

Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum

Who Weaves: The Gender question in the Handloom Industry

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BRIEFING NOTE 29

HIGHLIGHTS / KEY POINTS

- The handloom sector in India struggles in competition with the power loom. The labour of women in the handloom sector and their contribution needs to be weaved into a larger perspective when understanding the handloom sector. It needs to be understood significantly that there are almost 25 pre-weaving activities that women are engaged into and all of them require lot of patience, which usually gets classified as allied and secondary work. But this work remains very important for the survival of the sector.
- It is only allied work that women do and there is never a separate income for the allied activities. As a result women are never thought of as workers, because there are never earning when they could actually earn. Because of this the women also themselves never think that they are contributing to the family income.
- Even in the census, it is nearly always the family males who get formally enlisted as the owners and primary workers in the area. The women are enlisted primarily as housewives who assist men, hence are considered as secondary workers.
- Ownership really helps in accelerating the process of participating in the handloom activity. Ownership by the weavers is important in the whole process and not just in weaving but also product development. The willingness to invest time in developing the product, to explore marketing, to get market feedback, attending exhibitions etc. has been seen to lead to increased participation and value of the products created.

The handloom industry has historically been one form of household industry, with the form of production subjected to competition from modern industry and then dying out eventually in some countries. This story forms the background when we think of handlooms. However, while handlooms in India have always remained under stress and threat and continue to be a vulnerable occupation, the industry still survives. At the same time, the industry has always neglected the role of women's contribution. The challenges around the impact of technology and lack of government intervention, adds to the woes of the already dwindling occupation. Thus the question remains around the sustainable economics of the industry and what are the challenges within it. Finally how does one negotiate and cater to the market at the global as well as the domestic level and what do women earn from it. The forum raised these fundamental questions and attempted to understand the various issues and concerns regarding women and work in the handloom industry while analysing the various policies and schemes, and their impact on the women handloom workers. The speakers at the forum were Sumita Ghose (Rangсутra), D. Narasimha Reddy (Independent Consultant, policy expert, SDG Campaigner), Sanchita Mitra (SEWA Bharat) and Bhabhesh Hazarika (NIPFP). The discussion was chaired and moderated by Ratna Sudarshan (ISST). The effort was to understand the gender marginalisation taking place in the industry despite an extensive 77% of female adult workforce¹ in the sector as main weavers or allied workers. The discussion also delved into experiences of successful stories of women cooperatives/associations which brought the women weavers into forefront, acknowledging and appreciating their work.

The 'gender' story behind the weave

As per the Third Handloom Census (2009-10), of the total adult (18 years and above) workers, 57.6% are female, of which 26,44,054 are from rural areas and 3,54,308 are from urban areas. Major gender differences with respect to the workforce are seen in north-east in comparison to other regions of the country. In north east, women constitute 99% of the total people employed in this sector whereas in other regions of the country, the female labour force constitute 56% of the total labour force.² Even with such participation rates, women's work and contribution is not adequately recognized.

Reddy³ began with pointing out that the opportunity of employing women and giving equal access to resources gets lost out not only because of relations within handloom production but because of the external conditions stressing the handloom sector. The national textile policy and national fibre policy is actually a load on the sector, with no output or income generation and further leading to a declining rural employment, out-migration and income challenges within the handloom families. Reddy stressed at the problems within the budget allocated to the handloom sector, with both allocation and expenditure being extremely low. The handloom schemes are merely tokenist, which do not really support the weavers.

Reddy also emphasized that the handloom sector is not a homogenous space and needs to be understood in a disaggregated manner. The Indian handloom sector is very diverse and is acknowledged for it across the world. The United Nations too recognised this uniqueness in 1999. However this diversity doesn't include the role of women. He elaborated on how the third handloom census did more damage than good, because of the flawed methodology that did 'surveys' but called it a 'census'. This brought the numbers from over 12 million down to about 4.3 million. This data has been questioned widely as the surveyors failed to reach the villages where handloom sector is surviving. Reddy further refers to the 'defeminisation' of the handloom sector, especially because of the introduction of modern technology, mostly encouraged by the government, excluding women further from textile production. Even in the production technology, the move towards power looms and air jet looms has adversely affected the

women's participation. The hand spinning has stopped not just because of change in weaving technology but also due to the shifts in cotton production, the selection of seeds and its hybrid quality, that is introduced so as to support the modern automated spinning technology as compared to the hand spinning. With the web commerce affecting handloom sales, there is no women weaver representation, taking away any recognition that women weavers should be getting for their labour. He emphasizes how even the UN research doesn't recognize the labour of women weavers as skilled labour. A UN Report refers to women weavers as 'unskilled women in small and mid-size villages', which actually misunderstands the skill and labour of the woman weaver. The same report also says that, "Since the labour skills required in the apparel industry is not as demanding as in other sector and tends to prefer women labourers"⁴. This clearly reiterates the fact that women are preferred in the sector because they are considered having "low" skills. So in that sense these research conclusions which are feeding into public policies, further worsen the situation of women's presence in the sector and show their glaring invisibility.

Reddy⁵ states that historically between 1800 and 1900, UK lost its handloom sector to power loom within 50 years and at the same time in India the competition with the power loom sector has been going on for around 150 years. In this tussle with the power loom, the sector in India still survives only because of the women's skill, patience and cooperation. In one of his papers, Reddy mentions about this labour of women in the handloom sector and talks about their contribution which needs to be weaved into the larger perspective when understanding the handloom sector. There are almost 25 pre-weaving activities that women are engaged into, where each fibre is tied with the other fibre and most of this work is done by elderly women. The cotton weaving is easier but silk and heavy designs require much labour because of the weight of the loom and fabric.

Talking about sustainability through subsidies, Reddy mentions there has never been a subsidy to the handloom families in the last 25 years, no matter what was the budget allocation. This fact should clear the commonly held assumption that handloom sector is forever dependent on subsidies to survive.

Its survival is because of the tremendous sacrifices made by handloom weaver families, especially women. Despite adverse policies and almost zero subsidies, handloom sector remains competitive because women give their time and skill, and yet not charge for it. Reddy's point was also to make a change in policy rather than thinking of only subsidies. To buttress this point, he alludes to GST. Today GST on natural fibres is taxed at 5% and 12%. Even though on paper it is said that the cotton fibre or silk is not taxed at the farm level, crucially the impact of GST is felt at the textile markets. For textile buy of worth Rs.1000/-, GST is 5% and above Rs.1000/- it is 12%. Since almost all natural fibre, hand-woven buys easily cross Rs.1000/- (each exquisite handmade saree would be more than Rs.1000/-), handloom products end up with more GST pinch than cheap, poly-fibre products.

He also talks about the shift that has happened from the natural fibre and textile to the man-made fibre industry and how that is affecting the sustainability as well as the environment. So he urges us to think of sustainability from an overall larger perspective, factoring in livelihoods, income, environment, rural economy and natural fibre production etc. Moreover, he talks about the value chain, in which the contribution of a women weaver is never recognised and paid. So a woman spinner gets Rs 10/- per boggle and if she winds 5 boggles a day, she makes Rs 50/- per day. This is even lower than the unrecognized wage laws where the woman atleast gets Rs 200/- per day. Even if the consumer is paying appropriate value, only a small percentage of it reaches the real producer i.e., handloom weaver. If only 20 percent of it reaches them how does the family survive, and how does the sector attain competitiveness? Going by current prices, considering the rural areas, a minimum of Rs.15,000 per month income is required for a family to sustain itself. However, this income is not easy for families that are dependent on low technology cotton products. This is why handloom weavers in many places moved from cotton to silk to increase their income band. But over years even silk has lost its capacity because of imitation textile products from the powerloom industry. Presence of 'fake' handloom products in the textile markets, questions that enforcement of Handloom preservation Act. In turn, this speaks about the neglect of government policies to secure the interests of handloom sector.



Source: D. Narasimha Reddy, XXIX GEP Discussion Forum, May 2019

Empowering women weavers

In the handloom sector, women have been the stabilising force during the major economic crisis, working at minimal rates at the household looms. The persisting assumption in the handloom sector as a household enterprise entails that women are not main workers but do their work in their leisure time. As Cherry (2009) calls attention to the invisibility that happens in light of the fact that these tasks are related and mistaken for leisure, are viewed as intentional and furthermore fall outside the legal structure. Such an employment status divests these women weavers of competitive remuneration for their work, social security benefits, etc. Another reason for this employment status is also that most of the traditional handlooms are registered in the names of male members of the family with no recognition given to the female weavers or allied workers who work on them⁶. This restricts the women weavers to seek any financial support in the form of institutional credit, implicating financial hardships for them.

With respect to gender income gap, Hazarika (2017) points out that the influence of handloom related institutional training is not significant in increasing the income of the female handloom workers. However, in his study he also indicated the role played by financial literacy, risk-averse attitude and social capital in determining the work of women in the handloom sector, success of the micro-enterprises owned by women and so on. He also discusses the existence of gender income gap among the handloom micro-entrepreneurs. As per his analysis (based on data from Assam), women earn 51% lower income than their male counterparts. While considering the differences in endowments and controlling for location specific

effects, the income gap reduces from 51 percent to 29.7%.

However, in their paper, V.S. Teena and Nisha Sheen (2016) point out how women were found to be socially, personally and economically empowered through the cooperative societies. Their participation in the cooperatives enabled them to earn regular wages which were either monthly or weekly. It also stated how in the opinion of women they could improve their skills and knowledge through the activities of the cooperative. Enrolment into the cooperatives has also enabled them to procure raw material at cheaper rates, credit availability at lower rates of interest, profitable selling of products and so on. All this has empowered them to have a positive impact on social, dietary and health patterns among women which further affects their families as well.

Hazarika⁷ (in his presentation) emphasized about the relationship between empowerment of women with the income earned through handloom based activities. In his study, he looked at whether women engaged in handloom activities, as fully commercial or semi commercial, can its income foster economic empowerment. Further the study looked at the relationship between the demand in handloom activities and empowerment status. The study was based in the North-East, which has a predominance of women weavers and it is interesting to then see how do women navigate and negotiate their weaving skills and capacities and whether there is a sense of empowerment. In the North East, 99% of weavers are female. But there are 2 categories, one is that either women go for fully or semi commercial weaving and earn their income from that, while the other group is the one that weaves for their own consumption or for leisure. So, the statistics show that there is a decline in the women producing for personal consumption purposes but there is an increase in the women engaged in commercial weaving. Hazarika suggests that this engagement in the commercial aspect of weaving and selling products for generating income works as a medium for women to raise their status not only in the society but also in their households. Because the women could see how they were contributing to the household income through their earnings and as a result they had more power towards decision making as well as mobility, ownership etc.

What gets women to 'weave': Critical lessons from Rangсутra

Ghose⁸ speaks about her experience at Rangсутra and the challenges of working closely with the handloom workers. Even though gender wasn't a concern overtly in the beginning of their work but one could see how it played a role in the way how the handloom work was gendered in its activities. Rangсутra began its work in Rajasthan with the handloom workers in the mid 80s-90s, when the area was struck by recurrent drought and livelihood was a huge concern. Thus it started its work through supporting in yarn spinning as a lot of women had unused 'charkhas' in their homes. In that sense, what began as a drought relief programme in association with the URMUL Trust in 1987, turned into creating a market and linkages with weavers for the hand spun woollen yarn that was getting spun by the local women. Rangсутra found out how weavers were all men and spinners were women and the biases in the handloom activities were beginning to surface. There was a shift made from spinning to machine spun yarn and women wanting to enter the weaving process and to learn weaving, which was never allowed to women before. The women had been engaged in all the preparatory work- making bobbles, spinning, teaselling and finishing. They wanted to learn something different from what the men wove. Men wove fabric. They wanted to learn dari weaving. Even as Rangсутra trained these women into the processes of weaving, the gendered division of labour could clearly be witnessed. The women who could spare their time to come to the training centre, especially mother-in-laws and grandmothers were the only ones who participated in the training. The younger women, daughter-in-laws could not be included, because of the burden of household labour.

However talking about Rangсутra 20 years ahead of this beginning, the focus became on understanding the market first and then training the artisans and building up their skills. Rangсутra worked with a variety of artisans- weavers, embroidery people or tie & dye artisans. They did an active market research, understanding the needs of the market, the demands and then worked on focussing around improving design, quality, ensuring colour fastness and innovations in handloom weaving.

They also started making engineered fabric by making some changes on the weft which could not be copied by the power looms, because in the power loom the warp is engineered and weft runs automatically. This change helped in selling the fabric in Fab India stores and created a bigger market for their products. Ghose highlighted the point that for handlooms be it weaving, embroidery, ownership really mattered for the artisans. Ownership really helps in accelerating the process of participating in the handloom activity. Rangсутra also avoided paying a stipend to the artisans they had been training, so that the agenda and ownership falls into the hands of the artisans. The aim of Rangсутra was to provide a safe space as well as infrastructure for the artisans and especially women, motivated to come out of their homes and learn new skills.

Ghose⁹ also talks about their learnings in this process, especially when they worked with the women artisans. She talks about how women get encouraged to be equal partners in the weaving process when a safe space is provided to them, ideally in their own villages. If the training centre is far or in another village, only a certain set of women would be able to participate, discouraging young girls to be active learners. Rangсутra also started their work in Manipur. Their work in Manipur has been with the Manipur Women Gun Survivors network. This is the group of women who have been affected by conflict and are the only bread earners of their family. Thus their real stake in making this training programme successful was immense. Therefore they got together to organize a space, where Rangсутra arranged the equipment i.e. 60 looms. And this support really helped the women to get regular work and income. Ghose reiterated that when it comes to machines, whether looms or any machines, the men tend to come forward more because they can get out of their homes, to another village for trainings, and can give more time, which is difficult for the women to provide unless there is a space in their own villages.

Talking about Rangсутra's model, to address the issue of middle men and master weaver, it runs on a self-help group (SHG) model. They work with around 3000 artisans and cannot reach everyone so they work through the local SHG's or training centres. They find and train people who show leadership, both men and women, with some level of education, can keep and update records and train them to

become crafts managers. There is a lot of effort that goes in investing and improving the design sensibilities, in working closely with the craft managers, training them, working with the weaving groups, so that the sense of ownership and new learning gets generated in the groups. This further helps in more pro-active engagement from the weavers and artisans in understanding and working for the creation of the product till its end result.

In that sense, Rangсутra provides lessons on ownership and accountability and how women weavers could be empowered and encouraged, when possibilities are created.

Global market effects: Learnings from the SEWA model

Mitra¹⁰ spoke of the SEWA experience of working with the weavers in a place called Fulia in West Bengal, which is home to the famous Tangail-Jamdani Sarees. Through this work she traced the history of the handloom trade in not just Fulia but also how the global trends have affected the national and local occupation of weavers. The work in Fulia started in 2015-16, when a US brand approached SEWA, to include women weavers as part of their women empowerment strategy. However there was a tremendous difference between what the weavers got and prices in the global market. The \$5 t-shirt on sale in stores and malls across the globe has many more costs than what is shown on the price tag. The production of most products takes a toll on the social and environmental conditions of the producers. Overwhelmingly, these costs are felt in low-income areas of Asia. Mitra, therefore highlighted the impact of the global market and how it reflects in the value chain and the income cycle of the handloom weaver at the lowest end.

The case study that Mitra¹¹ presented of Fulia, carries a lot of history. It was established after the Bangladesh Partition and was home to the refugee handloom weavers. In Fulia, 83% of the families have their own handloom machines, 10% are Mahajan families who are not involved in weaving any longer but were associated to weaving earlier and 7% are workers who are at the bottom of the pyramid. This 7% don't own any handloom machines and do the weaving only for money as labour. Fulia, she further

mentions, has a strange case of seasonal migration from another district called Cooch-Bihar, from where the weavers come, do the weaving work for some time and go back. Further, historically it has been seen that women would help in allied activities because of the weaving work being a household occupation. However, in Fulia when the men were away, the women having some knowledge of the loom worked on it. This was unlike the women in Bhagalpur where the women wouldn't sit on the looms and were attached to allied work. As a result women were never thought of as workers. And at the same time the women too themselves never thought they were contributing to the family income.

Even with the government Census, Mitra¹² reiterates that the representatives (mostly male) who come to register the ownership of looms or the names of the primary workers in a family of weavers, it is nearly always the family males who get formally enlisted as the owners and primary workers in the area. The women are enlisted primarily as housewives who assist men, hence are secondary workers. Till the Third National Census of Handloom Weavers, 2009-10 women weavers in Fulia were not registered as weavers. Few of them were registered as 'Allied'. Then in 2017, SEWA participated on behalf of the Government for the survey and enlisted 5000 women weavers in Fulia. With SEWA's intervention, it was recognized that most women didn't have weaver cards, only few having allied cards. The weaver cards only became possible when the Census registered women as weavers. SEWA's involvement helped identify women weavers without weaver cards, negotiate with the Block level officials and get an upgraded training of 45 days to these weavers. This training helped in recognizing the women weavers in the latest Census and many women have now started registering themselves as weavers (workers).

Mitra traces how things changed and shifted economically in Fulia, beginning from weaver cooperatives which although were registered but only on paper. This shifted to the export of the products, with the coming of power looms which gave 6 times the production, and led to shutting down of the traditional looms to a great extent. This was followed by the coming of the synthetic yarn and the impact of demonetisation, GST was also huge on the weavers. However there was the phenomenon of the new designers who were getting interested in Fulia and

the-weaver's skills. This process led to many weavers getting registered for online shopping. However re-emphasizing the impact on women weavers, she highlighted that women were excluded from all the activities, even as the market changed and economy shifted. When the cooperatives began, women didn't find it attractive because these spaces were male dominated. This was also because the registration process was complex no awareness and organisation of the women weavers. When the exports began, women again were got excluded because they lacked the skills and couldn't compete. Further, when synthetic yarn flooded the markets, many of the allied activities like starching, ironing, cutting threads, etc. which were done by women at very low prices, started to get lost.

Talking about the current processes, Mitra elaborated that the designers who get work extracted from the weavers directly, primarily engage with the master weavers. It is because the master weavers have always been the people that understand the work, designs and then transfers it to the sub-weavers (who are weavers themselves, or employed weavers). In Fulia, there are no women master weavers. Even the master (men) weavers have graduated from being sub-weavers to master weavers. But women do not have a place anywhere in this power ladder. Additionally, they have been losing work because of power looms, synthetic threads etc.

Further, the designers communicate with the master weavers, with a lot of communication through the use of Smart phones and WhatsApp which women do not usually possess. And the designers are an important link between the outside world and sustainable fashion. However, because women remain occupied with household work, tremendous burden of work and lack of resources, they do not become an obvious choice by the designers.

SEWA as a trade union organization, have organized these women weavers, identified leaders amongst them and pushed for their identity as weavers so that they get recognized in the Census. Because of this many of them upgraded themselves and have moved up the pyramid. The purpose of organizing was advocacy as well as promotion of economic entrepreneurship. At the same time SEWA negotiated with the Mahajans to initiate regular pay,

social security benefits, capital generation, health safety nets etc. Organizing of women weavers as workers in that sense has helped push the agenda of worker rights and the gender debate in the handloom sector forward.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The government since independence has tried to make the handloom sector competitive but with limited to no success. Initiatives have been taken with schemes such as Integrated Handloom development scheme (IHDS), Diversified Handloom Development Scheme (DHDS), Mill Gate price Scheme (MGPS), Revival Reform and Restructuring Packages (RRRP), and so on. However, since most of the women do not have handlooms registered in their name, they fail to benefit from any of these schemes. Non-availability of certain other documents, failing to partner with any self-help group, etc are some of the other reasons behind failure of women to have access to certain other benefits provided by various initiatives of the government. In government schemes, there is no recognition of women weavers because they don't own anything. Even today with the handloom census stating that 70% of handloom workers are women, there were only 5 women who have been awarded for their work. In fact, there is no woman orientation in the ministry or departments in terms of schemes, participation, implementation.

* In the changing rural scenario, the government policies should focus on increasing handloom

production and comprehensive handloom development.

- * The SHG model has been successful in empowering women and has also allowed value return to the weavers. As it works better than the conventional marketing models, a women-empowering production model, wherein women can control resources has to be facilitated.
- * In working towards sustainability, volume is an important factor. The products that are sold as handloom are expensive, and do not cater the masses. A mixed model of production, for the masses as well as a niche or an elite market could be developed.
- * The current need is to build government policies which address employment, environment and economy and not to think of economy just with an export orientation, but on how the products can be consumed locally, for instance in the same villages. Just as local consumption happens for the organic, non-chemical food production, the local consumption of locally woven handmade textiles can also be made possible.
- * In the textile industry, policy changes are required in the handloom sector. The unique feature of India is that 85-90% of production is a competing regular textile production and it is because of this cascading benefit that the women producers are likely to be benefitted and hence the policy change is necessary.

Endnotes

¹ Third Handloom census (2009-10)

² Third Handloom Census (2009-10)

³ D. Narasimha Reddy, XXIX GEP Discussion Forum May 2019

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ D. Narasimha Reddy, XXIX GEP Discussion Forum May 2019

⁶ <https://scroll.in/article/813688/iwearhandloom-why-indias-women-weavers-dont-wear-handloom>

⁷ Bhabhesh Hazarika, XXIX GEP Discussion Forum May 2019

⁸ Sumita Ghose, XXIX GEP Discussion Forum May 2019

⁹ Sumita Ghose, XXIX GEP Discussion Forum May 2019

¹⁰ Sanchita Mitra, XXIX GEP Discussion Forum May 2019

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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