

**WOMEN IN THE FAMILY ENTERPRISES OF HANDLOOM
WEAVING: A CASE STUDY OF NADIA, WEST BENGAL**

**SYNOPSIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

By

SAYANA BASU

Registration No. D-7/ISLM/44/17

**SCHOOL OF WOMEN'S STUDIES
FACULTY COUNCIL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES
LAW AND MANAGEMENT
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
KOLKATA-700032**

2023

SYNOPSIS

Introduction

Handloom as a traditional Indian art form has been primarily sustained by transferring of skills from one generation to another as a part of the family legacy. The handloom production operation in India is the second largest employment generating activity (after agriculture), with a predominance of weavers (80%) chiefly engaging in the process of fabric manufacturing from home. The sector engaging more than 72% of female artisans from the family-based enterprises has been commended by the Ministry of Textiles as a flourishing industry with corroborating evidences of ensuring direct remuneration to the rural artisans, particularly to the poor rural women of the country. But, despite Ministry's positive evaluation of the family-based activity of fabric manufacturing, the sector witnessed a growing trend of weavers, particularly male weavers, moving out from handloom to other livelihood means. This trend has increasingly concerned the researchers, demographers and activists about what has induced the unsustainable situation that is pushing the male weavers from handloom to other occupations. My research therefore investigates why despite the lucrative returns in the industry, handloom as a means of livelihood is increasingly becoming unsustainable to the male artisans and how the gender relations within the handloom family enterprises and larger weaving community is affected by such a change. It also compels me to investigate that if handloom weaving is genuinely becoming an unsustainable source of livelihood, then why a section of the female members, semi-skilled or skilled weavers themselves, from the family enterprises are persistent on continuing the ancestral crafts while men from the same handloom family enterprises are rapidly relocating themselves from the sector to alternative income generating sources. My research looks into the critical inter-relationships that exist among the hierarchical groups of economic actors i.e. the mahajans, master weavers, yarn suppliers, dye suppliers, in the production chain of weaving to focus on ways in which women artisans (who are left behind in the family enterprises) negotiate to overcome the obstacles in the weaving community. I also investigate how paradigmatic shifts of COVID-19 pandemic impacts the economic conditions of the handloom households and how intra-household gender dynamics and vulnerabilities are affected by the loss of male jobs and their return to their traditional occupation.

Nandita Banerjee Dhanu
3/2/23

Assistant Professor
1 School of Women's Studies
Jadavpur University
Kolkata-700032



Research Objectives

- To explore how women negotiate gendered expectations, endogamous marriage norms and burden of cultural inheritance in the family enterprises after the mobility of male artisans into other occupations.
- To study the ways in which women strategically bargain for their rights as weavers with the economic actors in the hierarchy of the handloom production chain.
- To understand the challenges faced by women weavers as the Covid-19 impacts the intra-household gender dynamics of handloom family enterprises and deteriorate the condition of the handloom market.

Chapter 1: Research Methodology

The chapter lays down the demographic overview of weaving clusters of Nadia namely Phulia, Santipur, Ranaghat I & II and Nabadwip. These four important weaving clusters (i.e., Phulia, Santipur, Ranaghat I & II and Nabadwip) are selected in the study for their development of handloom as an export-oriented family enterprise-based textile production. The research draws from qualitative study conducted in these four weaving clusters of Nadia during four years of doctoral research. The four weaving clusters of the region encircle vast section of the male and female handloom weavers manufacturing niche variety of handloom fabrics for national and international consumers from their homes. My study uses non-probability sampling where the findings are not representative of the entire artisanal community in the district but is selected to focus on a particular phenomenon. Over the period of four years, starting from early 2018 to mid 2022, in-depth qualitative interviews have been conducted with 66 female artisans and 10 male artisans belonging to 26 handloom-based family enterprises. The 26 handloom family enterprises were specifically selected for analysing how the male occupational mobility from handloom to other livelihood sources was affecting the women artisans inside the home. Questions were asked regarding the stimulation for male weaver's disengagement from handloom, primary occupation they are relocating to and of course the average monthly income earned from new livelihood means. Inquiries were also made to understand whether women's increased responsibilities in managing the family enterprises have brought about a change in terms of widening of choices and opportunities in the handloom clusters. Interview have also been conducted with 3 mahajans, 1 master weaver, and 2 bank officials from the distict of Nadia and 3 women boutique owners from Kolkata.

During the field visits to the family enterprises I used a semi-standardised interview structure, where certain predetermined questions or themes were supplemented with unscheduled probes that arose during the interview process itself. Based on the information gathered, demographic table of the weavers was created showing the distribution of weavers based on their age groups, educational qualifications, marital status, nature of weaving activities undertaken by women artisans inside their homes; return from per piece of handloom fabric items, new occupation the male artisans were shifting to and the total household income from the combined effort of the male and female artisans. Time use survey was employed to assess and understand the array of tasks women engaged themselves inside the handloom family enterprises. The employment of time use survey is premised on the realization that a complete picture with detailed information on how women spend their time in the day (24 hours) on weaving and non-weaving activities is indispensable for understanding the power dynamics operating in this spatial domain. Based on the responses, I provided a detailed timeframe of the activities women artisans dedicated to different activities inside the family enterprises. I also described in details the essential stages women artisans undertook in the handloom fabric manufacturing operation and corresponding marketing of those finished produce.

Chapter 2: Women as Carriers of the ‘Weaving Legacy’: Shifting Labour and Changing Gender Relations in Marriage

This chapter focuses on how gendered norms of endogamous marriage, the dual burden of women within family enterprises, and the departure of male weavers to seek sustainable livelihood options outside handloom puts enormous pressure of reproducing the weaving community's cultural identity on women. When the male weavers of these family businesses embrace the choice of mobility to solve the financial distress for immediate livelihood stabilization, they rely on women's continued commitment to the ancestral craft to carry forward the economic rewards of adhering to it. This practise is supported by normative marital expectations inside the weaving community, where women's weaving labour is regulated and exploited through intra-community marriage.

The first section of this chapter highlights how the noticeable shift of male weavers from handloom to other livelihood means has been induced not only by the strong desire to be relieved from poverty, but also by the institution of marriage, where young men are increasingly finding it difficult to find brides from handloom backgrounds. This behaviour on the part of the young male artisans indicates that men from the weaving community want to

see their spouses in cultural-stereotypical terms, representatives of their traditional identity. Woman's agency to take decisions about her own marriage is therefore viewed as a moment of aberration of those social norms. Thus, marriage must be regulated in order for the reproduction of the artisanal community. Weaving abilities are therefore portrayed as a vital criterion for a young woman's marital partnership within this artisanal community.

The second section focuses that the intangible aspects of weaving within the family enterprises noticeably hold high value and meaning to the handloom households. The designs, motifs along with colour combinations etched on the fabrics are significantly affected by intergenerational learning and demonstrate the weavers' expertise. The consortium of collective heritage, a vast chronicle of migration history, and memories with all its concomitant struggle of creating an identity serves as important motivators for women as they manage gendered norms within the family, community, and labour market. Many women artisans are unwilling to forsake the cultural heritages of weaving and its concomitant history being closely associated with the discourses of migration from Bangladesh. They therefore insist on continuing the ancestral crafts even after the men have resigned from the trade. This highlights the important role handloom plays in establishing and expressing women's personal identity, which, in turn, signifies social practices, statuses and roles that help to build community identity.

The final section of this chapter focuses on how women put their health and well-being at risk in order to find a balance between carrying forward the weaving legacy while taking an active part in increasing household earnings. The women artisans experience a critical time pressure anxiety while managing the production operations with equally demanding household chores. This section contends that the consequences of internalised cultural ideals and societal expectations functioning inside the blurred boundaries of women's enterprise commitments and domestic responsibilities disproportionately places the burden on women artisans without a visible increase in benefits or entitlements.

Chapter 3: Women's Bargaining Interaction with Handloom Stakeholders to Overcome the Obstacles Faced in the Production Chain

The third chapter investigates the critical inter-relationships that exist among the hierarchical groups of economic actors in the weaving production chain in an attempt to understand the ways in which women negotiate to overcome the obstacles caused by hierarchical production operations in the fabric manufacturing process. The chapter focuses on how women artisans manage to learn the intricacies of bargaining with the intermediaries, i.e., mahajans and

master weavers and other economic actors in the production chain while manufacturing, transacting and trading the finish produce.

The first section of the chapter focuses on how women undertaking an abundance of enterprises duties experience a broad spectrum of critical problems in accessing financial resources and the management of it while partaking in revenue generating activity. The hierarchical decision-making ability inside the handloom family enterprises reserve certain crucial areas of decision-making for men in their position as household heads and breadwinners while assigning others to women in their capacities as mothers, spouses, daughters, and so on. Women are thus compelled to use a number of strategies to engage in the intricate procedure of negotiation to gain agency over credit control inside the family enterprises and beyond. This section thus emphasises women's ability to engage in the complex procedure of negotiation with the patriarchal structures of marriage in order to gain access to financial resources within the household as well as outside.

The second section focuses on decentralized mode of operation in the production chain that contributes much to sculpt the pyramidal, hierarchical structure of handloom activities in the weaving community. The primary economic actors i.e., the mahajans, master weavers along with other cluster actors such as raw material suppliers, credit lenders, marketing agents, wholesalers, distributors etc, in the discourse of occupational mobility of male artisans plays an outstanding role in shaping and manoeuvring the social norms and customs pervading the region; permitting the women to bargain with the existing power structures over economic, social and cultural resources in the region. This section looks at how women use their agency to engage in negotiating with multiple economic actors in the production chain, by focusing on their ability to perceive alternate avenues for a cooperative solution during business exigencies.

The third section focuses on women's strategic entrepreneurial behaviour, which includes opportunity recognition and innovativeness while marketing the end product independently of the intermediaries in the production chain, namely mahajans and master weavers. By swerving away from the marketing assistance offered by the intermediaries, a small section of women weavers initiate conversations with women handloom boutique owners in the urban spaces of Kolkata. They do so in order to avoid the incursion of mahajans or master weavers in the marketing process, which results in a higher loss in their wages if they negotiated their conditions directly with these intermediaries. The new business strategies moderately improves women's status and position within the households. The newly acquired (limited)

access to the management of family finances and fabric marketing helps them in ameliorating their conditions in terms of voicing their opinion within her home as well as outside.

Chapter 4: Unfolding Gendered Trajectories of COVID-19 Pandemic in the Handloom Sector of Nadia

The fourth chapter focuses how the handloom sector of the district of Nadia experience a massive disruption in fabric manufacturing process and subsequent supply chain system with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter elucidates how paradigmatic shifts of COVID-19 not only impact the economic conditions of the handloom households but the intra-household gender dynamics and vulnerabilities are too affected when male artisans lose their jobs and return to the traditional crafts.

The first section of this chapter examines how women's precarious position inside the handloom family enterprises is not only caused by diminished textile orders, but is also induced by reinforced gender stereotypes that cripple their decision-making capacity inside the handloom family enterprises. This section argues that the loss of male workers' jobs during a crisis exacerbates the deep-seated gender disparities that threaten to undo recent advances gained by women in terms of access to and management of productive resources and marketing of finish produce. The gendered fallout of pandemic induced distress highlights the importance of looking beyond the livelihood threat and joblessness of men and women; for a plethora of indirect effects of Covid-19 pandemic shows how men losing their jobs place additional obligations on women for economic sustenance of the household.

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has the potential to jeopardise the family enterprise's long-term survival plan. The second section of the chapter therefore looks at how the COVID-19 situation affects women's entrepreneurial capacity. It highlights how an unforeseeable external phenomenon pushes women handloom entrepreneurs to bargain inside patriarchal institution of marriage systems and be tenacious in order to overcome barriers and make the best of the circumstances. This section investigates the resilience of the home-based women artisans in adapting and pivoting their business strategies to suit new market needs.

The third section of this chapter focuses on how the government's multiple failures to accurately gauge the concerning degrees of vulnerability, as well as women's strenuous efforts in this sector, prevent the Ministry of Textiles from understanding the gendered nature of production relations within family enterprises and persistent gender inequality in the wider trading realm. With hardship and penury on rise, this section highlights how the upsurge of

Covid-19 cases compels the women weavers to stay at home and continue providing their loom services within their family structures despite the enhanced level of coercion and exploitation at the hands of the intermediaries. This section argues that the absence of concrete gender responsive policies in the primarily informal, unorganised sector of handloom weaving leaves a profound impact on the current gender relations at work.

Conclusion

Taking Nadia's four major handloom clusters as a case study, the thesis demonstrates how women's contributions to the handloom market are efficiently converged and productively diffused with gender roles demands from family members and the community at large. With payment or profit frequently projected as a necessary criterion for recognising an activity as 'work,' women's arduous engagements in the fabric manufacturing process, which frequently lack any definite form of remuneration or entitlement, escape the regular definition of work and its workspace protections. My dissertation thesis recommends that in order to design comprehensive policies for the sector, the Ministry of Textiles must recognise the conditions in which home-based women artisans deliver their vital economic services. To aid in the development of comprehensive policy and appropriate intervention frameworks for the handloom sector, the Ministry of Textiles need to acknowledge the different roles played by male and female artisans inside the handloom households. The Ministry needs to recognize how male and female artisans have varying degrees of access and control over productive resources/assets in the family businesses and the larger textile labour market. My research suggests an urgent need for gender responsive evaluation in census questionnaire schedule, for the Census Bureau's careful consideration can reveal the handloom weavers' adaptability and flexibility (in reference to leaving the handloom livelihood and re-entering it) in the industry. This can help the government in recording the differences in the patterns of mobility of male and female artisans in the sector and accordingly develop policies to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment in the industry.

Nandita Banerjee Dhanwan
3/2/23

Assistant Professor
School of Women's Studies
Jadavpur University
Kolkata-700032