



Role of Women in Kashi's Handloom and Textile Trade: A Socio-economic Study

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Abstract:

The handmade and textile trade in Kashi (Varanasi) has a rich and complex history, characterized by vibrant patterns and textiles that have been attracted to the world for centuries. The study explores the essential yet often underrepresented role of women in Kashi's handmade and textile industry. Traditionally, this trade was dominated by men; however, women contributed significantly at all levels – from sewing and dyeing to design innovation and quality control. Its involvement not only supports the art but also causes socio-economic changes within the community. The study aims to highlight the resilience and agency of women in Kashi's textile sector and argue that empowerment is essential for the future sustainability of this craft. This paper examines how women contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and the economic stability of their households through their skills and labor. This study uses an inductive approach within a descriptive framework, with qualitative data from secondary sources. In conclusion, this study employs thematic analysis to examine the gender dynamics within the industry. This research paper also discusses women's challenges, including wage disparities, limited resources, and the impact of modern mechanization on traditional roles. This research emphasizes that addressing challenges such as gender disparities, limited training opportunities, and a lack of fair labor practices can improve the empowerment of women in Kashi's textile industry, thereby preserving cultural heritage and driving socio-economic growth for future generations.

Keywords: gender, gender-disparity, Handloom, trade, textile, women-empowerment,

1.1 Introduction

Kashi, also known as Varanasi, is one of the world's oldest towns and a significant hub for traditional handloom and textile crafts, particularly the well-known Banarasi silk sarees. This craft has been essential to India's cultural history for centuries. While significant attention has historically been devoted to the craftsmanship of men, who have long been the face of the weaving heritage, women's contributions to the handloom and textile trade have often been overlooked, unrecognized, and unappreciated (Singh, 2019). Women play a crucial role in Kashi's growing handloom industry at all stages of manufacturing. They work hard, spinning raw fibers, meticulously dyeing them in a range of colors, and adding detailed embellishments to enhance the beauty of the finished product. Their meticulous attention to detail ensures that the fabric reaches high-quality requirements,

demonstrating their expertise and dedication to the trade. Despite their significant contributions, women's roles are sometimes ignored or devalued in a male-dominated business. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing their achievements and creating more opportunities for economic empowerment and gender parity in Kashi's traditional textile industry (Saxena, 2020).

Despite their crucial roles in these processes, entrenched economic inequality and deeply ingrained sociocultural norms have hindered their opportunities to be acknowledged and financially independent. Their marginalization due to this lack of recognition often makes it difficult for them to achieve the economic independence they require and establish a suitable place in society (Gaur, 2021). Globalization and mechanization have significantly altered the nature of employment, creating substantial challenges for female employees. Many women rely on labor-intensive, artisanal jobs requiring perseverance, expertise, and craftsmanship. Their livelihoods are in jeopardy as the demand for automated operations increases, highlighting the vulnerable status of individuals who rely on more traditional employment (Choudhary, 2022).

The roles played by women in Kashi's handloom industry provide crucial insights into how gender, the economy, and cultural practices interact. Several studies show the cultural barriers that hinder women's access to financial resources, education, and recognition, as well as how traditional gender roles in the household carry over into the workplace, where women's labour is frequently underestimated. Previous research has shown that caste-based hierarchies and patriarchal norms have traditionally shaped the way work is organized in the handloom industry, perpetuating a division of labour that assigns women to invisible or supporting tasks. These circumstances impact women's social standing and opportunities for self-empowerment, limiting their economic freedom (Agarwal, 2017; Bhardwaj, 2019).

Women's contributions to Kashi's textile industry also provide insight into more significant trends in India's unorganized sector. Because they lack official work opportunities, social protection, and recognition for their labor, women in the informal sector are frequently confined to low-paying professions, according to scholars (Sharma & Patel, 2020; Gupta et al., 2021). It is important to address the socioeconomic issues that marginalized women in this field in order to advance gender equality and to protect and enhance the textile industry's cultural legacy in Kashi.

This study aims to examine how women's contributions through their skills and labour support the preservation of cultural heritage and enhance the economic stability of their households within Kashi's handloom and textile trade. (focusing on how cultural norms) Moreover, economic pressures shape their experiences and opportunities. By adopting a functional, conflict, and theoretical perspective, this research aims to explore the social and economic implications of their roles and contributions, thereby underscoring the need for formal recognition of this traditional yet evolving industry.

2.0 Review of Literature

A literature review summarizes journal articles, books, and other materials that reflect the current state of knowledge on a topic, including substantive discoveries and theoretical and methodological contributions. A literature review is a comprehensive assessment of existing research on a specific topic that synthesizes information from various sources, including journal articles, books, and other scholarly publications. It emphasizes the evolution of knowledge in the discipline by highlighting major findings, delving into theoretical frameworks, and reviewing methodological techniques. This critical assessment highlights gaps in the existing literature and contextualizes the significance of ongoing research, providing insights into how previous studies have influenced the current understanding (Creswell, 2014).

2.1 Gender Roles in Artisan Industries

There have been clear divisions between gender roles in many traditional craft businesses. Women have historically performed ancillary jobs, such as spinning, dyeing, or finishing textiles, while men often assumed the roles of traders or weavers. This division of labor has influenced the social and economic dynamics of these industries. The author of this paper examines how women's gender affects the types of jobs they hold and the obstacles they encounter while trying to secure opportunities and financial gains in the handloom industry (Chandrika, 2010). This study examines how gender expectations and societal conventions have influenced

women's positions in the textile sector, with a particular emphasis on labour force participation (Kaur, 2014). Wichterich examines the complex ways that gender influences the craft production environment in various settings, particularly in India. She draws attention to the sometimes-disregarded roles played by women in the handloom sector, shedding light on how their labor is often underestimated and underappreciated, despite being essential to the economy. This discrepancy raises questions about equity, acknowledgment, and the value of women's labor in traditional crafts (Wichterich, 2012).

2.2 Economic contributions of Women in the households and Textile Trade

The handloom industry has benefited enormously from women's labour contributions. However, their contributions are primarily recognized through unpaid or inadequately compensated labour, and their positions are frequently underappreciated. It is possible to view women's participation in textile manufacturing as both a social empowerment tool and a necessity. This study examines the significant economic contributions made by women in the handloom sector, with a focus on rural and semi-urban areas. It highlights the important roles that these women play by demonstrating how their labour and craftsmanship support local economies in addition to providing for their families. They contribute to creating a livelihood network that sustains household finances and promotes community growth by working on handlooms (Bansal, 2017).

This study thoroughly examines the economic contributions of West Bengal women craftsmen, emphasizing their significant role in the region. It explores the complex ways in which cooperatives and microfinance programs actively empower these women, enabling them to improve their income, develop new skills, and become more independent in the marketplace. The study illustrates the life-changing effects of these support networks on female artisans and their communities through in-depth case studies (Bennett & Sharma, 2013).

2.2.1 Household Economic Stability:

Women working in the handloom industry play a crucial role in controlling household expenses and generating revenue. Reddy and Ramaswamy (2020) emphasize the importance of women in managing household finances, especially in rural India. In addition to earning a living, women in Kashi's handloom industry play a crucial role in setting priorities for household needs and creating budgets. They frequently have to supervise the money they make from their handloom job and ensure it goes towards necessities like food, healthcare, and education for their kids. Even in traditional gender roles, they have some autonomy due to their involvement in financial management (Reddy & Ramaswamy, 2020).

The sustainability of women's labour is closely linked to long-term household stability, especially in thriving artisan communities. According to Nair (2017), women's ongoing participation in the handloom industry provides both immediate financial benefits and the opportunity for the generational transfer of priceless skills. This approach fosters long-term financial stability within the family. Women skilled in weaving or other textile-related crafts are crucial in passing on their knowledge to their daughters, creating a rich and enduring knowledge cycle that preserves the craft and ensures the family's financial stability for many generations to come. The artistry involved and the household's financial stability depend on this crucial intergenerational transfer of skills (Nair, 2017).

2.3 Women's Role in Cultural Heritage and Craft Preservation

Traditional weaving methods are a cultural legacy passed down through the years, and women play a crucial role in their preservation. Women play an important role in this skill in locations like Kashi, where they instruct others in weaving. They foster a culture of creativity and shared learning by sharing their expertise with their daughters and other women in their community. Sharing intricate weaving patterns, dying methods, and the entire textile production process are all part of this talent transfer, which goes beyond simple instruction. The majority of this learning takes place informally through storytelling and practical experience. This type of instruction contributes to preserving the weaving craft and the ongoing significance of this cultural legacy for future generations (Kumar, 2016).

In addition to being valuable commodities, handloom fabrics are revered in Kashi as cultural symbols that encapsulate the area's artistic and historical traditions. According to Patel (2019), women craftsmen play a crucial role in the artistic and creative facets of textile production. Women's contributions to manufacturing textiles with

great cultural significance include adding elaborate patterns, motifs, and creative features. They are important contributors to the preservation of art and heritage since their work is regarded as an artistic expression that captures the area's cultural identity (Patel, 2019).

Women's participation in preserving the high standard and uniqueness of regional goods is essential to the survival of traditional hand-loomed techniques. This paper argues that, in addition to producing handwoven fabrics, women artisans in Kashi also contribute to the preservation of the craft by adapting age-old techniques to meet shifting consumer expectations. This modification guarantees the craft's survival while maintaining the spirit of the custom. By bridging the past and present, their contribution protects cultural heritage and fosters economic sustainability (Singh & Sharma, 2020).

In Kashi, women play a significant role in the planning and involvement of regional artisan networks and cooperatives, which support the handloom sector as a cultural heritage resource. To foster a sense of pride in the craft, women artisans collaborate with community-based organizations, as Jain (2017) explains. By working together, they guarantee the preservation of historic skills and the transmission of cultural practices associated with textile manufacturing to future generations. By highlighting the craft as an essential component of Kashi's identity, these community networks also raise the craft's cultural standing (Jain, 2017).

In general, Kashi women artisans have helped traditional handloom goods gain prominence worldwide, thereby furthering the preservation of their cultural legacy. By participating in exhibits, fairs, and trade events, women significantly contribute to the global marketing of handloom items, showcasing their creations and educating a global audience about the cultural value of their crafts. In addition to preserving traditional methods, this interaction with international markets highlights the cultural narratives woven into the textiles they manufacture (Mehta, 2018).

3. Research Problem

Despite the important role women play in Kashi's vintage handloom and textile industries, their contributions are often undervalued, underpaid, and overlooked. Existing research and business practices have generally focused on male weavers, thereby obscuring women's critical responsibilities at various production phases, including spinning, dyeing, embellishment, and quality control. This study aims to close the knowledge gap regarding the socioeconomic conditions and obstacles that women face in the industry, particularly in the context of globalization, mechanization, and gender inequities. The primary issue is a lack of institutional recognition and support for women's labor, which restricts their economic empowerment and social standing within the industry.

4. Research Objectives

This study examines how women's abilities and labor contribute to preserving cultural heritage while enhancing the economic stability of their households in Kashi's handloom and textile sector. Emphasizing how cultural norms and economic forces impact their experiences and possibilities.

5. Research Methodology

This study used an inductive technique within a descriptive framework, utilizing qualitative data from secondary sources. Using a feminist, conflict, and theoretical approach, it sought to explore the social and economic implications of their roles and contributions, emphasizing the need for legal recognition of this long-standing yet evolving field. In conclusion, it used thematic analysis to explore gender trends in the industry.

5.1 Theoretical Framework

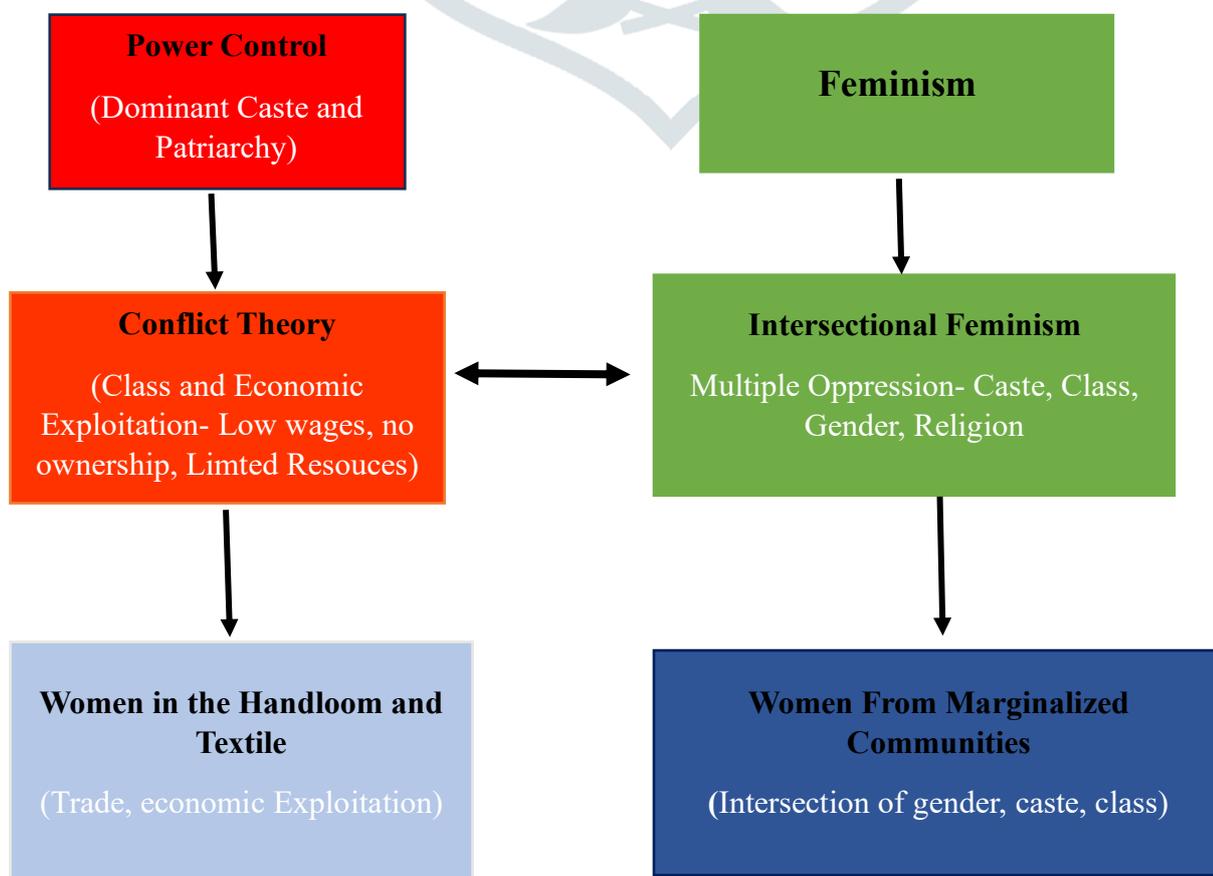
Conflict theory offers a framework for analyzing the unequal distribution of power, resources, and opportunities among various social groups, particularly between the ruling class (those in charge of production and distribution) and the labor class, which includes women. According to conflict theory, society is defined by constant conflicts between these groups, in which the ruling class exploits the labor of the disadvantaged to maintain economic advantage and social domination (Marx, 1867). In Kashi's handloom industry, women, particularly those from marginalized and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are frequently the most vulnerable and abused workers. They are often engaged in labor-intensive occupations such as weaving and spinning, but are paid less than men

for the same activity. This reflects class-based exploitation, in which textile firm owners and male workers profit from the excess value created by women's underpaid labor (Bhatt, 2011).

The economic structure of the handloom trade in Kashi is based on this disparity, with male business owners wielding enormous power over capital, decision-making, and resource allocation. On the other hand, although women are the backbone of production, they frequently have limited access to ownership or leadership roles in this business (Sarkar, 2013). This exacerbates the class battle, in which women are disadvantaged by both economic and patriarchal norms that restrict their upward mobility. Dahrendorf's conflict theory posits that society comprises conflicting interest groups, and conflict arises when one group attempts to dominate or oppress another (Dahrendorf, 1959). The rivalry between female laborers and elite male proprietors is evident in the handloom sector, with women's economic interests and rights being restricted to protect the upper class's profits and social status.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term "intersectionality," a feminist theory that examines how various social identities, such as gender, race, class, and caste, intersect to produce diverse forms of oppression. In the context of Kashi's textile trade, intersectionality demonstrates that women's experiences are not uniform. For example, a Dalit woman in the handloom sector may endure both gender-based oppression and caste-based discrimination. In contrast, an upper-caste woman may face fewer caste hurdles but still face gender inequity. This viewpoint highlights the interplay between various forms of oppression, which collectively produce distinct challenges for female workers. It goes beyond simply addressing gender disparity, focusing on how class, caste, religion, and other variables interact to exacerbate vulnerabilities among marginalized groups. Intersectionality demonstrates that gender discrimination is not separate but is inextricably linked to other social factors (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000).

Figure 1: Unequal access to resources, limited agency, and multi-dimensional oppression



Source: Author's representation

When combined, these theories provide a comprehensive perspective through which to examine the role of women in Kashi's handloom and textile sector. Conflict theory sheds light on economic exploitation and class struggles, but intersectionality expands our understanding by demonstrating how multiple layers of discrimination intersect and function simultaneously. This is especially important in rural India, where women in the handloom industry often come from lower castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. By combining these perspectives, we can see how capitalism and patriarchy interact to maintain both class and gender inequality.

The following is a simplified graphical illustration of how conflict theory (class-based exploitation) and intersectional feminist theory (multidimensional oppression) meet to describe women's positions in Kashi's handloom and textile industries:

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Analysis

- **Gender Roles in Artisan Industries:**

Women in Kashi's handloom and textile industries are firmly entrenched in conventional gender norms. The profession, while reliant on women's labor, is structured in a way that shows a stark gender divide. Women are generally involved in the weaving process, which is often supervised by men or carried out inside family settings where men dominate money transactions and market deals. This apparent division limits women's roles to production, reducing their authority over resources and economic decisions.

- **Economic Contribution of Women:**

Working in the handloom sector, women significantly contribute to their household income. Despite this, their economic contributions are often overlooked and devalued. In many circumstances, women are paid less than men or are entirely excluded from household decisions about income and financial planning.

- **Household Economic Stability:**

Women's labor in the textile industry directly contributes to household stability, frequently shielding against economic pressures. Their capacity to make high-quality textiles provides households with a regular income. However, market volatility and the control of middlemen over prices frequently put women in precarious circumstances, rendering them economically dependent.

- **Cultural Heritage and Craft Preservation:**

Women's handloom weaving capabilities are important in preserving Kashi's rich cultural legacy. This craft, passed down through the years, preserves the region's cultural identity. However, this duty binds women to traditional roles and restricts their access to possibilities for economic advancement.

- **Intersection of Gender, Class, and Caste:**

Intersectionality illustrates the complicated web of oppression that women endure in Kashi's handloom industry. Women are marginalized not only because of their gender but also because of their caste and socioeconomic status. Because of this multilayered oppression, women from lower castes or economically challenged families face even higher difficulties in obtaining resources, markets, and acknowledgment for their work.

- **Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer:**

Kashi's handloom and textile industry relies on the transfer of knowledge and skills between generations. However, as education and economic prospects evolve, younger generations of women are losing interest in traditional crafts in favor of more contemporary and financially stable jobs. This trend poses a threat to the preservation of cultural heritage in the trade.

- **Economic Exploitation & Patriarchal Control:**

The study found that women in the handloom industry, particularly those from underprivileged groups, endure substantial economic exploitation. Most respondents reported obtaining lower wages than men for comparable jobs, demonstrating gender wage discrepancies. Furthermore, women have limited ownership of vital resources, such as looms and land, which exacerbates their precarious economic situation. This is consistent with conflict theory, which posits that class-based exploitation is pervasive. Furthermore, many women have limited access to critical resources, such as financing, markets, and modern technology, which dominant social groups still control. Power and control in the handloom industry remain primarily patriarchal. Male members of the community often dominate decisions regarding resource distribution, market access, and trade negotiations, leaving women with limited opportunities to exert their own agency. The survey also found strong cultural norms that characterize women's responsibilities as supportive rather than leading. Women are often expected to support male family members rather than assume leadership roles in business, despite their significant contributions to production. These gendered assumptions promote the notion that women's participation is secondary, limiting their ability to participate in decision-making and leadership within the industry thoroughly.

Figure 2- Women’s role in the handloom & textile trade



Source: Author’s presentation

Discussions

The prevalent patriarchal framework hinders women's ability to participate in the trade. Women's roles in weaving and textile manufacture are viewed as extensions of domestic duties. Conflict theory, when applied, demonstrates how the system abuses its labor without proper pay or recognition. This maintains the power differential between men and women in the industry, maintaining systemic inequities. Women's labor supports the industry, yet the

socioeconomic system allows for the exploitation of women's labor through unequal wage distribution and access to resources. According to conflict theory, their contributions are used by an economic system that marginalizes them in favor of male-dominated systems. Intersectionality also plays an important role here, since women from underprivileged areas face additional challenges owing to their gender and socioeconomic background.

Women contribute substantially to economic stability; nonetheless, the overall economic framework does not safeguard them against exploitation. The unequal distribution of power in financial decisions is clear. Conflict theory emphasizes the power dynamics in which women's contributions help support their homes, but their lack of control over incomes makes them vulnerable to economic instability. Intersectional feminism would highlight the compounded marginalization of women, particularly those from lower castes or economic groups who are doubly disadvantaged. Craft preservation is critical, but it also serves as a double-edged sword. While maintaining cultural legacy gives women a sense of pride and importance, it frequently confines them to a restrictive socioeconomic framework that limits their prospects for growth. Intersectionality also becomes important here, with women from underprivileged communities facing even stronger cultural norms that limit their involvement in their communities and the market. The clash between cultural expectations and economic requirements limits these women's mobility.

The intersection of gender, class, and caste illustrates how oppression intensifies for women in this business. While patriarchy affects all women, individuals from underprivileged areas confront additional challenges due to socioeconomic disparities and historical caste prejudice. Conflict theory and intersectional feminism both emphasize the significance of interrelated oppressions, exposing how systemic institutions support and sustain women's marginalization in the handloom industries.

Conclusion

The study concludes with an examination of the ongoing gender inequities and power dynamics that affect women's experiences in Kashi's handloom and textile trade. Women, particularly those from impoverished groups, endure economic exploitation, limited access to resources, and strongly embedded gender stereotypes that limit their leadership roles in the trade. Despite their significant contributions to home economic stability and cultural preservation, patriarchal norms and class-based oppression continue to restrict their autonomy and prospects. To address these difficulties, targeted interventions must be implemented that promote gender equality, empower women through access to resources, and dismantle detrimental cultural norms to establish fairer trade environments.

Numerous initiatives are required to improve gender equality and women's empowerment in Kashi's handloom and textile industries. Gender mainstreaming should be prioritized in policy reforms, assuring women's equitable pay, access to resources, and leadership possibilities. Capacity-building efforts focusing on modern technology, marketing, and entrepreneurship will help women, particularly those from underserved groups, break traditional gender stereotypes and become industry leaders. Legal reforms are necessary to ensure women's ownership of resources, such as land and looms, and economic programs should promote direct market access to eliminate reliance on intermediaries. Addressing the intersections of gender, caste, and class will lead to a more comprehensive approach to empowerment. Furthermore, community awareness campaigns should challenge cultural conventions that limit women's responsibilities, encouraging shared decision-making and appreciating women's contributions to homes and trading structures. These policies could lead to significant social and economic changes, promoting more equitable participation by women in the sector.

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