

Women handloom weavers: Facing the brunt

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Summary

From centuries, production has been defining gender relations, be it agriculture or any sector. Presently, trade policies would like to redefine production to suit international trade. The impacts of such changes on the production system are bound to be felt in the existing gender relations as well. Given this, it is apparent that trade policies are also trying to define gender relations in the same way, which is status-quoist, at best.

Trade policy is like a torrent of rain on an undulating social terrain, accentuating the existing fissures, especially socio-economic relationships between men and women.

The trickle-down of trade benefits is yet to happen. However, changes have affected many sections more negatively because they were not informed and were unprepared.

Trade affects women more because of the existing structure of production. The state, and the governments have failed in changing these discriminatory production systems in the last 60 years, and trade-based current policies are accentuating it.

Government wants women weavers to shift from handloom weaving to apparel making. But this does not improve the structural position of women, except a shift in their skills and increasing burden on their physique. It would lead to deskilling of women and thus their social position.

Women to benefit from the current scenario need to move up the value chain in production and also move up in respective sectors, from primary levels. They need to be in the leadership, entrepreneurship and value addition levels.

Suggestions:

1. A gender benchmark is required while preparing the sensitive and special products list, in FTAs/ETAs/CEPAs.
2. Indian National foreign Trade Policy has to be made sensitive to the needs of women and production systems involving women.
3. There is a need to develop a Tool for Gender Impact Assessment (GIA), a la environment impact assessment, which can help in improving the content of trade policies.
4. Women handloom weavers should have specific growth and development programmes and allocations in the national budget.

¹ Centre for Handloom Information and Policy Advocacy is working to promote the growth of handloom sector through equity, justice and efficiency. It has been accepted as the pioneer in developing information on handloom sector in India.

Introduction

Women contributed substantially to the economic prosperity of India. The relationship between gender and the economy is thus of considerable importance for our understanding of Indian society in general. The breadth of women's commercial activities has, indeed, attracted the attention of numerous research scholars. The research of these scholars has not only increased our knowledge about the kinds of economic activities in which women participated, but also, as a collective body of scholarship, has shown the universal character of women's involvement in the Indian economy. What remains less clear in the literature, however, is how and why Indian social structure permitted and even encouraged women to become economic actors. Because Indian society commonly is considered to be highly centralized and patriarchal, women's control over and use of economic resources remains mysteriously disconnected from gender norms that subordinated women to men in other arenas.

Women's participation in the national economy has, in fact, been recognized as one of the most difficult aspects of women's lives to integrate into a patriarchal model that depicts women as perpetual minors under the tutelage of fathers and husbands. As Sylvia Arrom points out in her study of women in eighteenth-century Mexico City, 'the easiest aspect to refute in the traditional stereotype of the Latin American woman is her isolation from economic activities' (Arrom 1985, 154). Research on women's economic roles does more than change our vision of women; it forces us to reconsider our view of Indian society itself. Women's commercial activities, both independent from men and in joint ventures with them, defy division of society into separate gendered spheres—the supposedly private, domestic world of women and the public, economically driven world of men.

Women in Handloom sector

Handloom sector is unique in India. It has been the most popular manufacturing sector in the previous centuries, and has been the mainstay of rural industrialisation in India. Handloom sector has been catering to the clothing needs of India, and various other countries for centuries altogether. Modern textile industry has grown on the foundations of this sector, through mechanization and modernization. However, the most modern industry follows the principles of weaving set by the traditional handloom weaver. Unlike any other industrial endeavour, handloom sector still continues alongside the most modern textile machinery in India.

There are number of factors that have contributed to such resilience. Principal among them is that the weaving is household profession, passed on through generations. In these households, women play an important role. Women weavers have been the principal stabilisation force through years of crises and problems for the handloom sector.

Handloom sector is the only manufacturing sector wherein one finds large number of women producing products which are worn by large number of women. A unique feature of handloom sector is women producing for women.

The constraints and possibilities that govern women's lives were created within the system of decentralized authority that had historically characterized Indian society. The logic of Indian culture consistently undermined attempts to consolidate absolute positions of power at all levels of society, including the family and relations between men and women. The system of decentralized authority that structured Indian social and legal norms gave women substantial control over economic and social resources. This cultural analysis frames the study of women's participation in Indian handloom industry. The research suggests that women face few gender-specific obstacles in their economic activities and that women's civil status (single, married, or widowed) was not a crucial factor in determining the scope of their economic activities. The diverse forms of labor, production, and investments employed by women from varied backgrounds indicate not only that women's involvement in commercial enterprises was essential to the national growth, but also that women's economic roles were accepted and supported by national cultural norms.

Many influential scholars of women frame women's lives within a patriarchal paradigm. However, culture in the handloom weaver families in some ways undermined the establishment of centralized positions of authority through which a patriarchal system might operate. In contesting the relevance of the patriarchal paradigm for understanding handloom families, it is not argued that women were more liberated in handloom sector. Rather, evidence supports the conclusion that to the extent that women as individuals faced subordination in handloom weaver families, it cannot be attributed to the essentialized notions of gender in Indian society.

Because the family unit was such an important element in handloom sector there were compelling reasons to prevent families from collapsing into purely male-headed enclaves. Women's active participation in the handloom production was not limited to those ingenious few who could overcome the gendered obstacles in their path; rather than contesting male authority, women's common participation in the production can be explained as a product of the shifting alliances and conflicts that structured the Indian concept of authority, and created spaces where women, like other social actors, could exert their autonomy.

Handloom sector is ideal for studying women's economic activities in India. The handloom sector resilience, prosperity, demographic growth, and social stability make it possible to study gender norms operating in a normal, mundane fashion.

Within the wider network of handloom production in India, women were involved in production and marketing of the products, as workers, as participants in commercialized domestic textile production, and as investors/master weavers. Because textile manufacturing was and is the most profitable economic activity in many parts of the country, it is no surprise that most illustrious families controlled handloom production as

master weavers. Women within these elite families became master weavers through both inheritance and marriage.

Despite such features, which are outwardly unique, women weavers were never given the primacy they require. Their role in production was never acknowledged beyond the confines of the home. Their work most often went unpaid. Governments never recognised formally as a target group. Even the private initiatives of NGOs, or fashion boutiques, tend to ignore their contribution and role. The most radical to rightist political mobilization structures in handloom sector are devoid of any issues and participation of women. Women participation in political mobilization is completely absent.

Women constitute a major workforce in the handloom sector. Also, most of the handloom products are meant for women. Thus, handloom sector is the unique sector, wherein 60 percent of the women produce almost 70 percent of women products. However, their working, living and wage conditions need to be improved. They need to be empowered in various ways. Almost all the government schemes, projects and programmes on handloom sector have been and continue to bypass this major workforce through various means. They do not have identity cards, which are the principal means through which government welfare measures are sought to be implemented. There is no scheme, or project, or programme which addresses their needs.

Women weavers have been subject to domestic violence and victims of violence in many places. They have also been at the receiving end of discrimination of all types. Whenever handloom sector is in crisis, the burden of carrying through the crisis is the most on women weavers, through increase in physical, psychological and social pressures. Their health condition is a major concern, as also their role in relations of production and also the future of girl children. While performing critical functions in production, their role in decision-making is rather poor.

In the past ten years, with changes brought in by globalization, liberalization and economic reforms, handloom sector has been facing adverse government policies and discriminatory competition. As a result, the family economy has been in turmoil. The resultant burden is the most on the women weavers. In these circumstances, it became important to address the problems and needs of this 'vulnerable section' of handloom sector.

There is no recognition to women's work as weavers, even though women play a major role in all pre-loom operations and take on labor-intensive activities. Women do not have access to government identity cards, except in cases where they are widowed or are members of the cooperatives.

Women lack direct access to wages since weaving is a household enterprise and men take the final product to the master weaver for sale. Weavers depend on master weavers² for credit, raw material and market support. Even in instances where women are paid wages for small, piece-meal activities like yarn-winding, sizing etc, these wages range from

² Master weavers in general are people who invest in production, and sell the products

Rupees 10-15/- per day. Single and older women suffer more since they cannot take on labor intensive activities and lack family support. Literacy levels in general are poor amongst weavers and particularly lower in girls and women. Adolescent girls are also involved in weaving operations at the household levels and as paid wage workers. Amongst shed workers³ who weave on looms owned by master weavers, wages are lower and working conditions are highly unfavorable. Many live and work in small, congested houses and sheds under highly unhygienic conditions. Women shed workers are also subjected to sexual harassment in many instances. Most sheds do not have any primary facilities such as bathroom or toilets. Women face problems to take bath or use toilets. They have to use open spaces, shielded from public gaze. Dowry for girls, who are married off at a young age is a major problem. Many do not want to marry male shed workers, who live and work in crowded sheds with several other families. Health issues amongst women are of major concern – many suffer from back and joint pains, reproductive and respiratory disorders and lack health awareness and access to government facilities. Lack of organization amongst weavers is a major problem. Due to poor functioning of cooperatives, many depend on master weavers. Women to a large extent have no membership in primary weavers' cooperatives. Women weavers are keener to innovate in new designs and products in response to market needs and demands, but lack proper information about both.

A study done recently by Centre for Handloom Information and Policy Advocacy, brought out the problems being faced by women handloom weavers in AP. Some of the findings are presented below:

- 32 percent of women have been going without proper food, both in terms of quantity and time. Hunger has become a major concern for women and children in this sector, in quite a few places.
- 97 percent of women are suffering from ailments, from acute to chronic diseases such as TB, Asthma, reproductive health, anemia, poor eye sight, sugar and blood pressure.
- Women constitute 65 percent of workforce in handloom sector, a fact acknowledged by the government. But, there is not even a single programme, or scheme, that addresses this segment, in the last 100 years.
- 81 percent of women do not know of any existing or past government schemes on handloom sector.
- 96 percent of the households are debt-ridden. Most of the loans are taken from private money lender, micro finance institutions and master weavers. About 27 percent of the loans are taken in the name of women.
- Single women, widows and women-headed households are completely out of the bank-based system of loans.
- 62 percent of women are illiterates. There are 20 percent girl children dropouts from the schools, and 7 percent illiterates among girl children.

³ Shed is a place where a series of handlooms are placed for work by wage labour. Normally, weaving in India is a household, home-based enterprise. Of late, sheds have increased due to lack of housing and other facilities.

Gender and Trade Policy

- 80 percent of women in handloom sector working for more than 10 hours per day in handloom production. Often, there is no payment for this work, or if paid, there are very low wages.
- There are 55 percent households, which get an income of below Rs.1,000 per month. All these households would come under poorest section of the society.
- Membership for women in handloom cooperative societies is very low. Number of women employees in the cooperatives is also low.
- There are only 12.1 percent of women employees in department of handlooms.
- Women have been working daily for more than 14-16 hours on household chores and professional work. This drudgery, over years, coupled with low economies, has been stressing upon women in physical and psychological terms.

This situation of women weavers is because of their exclusion from the following:

- i. Decision-making positions in the household
- ii. Participation Trade negotiations (in finalizing national positions and also at the international level)
- iii. Finalising trade agreements
- iv. Assessing trade impacts
- v. Content of National trade policies
- vi. Assessment of sectoral issues
- vii. Access to raw material
- viii. Technological changes
- ix. Wage determination
- x. Improving working conditions
- xi. Suitability of global commodity chains

Observations

- Trade policies are accentuating the imbalance in man-women relationships on production floor, against the women
- Textile modernisation excludes women from the value addition roles and reduces their role to routine tasks. A kind of deskilling can be seen.
- Cost competition, a result of trade policies, burdens the women workforce in terms of increasing the number of working hours, decrease in wages, increasing stress and decrease in access to quality working facilities.
- There is no mention of women in National Foreign Trade policy. The Board of Trade does not even one women representative.

Way Forward

These findings were discussed at a State-level workshop organized by CHIP, yesterday, the 28th April, 2006, in Hyderabad, by delegates from different parts of Andhra Pradesh. The delegates were unanimous that government has to come forward for addressing these issues and chalk out an action plan for the upliftment of poor women weavers. The delegates wanted the government to do the following:

- ***Specific programmes and policies have to be developed for women in handloom sector. These programmes should aim at providing continuous employment through special budget allocations.***
- Minimum wages act has to be amended, to enable women to get proper and appropriate wages for their work, while being dynamic to the inflationary trends.
- ***Women should get identity cards, artisan credit cards and insurance coverage.***
- Bridge schools for school dropouts have to be established in handloom clusters and villages.
- ***Households with problems of hunger should be provided with Antyodaya cards and ration cards.***
- Mobile health centres have to be established in major handloom clusters and villages.
- ***Exclusively for women, handloom cooperative societies have to be established.***
- Hank yarn should be supplied to women through women cooperatives and groups.
- ***Handloom weavers should be brought under the ambit of National Employment Guarantee Scheme.***