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Women Empowerment through Handloom and Handicraft: Transforming Economic and Social Status

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Abstract

In recent times, women's empowerment has emerged as a growing concern at both national and international levels. In India, this issue of women's empowerment needs to be primarily addressed in the non-formal sectors, where the majority of the workforce consists of women. One such sector is the handloom and handicraft industry. It also provides direct or indirect employment to the population after agriculture and also passed on generations to generations. Nearly 72% of handloom and handicraft workers are woman. Women artisans, often balancing traditional skills with innovative designs, contribute significantly to the state's economy while preserving its artistic legacy. The empirical study aimed to assess women's employment and income from the handicraft and handlooms products on the economic and social empowerment on woman. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to identify major challenges faced by the woman artisans. Hence, the government can ensure better initiatives, policy interventions, and the promotion of local crafts for the growth of handloom and handicraft industry. This study concludes that fostering the handicraft and handloom industry is essential not only for sustaining traditional art forms but also for empowering women and driving inclusive development in the region.

Keywords

Economic, Empowerment, Handicraft, Handloom, Social upliftment, Transformation.

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1. Introduction

Empowerment of a community is essential for its social and economic development. It results in upliftment, betterment, and welfare of society as a whole. The Constitution of India grants equal rights to both men and women. However, women have not been covered equally or do not avail themselves of the equal rights that have been provided to them in rural settings. These situations result in distress and inefficiency in rural communities, which affect the overall development of the state. A characteristic feature of Indian constitutional development plans and policies is the emphasis laid down on the special development of weaker sections of society. Yet, with the passage of time, neither a significant improvement in the economic, political, and social status of women has occurred, nor have changes been brought about at the grassroots level of the community. However, the world has now begun to realize the economic contribution of women engaged in farm and non-farm activities of development by making them financially stronger. To achieve this, collection, diversification, and redistribution of both formal and informal resources and production are vital for the better half of the total rural population in the development sector.

2. Handicraft and Handloom in Himachal Pradesh: A Brief Introduction

Himachal Pradesh, hitherto known as a state where agriculture was the main occupation of the people, having limited scope for future development, is now witnessing the beginning of an era of change and transformation. Towards economic development and prosperity in the sphere that is new to it, namely the manufacturing of handicrafts, women have been engaged. These women have always played an important yet invisible and underappreciated role in economic activity, contributing not only to subsistence but also significantly to the economic welfare of their

families. Since time immemorial, most rural women have been confined to the boundaries of their households and work only there in inhospitable conditions without receiving any sort of appreciation, recognition, or reward. The textile industry in Himachal Pradesh has a rich history, deeply tied to its cultural heritage. Known for its exquisite handloom and handicraft products like Kullu and Kinnauri shawls, woolen garments, and carpets, the industry has been a source of livelihood for rural artisans for centuries. The modern framework for promoting textiles began with the establishment of the Ministry of Textiles, which focuses on policy-making, skill development, and market integration for the textile and handloom sectors across India. Also, The Handicrafts & Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd. (HHEC), established in 1958 and renamed in 1962, focuses on promoting exports and trade development of handicraft and handloom products.

In Himachal Pradesh, the Himachal Pradesh State Handicrafts and Handloom Corporation (HPSHHC) was established in 1974. It has been pivotal in promoting traditional crafts, providing training, financial assistance, and marketing opportunities for artisans. Over the years, it has facilitated participation in national and international trade fairs and introduced schemes for artisan welfare.

According to the 2011 Census, over 15,000 households in Himachal Pradesh were engaged in handloom weaving and handicrafts. The Handloom Census of 2019-20 recorded about 2,144 active weavers in the state, highlighting the industry's role in preserving heritage while adapting to modern demands. Efforts like the Pashmina Promotion Programme (2013) and the introduction of design innovation schemes have further strengthened the sector's growth. This industry has long been a vital part of women's lives, especially in rural areas, where they have been the primary artisans, preserving traditional skills passed down through generations.

3. Review of Literature

Srivastava & Bishnoi (2023) discussed that the handloom industry was experiencing a downturn, with many weavers having taken their lives in recent years due to various challenges. Weaving was the sole source of income for the respondents. According to them, some of the major issues they faced included the lack of state support, competition from power looms, financial pressures, and the presence of middlemen. Most handloom weavers live below the poverty line,

lacking proper housing, access to nutritious food, and adequate clothing. Many expressed a desire for their children to pursue careers as goldsmiths or secure permanent government jobs.

Aswani & Bhat (2022), adopted a descriptive research method to study 150 weavers from Chendamangalam taluk in Kerala. The primary objective of the study was to highlight the major challenges/problems of the handloom industry in Chendamangalam Taluk. The major issues highlighted in the study area were related to production (scarcity and high cost of raw material, lack of technological up-gradation, shortage of labour, inadequate design and product development, insufficient credit facility, unorganized sector), marketing related problems (competition from power loom, exploitation by middlemen/intermediaries, lack of consumer awareness, seasonality of demand etc.), lack of advertising and promotion, limited understanding of government programs and policies, rigidity in weavers etc. The study suggests that immediate government intervention shall be inevitable for the survival of the handloom weavers. Effective Administration of the programs introduced by the government would also ensure that the weavers get the benefits of government programs.

Vinodini (2022) discussed the problem of living standard of woman in handloom sector in India. With the help of secondary data, various problems like uneducated, physiological issues, gynecological problems etc. were highlighted. Various schemes were explained related to handloom sector to generate large-scale employment in this sector as study shows this sector is still unorganized. The study concluded that with the help of long-term vision, strong policies and schemes can protect women weavers. With the help of shift in skills and increased burden on their physique can improve the structural position of the woman.

Mishra & Mohapatra (2022), studied the motivational factors, changes, reasons for slow growth in the women entrepreneurship. As per handloom sector reports, handloom sector contributes 15% share of the total production of Textiles. The study pointed out some reason to find out the slow growth of women weavers viz; unfavourable family background, lack of business education, dual role of woman, lack of training, in adequate infrastructure facilities, shortage of raw material, corruption and absence of ideal market conditions. The study concluded that women entrepreneurs should be encouraged,

availability of raw material, awareness, self-employment opportunities, training should be there.

Roy & Chouhan (2017) point out that handloom weavers in Dakshin Dinajpur (West Bengal) were living in poverty. A lack of employment opportunities had led many young weavers to migrate to other states. Weaving was mainly carried out by women and the elderly. While weaving had been their primary source of income, many had transitioned to agriculture and other occupations to improve their living standards. The researchers emphasized the need for effective planning and implementation of government programs to ensure the well-being of the weavers.

Das (2015), studied the socio-economic profile of the handloom weavers by collecting primary data from 100 weavers in Bargarh District of Odisha. A classification of weavers like: Independent weavers, weavers working under master weavers, weavers working for co-operative societies have been mentioned. The researcher found the maximum population in Bargarh district to be of traditional weavers who majorly were wage- weavers working for more than 8 hours a day, accompanied mostly by their entire family. Owing to their poor socio-economic conditions they were in a pitiable condition. Das also highlighted a number of challenges faced by the weavers like financial constraint, inability to purchase latest machinery, poor working conditions, and lack of marketing strategies, low remuneration and the absence of enough government support in this study.

4. Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the impact of women's employment and income from the handicraft and handlooms products on their economic empowerment.
2. To examine the impact of handicraft and handloom on the social empowerment of women.
3. To identify the manufacturing and marketing problems faced by women engaged in handicraft and handlooms products.

5. Methodology

The primary study is based upon primary data collected from the sample respondents. The primary data was collected from the woman artisans of handicraft and handloom sector. At the first

stage, three districts namely Kullu, Mandi and Kangra were selected. These districts were selected as per the highest number of women registered in the textile ministry website. At the next stage, 6 blocks (2 block) were selected from the selected district. A sample of 420 women (140 from each district) artisans who were registered at the ministry of textiles was drawn using random sampling to conduct the present study. Informal discussion was also conducted with the women artisans for the study.

6. Results of the Study

The collected data of this study are presented in three different tables. The results of the study are calculated with the help of 5 point scale viz.: SD denotes Strongly Disagree; D denotes Disagree; N denotes Neutral; A denotes Agree and SA denotes Strongly Agree. The collective opinions have been analyzed in the following table-1 on 5 statements:

- S-1. Handicraft and handloom become the primary source of income.
 S-2. I feel financially independent because of the earnings from handicraft and handloom work.
 S-3. Handicraft and handloom provide me full time employment at home.
 S-4. I am able to save money regularly from the earnings.
 S-5. It minimizes the financial dependency on other members of the family.

Table-1 : Opinion about Impact of Women Employment and Income on Economic Empowerment from Handicraft and Handloom

Statements	Kangra District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	14 (10.00)	41 (29.29)	80 (57.14)	5 (3.57)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	28 (20.00)	55 (39.29)	57 (40.71)	140 (100.00)
S-3	3 (2.14)	17 (12.14)	25 (17.86)	65 (46.43)	30 (21.43)	140 (100.00)
S-4	5 (3.57)	30 (21.43)	17 (12.14)	69 (49.29)	19 (13.57)	140 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	5 (3.57)	94 (67.14)	41 (29.29)	140 (100.00)

Statements	Mandi District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	17 (12.14)	39 (27.86)	76 (54.29)	8 (5.71)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	33 (23.57)	42 (30.00)	65 (46.43)	140 (100.00)
S-3	5 (3.57)	21 (15.00)	29 (20.71)	59 (42.14)	26 (18.57)	140 (100.00)
S-4	3 (2.14)	26 (18.57)	19 (13.57)	65 (46.43)	27 (19.29)	140 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	3 (2.14)	98 (70.00)	39 (27.86)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Kullu District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	12 (8.57)	42 (30.00)	74 (52.86)	12 (3.57)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	25 (17.86)	61 (43.57)	54 (38.57)	140 (100.00)
S-3	7 (5.00)	13 (9.29)	20 (14.29)	70 (50.00)	30 (21.43)	140 (100.00)
S-4	3 (2.14)	13 (9.29)	14 (10.00)	71 (50.71)	39 (27.86)	140 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	7 (5.00)	98 (70.00)	35 (25.00)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Overall					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	43 (10.24)	122 (29.05)	230 (54.76)	25 (5.95)	420 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	86 (20.48)	158 (37.62)	176 (41.90)	420 (100.00)
S-3	15 (3.57)	51 (12.14)	74 (17.62)	194 (46.19)	86 (20.48)	420 (100.00)
S-4	11 (2.62)	69 (16.43)	50 (11.90)	205 (48.81)	85 (20.24)	420 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	15 (3.57)	290 (69.05)	115 (27.38)	420 (100.00)

Source : Field Survey.

Note : i) Figures in parenthesis represents percentage.
 ii) 'S' denotes 'Statement'; SD denotes Strongly Disagree; D denotes Disagree; N denotes Neutral; A denotes Agree and SA denotes Strongly Agree.

Data contained in table-1 reveal that 54.76 per cent of respondents were agreed with the statement that Handicraft and handloom become the primary source of income while 29.05 per cent were neutral on it. 41.90 per cent of respondent were strongly agreed with the statement that they feel financially independent because of the earnings from Handicraft and handloom work whereas 37.62 per cent were agreed with it and 20.48 per cent were neutral on it. 46.19 per cent of respondents were agreed with the statement that Handicraft and handloom provide me full time employment at home whereas 20.48 per cent were strongly agreed with it. While 17.62 per cent were neutral on it. 48.81 per cent of respondents were agreed with the statement that they were able to save money regularly from the earnings. 20.24 per cent were strongly agreed with the statement whereas 16.43 per cent were disagree with the statement. Majority of respondents were agreed with the statement that it minimizes the financial dependency on other members of the family.

Further, an attempt was made to elicit the responses of selected sample on following 5 statements which have been shown in table-2:

- S-1. I actively participate in SHGs/Cooperatives.
- S-2. I receive support from government's schemes for handicraft and handloom works.
- S-3. Handicraft and handloom works has increased my respect and recognition in the family and community.
- S-4. Handicraft and handloom work improved my social status.
- S-5. It minimizes the financial dependency on other members of the family.

Table-2 : Opinion about Impact of Handicraft and Handloom on the Social Empowerment of Women

Statements	Kangra District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	3 (2.14)	10 (7.14)	97 (69.29)	30 (21.43)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	20 (14.29)	40 (28.57)	65 (46.43)	15 (10.71)	140 (100.00)

S-3	—	—	5 (3.57)	55 (39.29)	80 (57.14)	140 (100.00)
S-4	—	—	7 (5.00)	59 (42.14)	74 (52.86)	140 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	3 (2.14)	98 (70.00)	39 (27.86)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Mandi District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	2 (1.43)	14 (10.00)	114 (81.43)	10 (7.14)	40 (100.00)
S-2	2 (1.43)	17 (12.14)	33 (23.57)	65 (46.43)	23 (16.43)	140 (100.00)
S-3	—	—	3 (2.14)	61 (43.57)	76 (54.29)	140 (100.00)
S-4	—	—	9 (6.43)	42 (30.00)	89 (63.57)	140 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	5 (3.57)	94 (67.14)	41 (29.29)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Kullu District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	5 (3.57)	7 (5.00)	94 (67.14)	34 (24.29)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	15 (10.71)	42 (30.00)	61 (43.57)	22 (15.71)	140 (100.00)
S-3	—	—	9 (6.43)	39 (27.86)	92 (65.71)	140 (100.00)
S-4	—	—	2 (1.43)	49 (35.00)	89 (63.57)	140 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	9 (6.43)	88 (62.86)	43 (30.71)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Overall					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	10 (2.38)	31 (7.38)	305 (72.62)	74 (17.62)	420 (100.00)
S-2	2 (0.48)	52 (12.38)	115 (27.38)	191 (45.48)	60 (14.29)	420 (100.00)

S-3	—	—	17 (4.05)	155 (36.90)	248 (59.05)	420 (100.00)
S-4	—	—	18 (4.29)	150 (35.71)	252(60. 00)	420 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	17 (4.05)	280 (66.67)	123 (29.29)	420 (100.00)

Source : Field Survey.

Note : i) Figures in parenthesis represents percentage.

ii) 'S' denotes 'Statement'; SD denotes Strongly Disagree; D denotes Disagree; N denotes Neutral; A denotes Agree and SA denotes Strongly Agree.

The above Table-2 shows that majority (72.62 per cent) of respondents were agreed with the statement that they actively participate in SHGs/Cooperatives related to handicraft/ handloom while 17.62 per cent were strongly agreed with it. 45.48 per cent of respondent artisans were agreed with the statement that they receive support from government's schemes for handicraft and handloom works while 27.38 per cent were neutral on it. 59.05 per cent of respondents were strongly agreed with the statement that Handicraft and handloom works has increased their respect and recognition in the family and community. Majority of respondents were agreed with the statement that Handicraft and handloom work improved their social status. 66.67 per cent of respondents were agreed with the statement that Handicraft and handloom work enhanced their self-confidence. Overall, it was concluded that involvement in handloom and handicraft activities enhanced their social status.

Finally, an attempt was made to elicit the responses of selected sample on following 6 statements about problem/challenges faced by the handicraft and handloom activities which have been shown in table-3:

- S-1. Decreasing demand due to change in the taste, trend and interest of people.
- S-2. Gain is less as compared to hard work.
- S-3. Lack of training and skill development programmes.
- S-4. Competition with latest machine-made products of large industries.
- S-5. Middlemen earn huge profit.
- S-6. New generation is not interested in handicrafts.

Table-3 : Opinion about Problem/ Challenges faced by the Handicraft and Handloom Activities

Statements	Kangra District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	20 (14.29)	40 (28.57)	65 (46.43)	15 (10.71)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	7 (5.00)	59 (42.14)	74 (52.86)	140 (100.00)
S-3	—	—	5 (3.57)	55 (39.29)	80 (57.14)	140 (100.00)
S-4	—	—	3 (2.14)	98 (70.00)	39 (27.86)	140 (100.00)
S-5	3 (2.14)	7 (5.00)	23 (16.43)	95 (67.86)	12 (8.57)	140 (100.00)
S-6	3 (2.14)	40 (28.57)	40 (28.57)	42 (30.00)	15 (10.71)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Mandi District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	2 (1.43)	17 (12.14)	33 (23.57)	65 (46.43)	23 (16.43)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	9 (6.43)	42 (30.00)	89 (63.57)	140 (100.00)
S-3	—	—	3 (2.14)	61 (43.57)	76 (54.29)	140 (100.00)
S-4	—	—	5 (3.57)	94 (67.14)	41 (29.29)	140 (100.00)
S-5	2 (1.43)	5 (3.57)	16 (11.43)	98 (70.00)	19 (13.57)	140 (100.00)
S-6	3 (2.14)	61 (43.57)	41 (29.29)	20 (14.29)	15 (10.71)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Kullu District					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	—	15 (10.71)	42 (30.00)	61 (43.57)	22 (15.71)	140 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	2 (1.43)	49 (35.00)	89 (63.57)	140 (100.00)
S-3	—	—	9 (6.43)	39 (27.86)	92 (65.71)	140 (100.00)

S-4	—	—	9 (6.43)	88 (62.86)	43 (30.71)	140 (100.00)
S-5	—	—	9 (6.43)	88 (62.86)	43 (30.71)	140 (100.00)
S-6	9 (6.43)	43 (30.71)	20 (14.29)	52 (37.14)	16 (11.43)	140 (100.00)
Statements	Overall					
	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
S-1	2 (0.48)	52 (12.38)	115 (27.38)	191 (45.48)	60 (14.29)	420 (100.00)
S-2	—	—	18 (4.29)	150 (35.71)	252 (60.00)	420 (100.00)
S-3	—	—	17 (4.05)	155 (36.90)	248 (59.05)	420 (100.00)
S-4	—	—	17 (4.05)	280 (66.67)	123 (29.29)	420 (100.00)
S-5	5 (1.19)	12 (2.86)	48 (11.43)	281 (66.90)	74 (17.62)	420 (100.00)
S-6	15 (3.57)	144 (34.28)	101 (24.05)	114 (27.14)	46 (10.95)	420 (100.00)

Source : Field Survey.

Note : i) Figures in parenthesis represents percentage.

ii) 'S' denotes 'Statement'; SD denotes Strongly Disagree; D denotes Disagree; N denotes Neutral; A denotes Agree and SA denotes Strongly Agree.

The above table depicts that 45.48 per cent were agreed with the statement that decreasing demand due to change in the taste, trend and interest of people whereas 27.38 per cent were neutral on it. Majority of respondents were strongly agreed with the statement that Gain is less as compared to hard work. 59.05 per cent of respondents were strongly agreed with the statement that Lack of training and skill development programmes whereas 36.90 per cent were agreed with the statement. 66.67 per cent of respondents were agreed with the statement that competition with latest machine-made products of large industries while 29.29 per cent of respondents were strongly agreed with it. 66.90 per cent of respondents were agreed with the statement Middlemen earn huge profit whereas 17.62 per cent strongly agreed with it. While 11.43 per cent were neutral on it. 34.28 per cent of respondents were disagreed with the statement that new generation is not interested in

handicrafts whereas 27.14 per cent were agreed with the statement and 24.05 per cent were neutral on it. Hence, it can be inferred that there are still challenges of decreasing demand, limited training, competition with machine-made products, exploitation by middlemen, and mixed generational interest.

7. Findings and Discussion

On the basis of present study, it can be concluded that a significant majority of respondents actively participate in SHGs/Cooperatives related to handicraft and handloom, experience enhanced respect, recognition, and social status within their communities and families, and report increased self-confidence due to their engagement in these activities. It was observed that handicraft and handloom work serve as a primary source of income for many respondents, fostering financial independence, regular savings, and reduced financial dependency on family members, with a notable portion also benefitting from full-time employment at home. There were several challenges faced by respondents, including decreasing demand due to changing consumer preferences, low financial returns compared to effort, lack of training opportunities, competition with machine-made products, and the significant profits earned by middlemen, while opinions on the disinterest of the new generation in handicrafts were mixed. To address these challenges, promote demand through modern marketing strategies while preserving tradition, and enhance artisans' skills through regular training programs. Establish direct marketing platforms to reduce middlemen, ensure fair pricing, and improve financial literacy. Encourage youth participation through incentives and modernize designs to effectively compete with machine-made products.

8. Conclusion and Suggestions

Handloom and handicraft industry are the highly growing-oriented industry in India as the larger number of labour force engaged in and also export has been increased over the time due to demand of Indian products. Hence, we can say that this industry is the future of the world market and it was noticed that Indian handloom and handicraft market is running with the help of the women specifically of rural areas. Only a long-term vision, along with robust policies and schemes, can safeguard this ancient custodian of tradition. Specifically, ensuring a consistent supply of raw materials will help preserve this art form and shield it from being listed among endangered traditional crafts.

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