

REVIEW ARTICLE

Contemporary Issues and Challenges in Women's Weavers in the Varanasi Silk Saree Industry

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ABSTRACT

The Silk saree industry is one of the most female-dominated industries in the world, with more than eighty percent of the workforce being female and the second most direct and indirect employment generator after agriculture in India. Nevertheless, nowadays, as we know, the decrease in female workers in the global textile industry has positive and negative effects. The positive side is that women have become more empowered through improved economic conditions, the provision of formal employment, and the acquisition of digital skills through the Indian government schemes, Skills India and Digital India. Skills India is a government initiative to provide youth skill development and vocational training, and Digital India is a program to transform India into a digitally empowered society. These initiatives have significantly empowered women weavers by providing them with the necessary skills and formal employment opportunities. The negative side is that women face several problems. However, the increase in the number of female textile workers has exposed them to incidents of gender-based violence, harassment, overwork, poor working conditions, and underpayment. The paper will discuss the negative and positive points of working women in the Varanasi silk saree industry and women's social and economic lives. For the study, 100 sample sizes were taken through purposive sampling, and an interview schedule was used to collect data. The paper finds that most women weavers face multiple layers of intermediate, unequal pay, and discrimination in the Varanasi saree industry. Women workers state that they were not recognized as workers and faced low wage problems and poor working and living conditions. The government's role in ensuring recognition and support for these women as workers is not just essential

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but crucial and makes policies for women workers to enhance their abilities. Which can help and contribute to our economy. India can move towards becoming a five trillion economy.

KEYWORDS

• Women weavers • Varanasi Saree Industry • Marginalized Group

INTRODUCTION

Women constitute almost fifty percent of the human population in all living societies. Nowadays, women are the most disadvantaged sections of society. They are the victims of many disabilities, discrimination, and exploitation in socio-economy and political spheres of life in almost all social structures. Indian women are no exception. However, the uniqueness of Indian society is that the basis of their subjugation and discrimination is the Hindu religious scriptures (**Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**). The Varanasi Saree industry, a significant part of India's cultural and economic landscape, is male-dominated, and women are not considered workers (**Raman, 2010**). The saree also hides within its folds the relationship between men and women. The male weaver usually weaves the Banarasi sari since it is primarily the male weaver who sits at the loom and is considered the 'head of the family.' For this reason, most studies on the artisans of Banaras focus on the male artisan (**Kumar, 1988**). According to the latest PLFS report (Periodic Labour Force Survey) 2021-22, women constitute an essential workforce in our country and contribute 32.8% to the Indian economy. The government of India has loudly announced in recent parliament sessions that it is proud to promote women in the workforce and economy (**Sansad T.V**). However, the reality is different. Half of the Indian women in our country do not get regular work. The saree industry in Varanasi also needs to provide regular work to women weavers. They face a mediator who provides work from home (**Bismillah, 1987**).

Varanasi saree is a household industry. Women workers work in their own houses, and intermediaries give jobs to the workers in their homes, where the intermediaries provide extra work to the women workers and exploit them by not paying the value of that additional work. Recognizing these women weavers as workers, not just homemakers, is crucial

to a significant shift in societal attitudes and practices. Varanasi is the hub of silk and other types of sarees. The reason for this decline is the need for more technical knowledge and the impact of the recession on women weavers. India's cultural and economic landscape is significantly influenced by the Varanasi silk saree industry, which is well-known for its excellent craftsmanship and elaborate designs. These sarees' weavers, who frequently come from multigenerational artisan families, help to preserve an age-old art tradition. However, socioeconomic, gendered, and structural inequalities provide particular difficulties for women weavers within this conventional framework. In silk weaving, women do essential but frequently unseen duties like designing, dying, and ancillary work. Notwithstanding their accomplishments, they usually face discrimination based on gender, unequal pay, restricted access to resources, and limited chances to advance their skills. Social conventions and cultural expectations further limit their recognition and participation in this male-dominated field. Market volatility, technical progress, and globalization have all contributed to today's problems. Women's job stability has been impacted by the decline in demand for hand-woven sarees due to competition from power looms and synthetic materials. Furthermore, many women weavers were forced into hazardous working circumstances as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which increased economic vulnerabilities. The socio-economic and gendered dimensions of women's involvement in the Varanasi silk saree business are intended to be contextualized in this introduction. To address these structural injustices, it will examine how intersectional factors such as gender, caste, and class influence their experiences, highlighting the necessity of recognizing these women weavers as workers and the need for inclusive policy interventions and empowerment programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Amrita Singh and Shailaja D Nayak, (2008). Discussed in their article "Status of Banaras weavers: A Profile" described Banaras and its essential product, the Banarasi sari and weavers. Today, the Banarasi silk sari has acquired international fame and is known as the "Indian Sun" in fashion. The study attempts to find out the socio-economic status of the weavers, their marketing practices, and the problems they faced due to illiteracy, financial constraints, marketing barriers, and lack of government support.

Archana Kaushik (2011). The article "Weaving Dreams, Living in Nightmares: Exploitation of Women and Children in Silk Industry of Varanasi in India" describes the lives of weavers as plagued by abject poverty, malnutrition, various health hazards, starvation, deaths, and suicides. According to the author, the investment cost is unaffordable, and the industry structure is such that mediators loot weavers.

Vasanthi Raman, (2010). In her book "The Warp and the Weft: Community and Gender Identity among Banaras Weavers." She discussed Communal violence in Varanasi during the 1990s. Where Hindus and Muslim weavers are affected by the violence. According to the author, Varanasi teaches us to live with Ganga, Jamuna Tahzeeb, a famous quote worldwide that symbolizes Varanasi's cultural harmony and coexistence. This quote, often used to describe the unique cultural fabric of Varanasi, is a testament to the city's rich history and diverse community.

Dikshha Tiwari, (2017). The study focuses on the residential conditions of weavers in Varanasi. People from this community are facing dire poverty, making it difficult for them to survive daily. With increasing competition in the sector, the availability of cheaper, power-loom alternatives has affected the demand for saris and the manufacturing process, worsening the conditions of workers.

Nasir Saboor, (2020). His article "Not a single piece sold in the last 5 months: Weavers of Varanasi," published in The Quint, mentions the state of the handloom business in Banaras during COVID-19. In his article, Saboor tells about the weavers of Pilikothi in Varanasi and that during COVID-19, most of the weavers have opened tea shops, snacks, and biscuit

shops because these shops are opened at a lower cost than handloom. The income is also better than the loom because it also stopped during COVID-19, along with the production stoppage from the handloom and power loom business in Banaras.

Singh and Ziauddin (2023) have talked about the facts related to the caste system, class, and social exclusion in the saree industry among the weavers of Banaras in their article "Weaver Society: With special reference to Varanasi District," published in Indian Sociological Review. They believe that just as there is stratification in the structure of our social system, in the same way, different types of stratification systems are seen in the structure of Banarasi saree textile industry. They also discussed three types of classes (Gaddidars, Giristas, and Laborers) in this industry. The author has mentioned the weaver caste. The author has thrown light on the structure of production and trade of the Banarasi textile industry. He has also described the means of production of the Banarasi textile industry, the feudal system, and the dominance of Girista in this industry. The author has also found the structural barriers behind the economic condition of the weavers and the reasons for their neglect and exclusion in this business.

Statement of the Problems

The community of women weavers is the weakest Section in the current 21st-century decades. The issues that women weavers face in the Varanasi silk saree business face complex problems stemming from socioeconomic disparity and being exacerbated by gender bias. Targeted solutions that guarantee equitable pay, improved working conditions, resource access, and empowerment via legislative and educational reforms are necessary to address these issues. To establish a more equal and inclusive industry, this study identifies these problems and suggests remedies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design will be used in this study to investigate the current problems and difficulties that women weavers in the Varanasi silk saree industry face. A mix of descriptive and exploratory methods will be employed to understand the socioeconomic, cultural, and gendered aspects of their experiences.

Research Objectives:

- To identify the socioeconomic obstacles that women weavers must overcome.
- To evaluate how globalization and technological improvements have affected their means of subsistence.

Sampling Method and Sample Size

Purposive sampling will be used in the study's participant selection process to guarantee that a range of perspectives from women weavers from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds are represented. The sample will comprise 100 women weavers employed in the Varanasi silk saree industry. Important informants include representatives of NGOs, cooperative leaders, and industry stakeholders.

Data Collection Methods:

- Semi-structured Interviews: Women weavers are interviewed in person or virtually to learn more about their individual experiences, difficulties, and goals.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs assist in documenting the shared experiences and collective perspectives of women in the weaving community.
- Participant Observation: Direct observation of working conditions, equipment, and procedures is possible through field trips to weaving clusters.

Data Analysis:

The qualitative data are examined through thematic analysis. Interview and focus group transcripts will be coded, grouped, and reviewed to find recurrent themes about:

- Socioeconomic difficulties and gender inequality.
- Effects of market and technology shifts.
- Gaps in policy and areas that need attention.

Relevance of the study

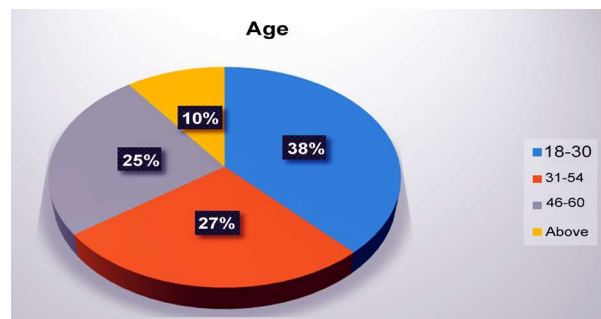
The current study concentrated on a marginalized community in Varanasi that struggles to make ends meet. They contribute in an economically invisible way due to salary discrepancies or unequal payment. The study emphasizes their contributions to this field and their advocacy for legislative changes; research may support economic empowerment,

equal opportunity, and the maintenance of Varanasi's and our nation's artistic legacy.

Women as an invisible hand in Varanasi saree industry

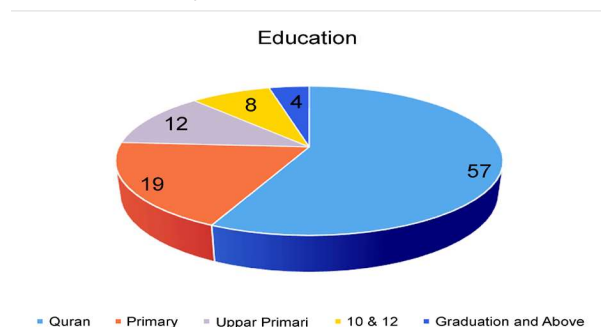
The phrase "invisible hand" describes the important but frequently overlooked and underappreciated efforts made by women in the Varanasi silk saree industry. Due to socioeconomic and cultural restrictions, women's contributions to the many stages of saree production, from weaving to finishing, should be noted. Women play a crucial role in the Varanasi silk saree business. Their efforts uphold the industry's standing internationally, yet they still need to be given official recognition or financial compensation. To achieve gender parity and guarantee the industry's long-term viability, it is imperative to emphasize their contributions and promote their empowerment.

Research Findings and Discussion:



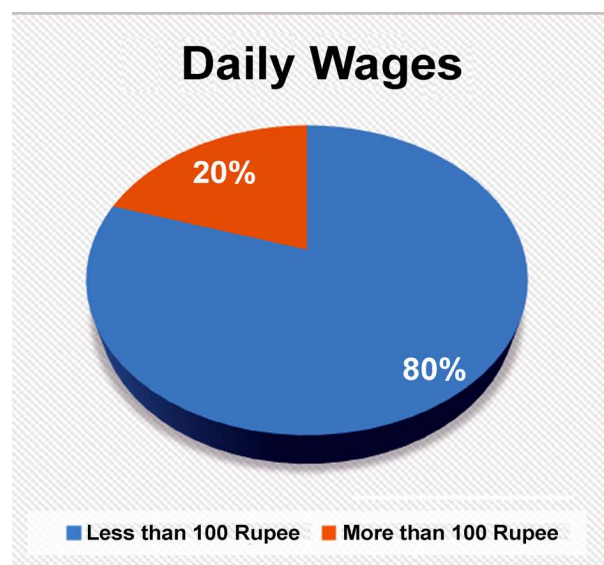
Source: Fieldwork - 2024 (Field Work)

According to Respondent age, thirty-eight percent of women are 18 to 30 years old, and twenty-seven percent and twenty-five percent lie between thirty-one and sixty. Moreover, ten percent of women are more than sixty years old. So the data is represented, every age women are working in the Varanasi weaving industry and contributing to their family. We can see the diversity of ages of women working in this industry.



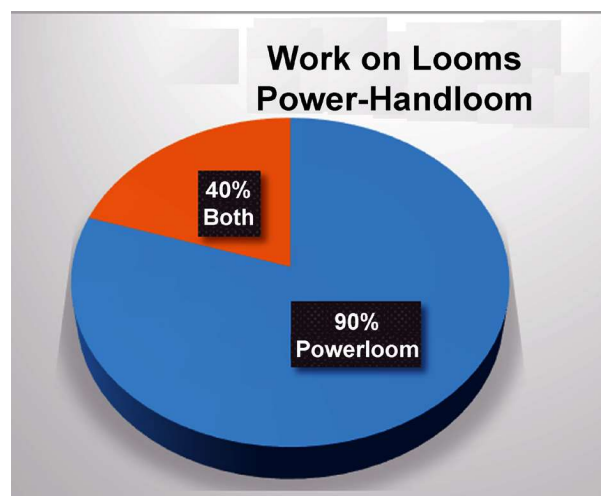
Source: Primary Data - 2024 (Field Work)

According to a field study, there is less education among women weavers; fifty-seven percent of them studied the Quran only due to their religious fundamentals. Thirty-one percent had been studied in primary and upper primary schools. Only four percent of women have completed graduation. According to the Succhar Committee report, Muslim women are backward in education compared to the ST Community. There is an urgent need for women's education in the Varanasi Weavers community.



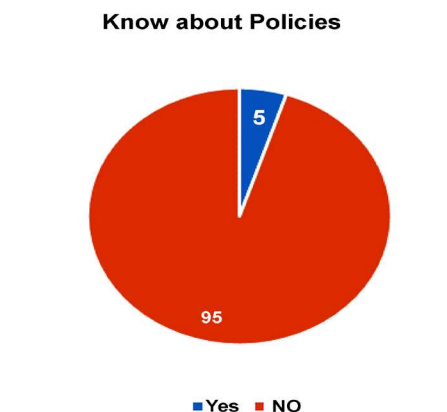
Source: Primary Data - 2024 (Field Work)

The research findings show that the socio-economic condition of women is very pathetic; 80 percent of women weavers earn less than a hundred rupees a day. When collecting data from women, I questioned them and found the reason for the lower wages for their work. Then, it was found that women weavers have been doing this work since childhood, but the condition of this work has become worrying. Earlier, this work was going very well, and they used to earn three to four hundred rupees daily, but now they cannot earn even a hundred rupees daily. The reason is that the number of mediators has increased in this work; they are doing this under compulsion because they do not know any other work apart from this. Furthermore, they are not even allowed to work outside the house; otherwise, the work they get from the mediators would have been taken directly from the owner so that they would have the proper wages.



Source: Primary Data - 2024 (Field Work)

The research found that Ninety percent of women weavers work related to power looms, and 40 percent work both power looms and handlooms. After 1991 (LPG), power loom work increased in the Varanasi saree industry, and handloom-related work in Varanasi decreased. Most of the women weavers do not know about technology and modernization. Varanasi is known for his handmade saree work, not for his Power loom saree. The handloom-made Banarasi saree is made by some unique artisans of Banaras only because to learn this art, one has to be involved in this work from childhood because it is a fine craft in which the threads have to pass through the warp and weft, and the artisan should know of this from childhood. This art is mainly known to the artisans of Banaras, who have been engaged in it since childhood, and only these few artisans have preserved it; otherwise, this art will become extinct.



Source: Primary Data - 2024 (Field Work)

When I asked about the schemes or policies being run by the government, I found out that ninety-five percent of women do not know anything about the schemes, and those who know have never been beneficiaries; They only know about them. They only go for the five KG of ration the government provides them monthly.

CONCLUSION

As I observed, the study examines Varanasi women weavers as women working as household laborers. Varanasi women weavers are the backbone of the silk industry of Varanasi. More than 95 percent of women work in the preliminary and finishing stages, but they must be given the opportunity or support to weave independently and increase their income. As a crucial player, the government should take measures to empower women weavers, including providing them access to credit, training, and resources. The Banarasi silk saree industry in Varanasi, India, is facing exploitation and decline due to globalization and neoliberal policies, leading to poverty and desperation among weavers. The Gaddidars controlled the production and marketing of silk fabrics, considerably influencing the weaving community's social, cultural, economic, and political life. Abject poverty, malnutrition, various health hazards, starvation, deaths, and suicides plague the lives of weavers. The investment cost is unaffordable for the weavers, and the industry structure is such that mediators loot women weavers. However, with the proper government intervention, there is hope for change. The government should interfere in this matter, provide fair wages, and protect artisans and their art.

SUGGESTION

A comprehensive strategy is required for the women weavers in the Varanasi silk saree business to be meaningfully uplifted.

- **Economic Independence and Fair Wages:**

Policies for Fair Wages: Enforce minimum wage laws and guarantee women weavers receive equal compensation by conducting routine compliance audits and monitoring.

Direct Payment Systems: The government should provide online payment systems that cut out intermediaries and enable women to get paid directly.

Financial Inclusion: Make it easier for women weavers to obtain grants, low-interest loans, and microfinance to launch their businesses or cooperatives.

- **Programs for Enhancing Skills:**

Set Up government-sponsored training courses emphasizing cutting-edge weaving methods, creative design, and digital proficiency to improve employability.

Entrepreneurship Training: To assist women in starting their businesses and using direct marketing, offer them business and entrepreneurial training.

Mentoring and Networking: Establish mentorship programs that link seasoned craftspeople with female weavers, encouraging support and information sharing.

- **Market and value chain accessibility:**

Marketing Support: Provide physical and virtual venues for women weavers to exhibit and sell their wares directly to customers, cutting out mediators.

Branding and Certification: Create a system of certification for genuine women-made handloom goods to increase their market worth and customer confidence.

Export Assistance: Facilitate women's access to export markets by streamlining rules and offering financial and logistical assistance.

- **Welfare and Social Security Measures:**

Health and Safety: Enhance working conditions by making healthcare services accessible and enforcing occupational health and safety regulations.

Social Security Programs: Make sure that social security programs cover women weavers, including insurance plans, maternity benefits, and pensions.

Support for Childcare: Establish childcare facilities in the community so that women can concentrate on their careers without sacrificing their family obligations.

- **Law Reforms and Gender-Sensitive Policies:**

Cooperative Membership: Promote and require women to be included in leadership positions and cooperative societies.

Legal Support: To assist women in understanding their rights and obtaining justice in situations of discrimination or

exploitation, offer legal aid and awareness campaigns.

Awareness Campaigns: To combat patriarchal practices and advance gender equity in the community, implement gender-sensitization initiatives.

- **Policy Structures and Institutional Assistance:**

Specific Government Programs: Introduce programs designed especially for women weavers, emphasizing market access, financial assistance, and skill development.

Encourage government, non-governmental organizations, and the business sector to work together to establish public-private partnerships (PPPs) that will assist women weavers.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Establish specialized organizations to keep an eye on the results of government programs and guarantee responsibility.

- **Social Empowerment and Community Development:**

Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Encourage the creation of women-led SHGs to strengthen mutual support and collective bargaining power.

Community-Based Initiatives: Implement neighborhood-based programs emphasizing economic development, health, and education.

Education and Literacy: Provide adult literacy programs to improve women's access to opportunities and information.

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