



Health Issues of Women Handloom Weavers in Manipur

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India's Northeast region, comprising of eight states, is one of the dominant players in the production of handloom products in the country. The state of Manipur is not an exception. It is known for its extensive woven handloom products, which have been an essential determinant in fostering the expansion of the state's growth and development. The handloom industry, next to agriculture, is a vital sector in the state economy and it serves as an important source of livelihood. It also offers job possibilities to a large segment of the local population and also contributes to the maintenance of a stable socioeconomic live for many. The industry has the potential to export varieties of traditional handloom products outside the state, which will help boost the economy. Traditionally, in Manipur, women both young and adults have had significant participation in this industry. The women weavers have distinctive skills and qualities passed on from their ancestors. Most of them belong to rural areas with low socioeconomic status. Limited income has greatly barred them from accessing to quality healthcare facilities. Additionally, poor socioeconomic conditions have compelled them to work in challenging environments such as long hours of work and a lack of proper lighting, which can contribute to adverse health outcomes. The present study aims to identify the health issues faced by women weavers and to examine their impact on income levels. A total of 100 respondents, comprising 50 independent weavers and 50 dependent weavers from Imphal East district, were randomly selected through personal interview using well- structured questionnaire. Back pain, eye problems, joint and knee pain, and insomnia were the most prevalent. The study also found that dependent weavers have no impact on income compared to independent weavers. Access to proper health care, implementing government policies and timely health checkup are required to enhance the well-being and economic status of women weavers. Addressing the health issues faced by the weavers in Manipur is a matter of individual well-being and a strategic step toward strengthening the handloom sector.

Keywords: handloom industry, manipur, women weavers, health issues, income

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1. Introduction

Handloom constitutes a significant component of India's cottage industry and serves as a foundation of cultural legacy of the Northeastern region. The handloom apparatus is a weaving instrument operated either manually or with limited mechanical assistance, and is employed in the traditional manufacture of textiles (Bori, G. et.al. 2021).

Handloom refers to the method of weaving fabrics using wooden frames, operated manually by skilled artisans without the use of modern machinery or scientific intervention, relying on both their hands and legs. Sarkar (2016) defined a handloom as a loom other than a power loom encompassing hybrid looms wherein at least one part of the weaving process involves manual effort. To work in a healthy environment, basic infrastructure such as lighting, ventilation, flooring, roofing, sanitation, water, and a comfortable workplace are required. However, the study (Jeeva. P. 2022) discovered that weavers work in poor work environments, which can lead to a number of health issues. Weavers in our country lack access to high-quality raw materials, modern equipment, and tools that enable them to weave in a more scientific manner. They also don't receive sufficient infrastructure support from the government. Additionally, government schemes and programmes have not yet been implemented effectively (Banik et al., 2023). However, until now, weavers have carried a legacy of working in challenging environments to maintain the continuity of the traditional weaving method and to keep the handloom industry sustainable for the future.

The Department of Tourism, Government of Manipur, acknowledges that the traditional method of weaving in the state was believed to be started for the first time when the Goddess Chitnu Tamitnu discovered cotton, spun it into yarn, prepared the threads for weaving, assembled the required tools, and built the Sinnaishang workshed. To add to it, the deity Panthoibe, associated with civilisation, bravery, fertility, crafts, love, triumph, well-being, and knowledge, observed a spider spinning delicate threads to form a web, inspiring the origins of weaving [1]. As a result, she became inspired by weaving and introduced it to the state as a means of life for many people, particularly women. The handloom industry is Manipur's oldest and largest cottage industry, providing a livelihood for many people, especially in rural areas, where women are sole weavers who participate in this job.

Apart from the agricultural sector, the handloom industry is the second-largest industry, providing substantial employment to people of all ages and contributing to the state's economic growth. Women weavers in the state help maintain the oldest traditional and indigenous handloom designs, such as phanek, moirangphee, raniphee, innaphee, silk saree, khudei, feijom, etc. Most weavers famous for their skill and intricate design, including delicate silk items, are from localities like Wangkhei, Bamon Kampu, Kongba, Khongman, Utlou, etc.,. Not only these particular places but also some villages in the state produce different kinds of handloom products with distinctive designs using different fabrics. Manipur is a place where people of different religions live together in harmony, both in the valley and the hilly regions. Hindus, Meiteis, and Muslims live in the valley regions, while various tribal communities inhabit in the surrounding hills. The tribal communities have their own distinctive and beautiful traditional clothes woven with great care and skill. The unique patterns, colours and designs reflect their identity, culture and beliefs, which exhibit their rich cultural heritage all over the world. It is believed that tribal shawls with creative design and motifs are from the five hill districts of Manipur. Nowadays, the state's handloom products enjoy substantial demand across national and international markets, which have helped to boost the state's economy and move the handloom sector toward sustainability. As per the report of the Fourth All India Handloom Census 2019-2020, Manipur ranked the second largest state in producing varieties of fabrics for handloom products including shawls, Mekhla Chadder, Loi, stole, scarf, muffler, Angavastram, dhoti, sarong, lungi. Dress material (Salwar, kameez, etc.), suiting, shirting, long cloth in the entire Northeastern state.

Women Health

A healthy person promotes holistic growth for both the individual and society since they are conscious of enhancing the quality of their lives. It may be argued that a sick individual is considered an inactive resource who cannot significantly advance the nation and acts as a barrier to its progress. While we all know that healthy people can contribute to the country's advancement, people in good health are seen as productive and can work more effectively and efficiently for longer periods than those in poor health.

In today's society, women make significant contributions to increasing productivity, strengthening the development of rural area, and enhancing the nation's growth. The report of the Fourth All India Handloom Census recorded that 77.3 per cent of the work force in handloom sector are women workers, both from rural and urban areas. The involvement of women in the handloom industry improves their standard of living and the country's overall development. Most workers are rural residents who make their living via farming. In addition to working in agriculture, they also take care of their families and handle household chores – their health matters since they work day and night for a living. Women's health is considered a crucial factor for the welfare of their families and communities, and it raises handloom productivity as long as they remain healthy. A person in good health can perform their duties effectively and prevent health issues that could hinder them from working. Unhealthy workers trigger an overall loss of output, which drives down export activities and impedes national progress. Today, women are facing numerous health issues that are linked to their lifestyles and their work environment. Weaving is a time-consuming and labour-intensive work that involves great skill and patience (Banic et al,2023). Despite their role in sustaining the handloom industry, they encounter multiple health challenges that affect their well-being. For instance, weaving requires prolonged sitting, leg and hand movement, bending down for long hours to do the handwork, and exposure to chemicals for dyes, which results in occupational health hazards such as vision problems, knee and back pain, and mental stress. Women workers also experience depression, anxiety, and illnesses caused by stress due to the nature of their work and other factors, including financial stress and high demand for the products to be delivered or completed within the consumer's deadline. Weavers also often experience psychological stress such as boredom, feeling depressed, feeling uneasy and frustration as a result of weaving (Jeeva. P. 2022). Hence, women's health is a significant concern nowadays, and it needs to be taken seriously, as they are the pillars of their families and substantially influence the development process.

Good health is an indispensable factor influencing a person's overall well-being and a country's growth. An unhealthy individual brings hindrance to both personal and the country's wealth.

Sometimes, health issues and financial constraints can eventually affect a person's ability to work, which lowers productivity levels and limits the industry's expansion. Consequently, it will also reduce the personal income level of those who solely depend on this industry for their living, and hence affect the overall socio-economic development.

2. Review Literature

Sarkar (2016) analysed the health issues faced by the cooperative and independent handloom weavers of Pontex (Puducherry). Among the respondents, males were the highest, and most of the respondents came from a low socio-economic background, with a minimum monthly income of Rs 3000-5000. Since 100% of sample weavers were working for 11-12 hours a day in harmful positions on traditional looms and instruments, they have faced various health problems, such as musculoskeletal problems, including back pain and knee and joint pain. The study also revealed that financial issues greatly influence their health problems. The study suggested measures to overcome the challenges handloom weavers face through the involvement of industry bodies and government machinery to pass specific legislation to work in a clean, safe and hygienic environment to improve health.

Singh and Singh (2019) studied a handloom weaver's health hazards and their new livelihood prospects in Bishnupur district, Manipur. The study revealed that musculoskeletal disorders, low back pain, and MMADS are major health problems among handloom weavers due to long hours and strenuous activities. Since most weavers are unaware of central and state government schemes, the study recommends that the government take necessary action to improve the livelihoods and enhance the incomes of weavers.

Dr.Veena R. Humbe et al (2024) conducted a study on "Weaving Wellness: Exploring Health Challenges of Women Working in Indian Handloom Industries" in Maharashtra, which focuses on the profile of women workers and their opinions regarding health problems faced by them while working in handloom industries and provides insights into reducing their health issues. The study found that women workers have to face various health issues such as Back Pain, Leg Pain, headaches, respiratory problems, high Blood Pressure, etc.

Inadequate workspace design and equipment contribute to awkward postures and increased stress on the body, leading to musculoskeletal issues.

Hattiholi et al. (2024) reveal that understanding the health hazards handloom weavers suffer is essential for ensuring the well-being and sustainability of the oldest profession, which gave livelihood prospects. The study also suggests some solutions to overcome the health problems faced by weavers.

Rajesh A et al. (2024) conducted a study in Kerala to understand the socio-economic profile of working weavers and the challenges they encounter in their occupation. The study emphasised the need to overcome the difficulties faced by women in the handloom industry. It highlights major problems, such as long working hours, low pay, and a lack of awareness about government support programs, among weavers. The study has suggested that self-help groups and collaborative efforts of stakeholders could play a crucial role in empowering women and enhancing their economic security.

3. Objectives

1. To study the socio-economic condition of the women weavers in Manipur.
2. To identify the health issues faced by these women weavers.
3. To examine the impact of health issues on their income.

4. Methodology

The present study was carried out in the Imphal East district. For a better understanding of the weaver’s socio-economic condition, health problems and their impact on income, 100 women handloom weavers (both independent weavers as well as dependent weavers working under an entrepreneur) were surveyed using a random sampling technique and a well-structured questionnaire. To select the respondents, a purposive sampling technique was used. Secondary data were also collected from government reports, articles, journals, and websites. The study employed descriptive analysis methods, including percentages and graphs, to represent the data. These methods were used to illustrate the socio-demographic status and health issues experienced by the respondents, as well as the impact of these health issues on the respondents’ income levels.

5. Results

Society sees and appreciates only the beauty of various textiles, patterns, handicrafts, and unique colours of woven clothing, however, the hardships and suffering that the weavers endure while working in this field and its direct impact on their physical and mental well-being, goes unnoticed. 100 women weavers were surveyed to identify the health issues they have encountered while working in this industry and to examine their impact on their income level.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic profile	No. of respondents
Age	
18-28	47
29-39	32
40-50	14
50 above	07
Marital status	
Single	42
Married	53
Widowed	05
Educational level	
Below primary	11
Primary	45
Higher Secondary	27
Graduate and above	17
Income level	
Less than 10,000	30
10001-20001	20
20001-40000	17
40000 above	33

Source: Primary data

The demographic profile gathered from the respondents during the survey to determine their socioeconomic circumstances is presented in the above table. It reveals that the majority of weavers are between the ages of 18 and 28, with the smallest number of weavers, i.e. 7, being 50 years of age. It is evident that just five weavers are widowed, whereas fifty-three are married and forty-two are unmarried (single). The surprising fact is that, while only 11 weavers have completed their education beyond elementary school, the majority of them, 45 weavers, have finished their primary education. Income is the amount of money received by an individual for their labour, upon which they depend for their livelihood.

The level of socioeconomic status may also be determined through income. The majority of weavers, or 30 weavers, earn between 10,000 and 40,000, while 20 weavers earn above 40,000. However, 17 weavers make between 200,000 and 400,000, and 33 weavers earn over 40,000. It can be stated that the majority of weavers do not have a high socioeconomic position, as is evident from their salary range.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents based on health problems

Sl.no	Health problems	No. of respondent	Percentage
1	Back pain	26	22.5%
2	Neck pain	06	2.5%
3	Eye problem	15	18.75%
4	Chest pain	07	8.75%
5	Joint and knee pain	12	15%
6	Headache	05	6.25%
7	Anxiety	05	6.25%
8	Stress	02	2.5%
9	Insomnia	08	10%
10	Blood pressure	06	7.5%
TOTAL		100	100%

Source: Primary data

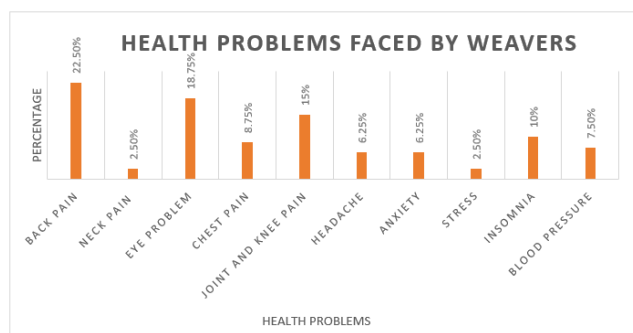


Figure1: Health Problems

Table No.2 and Figure No.1 indicate the various health-related problems of women handloom weavers in Manipur. 18 respondents i.e. 22.5% women having back pain, 02 i.e. 2.5% women having neck pain, 15 i.e. 18.75% women having eye problem, 07 i.e. 8.75% women having chest pain, 12 i.e. 15%, women having joint and knee pain, 05 i.e. 6.25% women facing headache, 05 i.e. 6.25% women having anxiety problem, 02 i.e. 2.5% women having problem of stress, 08 i.e. 10% women having insomnia and 06 i.e., 7.5% women having problem of blood pressure these are the health issues at their workplace. The maximum number of respondents have back pain and eye problems,

since most of the respondents reported they weaved for many hours, bending down, creating very fine and delicate designs and to complete in time. While, the minimum number of respondents have issues of stress and neck pain related to their health problems after working as weavers.

People's socioeconomic status is mostly determined by their income. The majority of weavers rely on their handloom earnings, and because they spend so much time sitting down to weave, they don't have time for other jobs. However, their health issues have a direct impact on their income. In contrast to independent weavers and dependent weavers employed under an entrepreneur, the income of independent weavers is significantly impacted by their illness and they must stay idle until they recover, whereas the income of weavers employed by entrepreneur is unaffected because they receive the same monthly allowance regardless of whether they are ill or not, according to the weavers surveyed.

Table 3: Impact on income

Category	Impact on income	No impact on income	Total
Independent weavers	31 (62)	19 (38)	50 (100)
Dependent Weavers	0 (0)	50 (100)	50 (100)

Source: Primary data

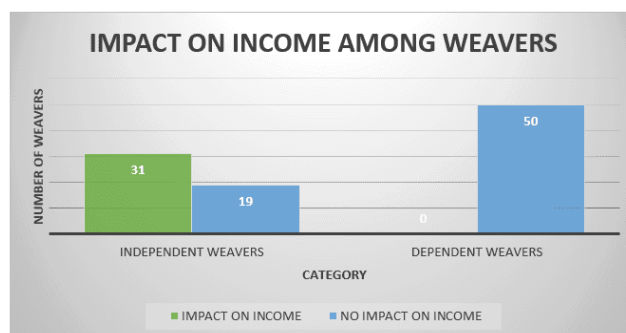


Figure 2: Impact on Income among Weavers

The table and figure above illustrate the impact of weavers' health problems on their income. A study of 100 respondents was used to examine the impact of health problems on their income levels. A maximum of 31 respondents i.e. 62%, independent weavers find their income level reduced due to work related health problems as they are unable to continue weaving as usual. But in the case of weavers working under entrepreneurs all of them find their income having no effect due to health related problems since the master has not deducted any amount from their salary while they are ill.

However, 19 (38%) independent weavers reported that their health problems have no impact on their income, as they work forcefully to complete their work. According to the above table, it reveals that the work-related health problems have a significant impact on the income of independent weavers as compared to dependent weavers.

6. Discussion

This study examines the occupational health risks faced by handloom weavers and its impact on their income level. Like all professions, handloom weaving entails specific hazards, particularly due to the extended hours of manual labour involved in the weaving process. These prolonged working hours contribute to various health issues for the workers, emphasizing the need for focused attention on their well-being.

Good health is an indispensable factor influencing a person's overall well-being and a country's growth. An unhealthy individual brings hindrance to both personal and the country's wealth. The handloom industry plays a crucial role in generating employment and empowering women, as 72% of women are engaged in this sector. The most crucial factor in maintaining and ensuring the continuity of this industry is the health of the workers. As long as they remain healthy and fit, there will be a significant increase in productivity, thereby boosting the country's economy and also empowering them. The purpose of the study was to discuss on health issues of women handloom weavers in Manipur. From the collected data and information, women weavers are facing different types of health issues such as back pain, neck pain, eye problems, chest pain, joint and knee pain, headache, anxiety, stress, insomnia and high blood pressure. Singh et al. (2019) revealed in their study that musculoskeletal disorders (MMSDS), primarily low back pain, are the major health problems prevalent among handloom workers due to long hours of work and strenuous activity. Most handloom weavers have weak eyesight. Weavers sometimes discontinue weaving at a young age due to bad vision caused by intricate designs in poorly light settings. (O'Brien, J. R. 2022). The study here shows that most of the women respondents are having issues of back pain, joint and knee problems, and eye problems. Some of the women workers are also having mental health issues such as stress, insomnia and anxiety.

The reason behind their health problems lies in the long hours of sitting, kneeling, repetitive movements, awkward postures, working in poorly designed workspaces and lack of modern equipments. The study reveals that most of the respondents are working for long hours, which can lead to stress, exhaustion, and poor health. The independent weavers are significantly impacted in their income level due to health problems when compared to weavers under entrepreneur.

7. Conclusion

Women weavers are integral to the preservation and continuity of traditional handloom weaving in Manipur, yet they encounter a multifaceted set of obstacles that constrain their advancement. These challenges encompass persistent economic hardship, entrenched social inequities, and a decline in physical health, collectively impeding their professional progression. Empirical research and statistical evidence underscore a direct association between prolonged working hours and adverse health outcomes among these artisans, while higher levels of formal education and secure employment have been shown to positively correlate with enhanced income potential. Nevertheless, despite these clear benefits, a significant proportion of women weavers remain encumbered by the demands of domestic labour, receive insufficient acknowledgment for their contributions to the sector, and continue to depend extensively on male family members for critical financial decision-making and autonomy.

Protecting the health and welfare of women is essential for the sustainable development of the handloom industry and poverty reduction. Access to healthcare, secure working conditions, social support networks, and health education and skill development are all essential components of any comprehensive health improvement initiative that the government must undertake immediately. Manipur's economy and culture are heavily reliant on the handloom sector. This sector's expansion and advancement are essential to the state's overall progress. The handloom sector also offers several opportunities, including employment, financial stability, and empowerment. Despite all the opportunities and benefits, workers also encounter challenges. Most of the women weavers have back pain, eye problems, and respiratory health problems.

Back pain, knee and joint pain, and eye problems are the major health issues experienced by weavers due to long hours of work in an awkward position and continuous movement of their hands and legs. To guarantee safe working conditions for these women weavers, the government should take the initiative to implement and provide infrastructural support to enhance their working conditions. These should include standards for workplace ergonomics, ventilation, hygiene, and the use of personal protective equipments. Additionally, the government should establish healthcare programs and facilities that are easily accessible to women weavers, particularly those working in rural and remote areas, to enhance their health.

The State Government also need to create marketing opportunities and establish connections to expand the handloom sector globally and provide the State's weavers with more advantages to showcase the beauty and creativity of their work. Additionally, efforts should be made to apply contemporary facilities and technologies to boost their productivity and efficiency. The study also suggests that the government, policymakers, and stakeholders should take the initiative to meet the needs of women weavers in the handloom industry, improve their overall well-being, and ensure the country's sustainable economic development.

The sustainability of traditional weaving practices, as well as the maintenance of livelihood opportunities that drive income generation and foster economic advancement in the Indian economy, is inextricably linked to the health status of weaving artisans. Thus, prioritising comprehensive health measures for weavers is indispensable for safeguarding the sector's sustainability and ensuring its ongoing contribution to socio-economic development.

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