should be given priority to participate in entrepreneurship programs.
- 9. Skill Development Programs should be implemented frequently and in all corners of India, in order to make it easy for the women who travel from very far.

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