

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMAN WEAVERS THROUGH HANDLOOM INDUSTRY-PROS AND CONS

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Master-craftsmen and weavers, down the ages, have taken pride in passing on their skill to their succeeding generations. In fact, a very clear view on this and considered handicrafts to be a vital part of education. He had said - and I quote, "if we want to keep all seven lakh of our villages alive and not only a fraction of them, we have to revive our village handicrafts. And you may be sure that if we impart scholastic training through those crafts, we can bring about a revolution" ---- **Gandhiji**

Abstract

Women as a whole in world over suffer from secondary status and are overall vulnerable in many situations, and in Indian context they are in lower most hierarchy. It is also understood that the deprivation of women is not only related to her socio-economic status but differs from region to region and even in rural and urban context. Moreover, the construction of discrimination has a cultural base and we all know we have plurality as far as culture is concerned. The struggle starts from right to life, which is evident from female foeticide issues. It is also associated with malnutrition due to poverty and discrimination, discrimination in education, property rights, control on resources, participation in decision making, issues related with legal rights, atrocities, rape, trafficking, health and HIV/AIDS, child marriages, domestic violence, violence in society, etc. and thereafter exploitation within family at all stages. Further, it is universally accepted that women's vulnerabilities are age-related. In early childhood, girls are vulnerable for physical survival whilst adolescent and married women have different kind of vulnerabilities. Similarly, girls/women are also vulnerable to sexual abuses. Old age brings economic vulnerability whilst widowhood brings variety of vulnerability depending upon at what age woman has become widow. Thus, the web of vulnerability that arises due to deprivation has to be unbundled if we want to address the issue of inclusive development of women. This article traces the issue of women weavers and offers suggestions to overcome them for the wellbeing of women weavers in India.

Introduction

Developmental policies and programmes, both in the women-specific and women-related sectors, put into action through various Five Year Plans, have brought forth a perceptible improvement in the socio-economic status of women in the country. But it is to be noted that till today women in India are many issues that are to be taken care of through various policies and legislations so that they can live their life on par with their men counterpart in the society peacefully sound life socially, economically and politically.

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 home based industry.

Methodology

This is a descriptive study based on secondary data. The secondary data required for the Paper is collected through published material such as government reports, Plan documents, articles, reference books. The study limits itself to women weaver's issues and focuses on suggesting solutions to solve their problems.

Women Empowerment – A Burning Issue

Empowerment of women means their capacity to participate as equal partners in cultural, social, economic and political systems of a society. It is the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development as well as shine as equals in society. Women want to be treated as equals so much so that if a woman rises to the top of her field it should be a commonplace occurrence that draws nothing more than a raised eyebrow at the gender. This can only happen if there is a channelized route for the empowerment of women.

Even though the world economy has developed into global economy, in both developed and developing countries women have been suppressed in all walks of life for generations. Women empowerment is far easier said than done. This in a certain respect demands a revolutionary change in the socio cultural values of the society. In USA and western countries the education and health of a woman is much higher comparatively with developing countries. Still gender bias and beliefs are playing as chief obstacles for the growth of women empowerment worldwide. In India also, in spite of various laws that protect women's rights, the gender inequalities are one of the highest in the world.

Thus it is no real surprise that women empowerment in India is a hotly discussed topic with no real solution looming in the horizon except to doubly redouble our efforts and continue to target the sources of all the violence and ill-will towards women.

Handloom sector in India

Handloom industry is the oldest industry. Handloom industry in India is the second largest employer after agriculture. The Indian handloom industry has occupied an important position in respect of its export to foreign countries from an early period. The handloom fabrics of India occupy an immeasurable position in the early civilization of Egypt, Rome and Babylon. Majority of the handloom weavers in India are self-employed artisans who are carrying on their profession in their own houses with the assistance of their family members in pre-loom and post-loom processes. On attaining Independence, Government of India rightly recognized the important role that the industry can play and a number of policy measures were formulated and executed to bring the industry on sound footing. The 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 industrialization 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 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.

Handloom sector, predominately a rural occupation, is one of the largest generators, next to agriculture in India. Nearly 23.77 Lakh handlooms provide direct and indirect employment to 43.32 lakh weavers and allied workers, of which 36.33 lakh workers stay in rural areas and 6.98 workers stay in urban areas and 38.47 lakh adult persons are engaged in weaving and allied activities in the country, out of which, 77.90% are women. 10.13% are scheduled tribes, 18.12% belongs to scheduled castes, and 45.18% OBC and 26.57% are from other castes (Handloom Census 2013). 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 stabilization force through years of crises and problems for the handloom sector.

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

No. of Women Engaged in Weaving Activity by Nature of Engagement 2012-13

Name of the State	No. of Women Engaged in Weaving Activity by Nature of Engagement		
	Part time	Full time	Total
Andhra Pradesh	46384	6376	52,760
Arunachal Pradesh	9363	16,290	25,662
Assam	6, 86,457	7, 02196	1,388,653
Bihar	1783	690	2472
Chhattisgarh	212	6	218
Delhi	115	17	132
Gujarat	726	244	970
Haryana	27	0	27
Himachal Pradesh	848	3724	4572
Jammu & Kashmir	319	1807	2126
Jharkhand	1807	148	1955
Karnataka	8303	480	8783
Kerala	7749	71	7820
Madhya Pradesh	1593	241	1834
Maharashtra	250	8	258
Manipur	1,69,310	29,801	1,99,111
Meghalaya	7015	5519	12,534
Mizoram	6095	32,418	38,513
Nagaland	21,351	23,171	44,522
Orissa	5930	1626	7556
Puducherry	791	103	894
Punjab	289	53	342
Rajasthan	3533	829	4362
Sikkim	264	263	527
Tamil Nadu	77,477	14,539	92,016
Tripura	6489	1,22,302	1,28,791
Uttar Pradesh	21,720	3689	25,409
Uttarakhand	1185	916	2101
West Bengal	1,23,482	24,635	1,48,117
All India	1,210,851	9, 92,171	2,203,032

Source: Third National Handloom Census, 2013.

Women Weavers and Handloom Sector in India

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 recognized 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 nil.

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.

Issues of Women Weavers in India

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.

Gender Discrimination in India – A Historical Perspective

Women around the world share a common condition; they are not full and equal participants in public policy choices that affect their lives. Nowhere is the gap between de jure and de facto equality among men and women greater than in the area of decision making. The top decision making position remain largely male dominated spheres where women have little influence.

Wage Discrimination of Women Weavers in India

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 weavers for credit, raw material and market support. Master weavers in general are people who invest in production, and sell the products even in instances where women are paid wages for small, piece-meal activities like yarn-winding, sizing etc, these wages range from 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. 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.

Ill Competition of Handloom Sector in the Era of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG)

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.

Invention of Power loom – An Issue to Women Weavers

The invention of the power loom, the recurrence of sweatshop manufacturing and a competitive global textile market was stripping handloom weavers of their market.

Traditional Handloom Sector

The traditional handloom sector failed in the area of technological up gradation, value added product development, diversification and effective marketing management.

The constant debts of the families, illness and other factors such as globalization, power looms and industrialization retained them at the lowest level of subsistence. Their low wages went to pay debts and forever they remained in poverty and deprivation. They toiled very hard, but the returns were very few and far between. In most of the weaving families in south India, the men turned to alcohol, neglecting work, indulging in child abuse and the women gradually took over the burden of the whole family.

Suggestions

To overcome the issues of women weavers some of the important suggestions are mentioned below:

- The central and state government must take concerted and collective steps at multiple levels. These could include, for example, facilitation of easier access of these sectors to credit from banks and other financial institutions and the promotion of the products of these sectors in domestic and foreign markets.
- Universities, corporate sector and Government departments should contribute by sponsoring - and themselves taking up - research that results in innovative technology to adapt and upgrade the traditional tools and designs of the local artisans, and weavers.
- All concerned Ministries and Departments to stay vigilant and respond promptly to demand in existing and emerging markets.
- The Government should provide alternative source of raw materials in order to ensure uninterrupted supply.
- The Government should provide training facilities to each and every worker in the unit for making better quality products.
- The panchayat authorities has to provide women friendly environment in the unit.
- The government should provide financial support for the widening of the unit.
- The textile policies have to be renewed.
- Due to restless weaving activities, large numbers of women are suffering from gynecological problems. In order to lessen the women casualties, free medical camps and mobile health centers be established in the handloom clusters in all parts of India, in particular government should concentrate the handlooms in hamlets and remote villages.
- The government has to find out alternative marketing sources to sell their products.

Conclusion

It is important to recall that the founding fathers of our nation had recognized the importance of safeguarding handicrafts and handlooms in the long term. They had introduced a number of measures to ensure its sustainability including well-conceived initiatives, national-level programmes and supportive legislations.

Women are a large part of the work force in the weaving sector and women constitute over 50% of the artisans' sector. A considerable percentage of weavers and artisans belong to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and religious minorities. This sector not only provides low investment income opportunities for families in the rural sector but it also supplements their incomes in off-season of Agriculture. Vitality in this sector checks migration and helps to keep traditional economic relationships intact. It is significant that the handlooms sector in India, with 24 lakh handlooms, provides employment to about 44 lakh persons and our handicrafts sector provides employment to about 70 lakh persons. The Textile Sector provides largest employment opportunities next to Agriculture. Between 2010 and the present, it is seen that despite the overall slowdown in the Indian economy there was a growth of 34% in exports from the handlooms sector and 126 % in the exports from the handicrafts sector. However, it cannot be ignored that this sector, despite its wide production base, has been constrained in its growth. It has been disadvantaged by its inadequate access to credit, dependence on middlemen, inadequate availability of raw material, out-dated technology and limited access to markets. The products in this sector remain vulnerable to competition from cheaper imports and machine made substitutes. These factors need to be addressed urgently, systematically and comprehensively and we must give more attention to development of capacity, skills, designs and infrastructure.

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