

WEAVING WELLNESS : EXPLORING HEALTH CHALLENGES OF WOMEN WORKING IN INDIAN HANDLOOM INDUSTRIES

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Abstract

Maharashtra is known for its rich and exquisite traditional handloom textiles. Hand woven products such as Sarees, Brocades, Dress Material, Bed Sheets, Khanas, Dhotis, Lungies, Scarves, Ghongadi, Pitambari are some of the famous handloom products manufactured in Maharashtra State. Hand woven textiles like Paithani brocades that have existed for more than 2000 years in original patterns, and woven with the same techniques even today, are prized heirlooms and possessions for many. Handlooms and handicrafts have played a crucial role in the state economy in providing employment and income to maximum illiterate rural masses. The women working in this sector are uneducated and live below poverty line. Their socio-economic condition is very poor and work very hard for the survival for their daily needs. The problems of working women according to their designation / position differ from women to women. It has been proved by studies that women are equally capable and successful as men. They are more focused, committed and successful even when they are under-represented most of the time. Employing women not only helps to double the gains and increase the productivity but also makes the workplace better. The current study focuses on profile of women workers and their opinion regarding health problems faced by them while working in handloom industries and provides insights to reduce their health issues.

Keywords: Handloom, Empowerment, Paithani, Brocades

Introduction

Maharashtra is known for its rich and exquisite traditional handloom textiles. Hand woven products such as Sarees, Brocades, Dress Material, Bed Sheets, Khanas, Dhotis, Lungies, Scarves, Ghongadi, Pitambari are some of the famous handloom products manufactured in Maharashtra State.

Hand woven textiles like Paithani brocades that have existed for more than 2000 years in original patterns, and woven with the same techniques even today, are prized heirlooms and possessions for many. New techniques and products were introduced by different dynasties, which ruled the state from time to time. These have left an indelible impression on the history of hand woven textiles and handcrafted arts of Maharashtra. Handlooms and handicrafts have played a crucial role in the state economy in providing employment and income to maximum illiterate rural masses. Handloom Paithani Saree of Maharashtra is world famous which is produced at Paithan near Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (Aurangabad) and at Yeola near Nashik where maximum number of women workers are working in these handloom industries.

Now a days, women empowerment plays major role. At the same time women face lot of problems in their day to day life and this is because of their dual roles. In handloom industries, large number of women workers are engaged in some or the other work. As handloom industry comes under un-organized sector, it is male dominated. Women workers of handloom industries face lot of problems and difficulties in their work.

Weaving of handloom products is considered to be one of the important activity next to agriculture. Women handloom workers are India's pride and play major role in retaining the old Indian art of weaving, culture and heritage. The women working in handloom industries produce high quality handloom products which are sold at higher rates, but they are paid very less and live below poverty line, their socio-economic condition is very poor and work very hard for the survival for their daily needs.

It has been proved by studies that women are equally capable and successful as men. They are more focused, committed and successful even when they are under-represented most of the time. Employing women not only helps to double the gains and increase the productivity but also makes the workplace better. As women weavers working in handloom industries are found to be hardworking, special consideration and provisions for their health should become the prime consideration.

Review of Literature

Women workers in handloom industries often face numerous health challenges due to the nature of their work environment and the specific demands of their occupation. Some of the literature reviewed for the study purpose is as follows :

Kotaiah. P (1987) in his study on "Problems regarding the handloom industry" suggested several measures for weavers security purpose, like insurance, provident fund, and group insurance. The author suggested the government, to construct

hospitals for the weavers and also provide tax free on inputs of handloom industry. Safayet Jamil et.el. (2022) in their article “Prevalence and Factors Associated with Musculoskeletal Pain among Rural Handloom Weavers in Sirajganj, Bangladesh” mentioned that there has a high prevalence rate of musculoskeletal pain among handloom weavers. Lower back pain (LBP), shoulder pain, and arm pain are mostly seen among them. There have some significant associated factors with musculoskeletal pain. Associated factors are age, number of working days, and treatment types that are taken by handloom weavers. Moreover, the main cause of this problem is illiterate and not taking physical exercise. So, handloom weavers may take physical exercise regularly. As they are mostly illiterate, the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must organize different kinds of seminars and workshops to increase the consciousness of musculoskeletal disorders. Humbe Veena R. (2023) in her research paper “Survival of Handloom Workers : Causes and Remedies” mentions that “Out of the 344 Geographical Indication tags held by India, 202 are of the handloom and handicraft products. However, the handloom industry’s current status in India is disturbing in the socio-economic conditions of the workers. The present study highlights on the socio-economic conditions and the remedies for the survival of handloom workers of Maharashtra State”. In her study she found that as the income level of these handloom workers is less they have to work hard for their leaving. Ratri Parida (2019), Indian Institute of Management, Sambalpur. Vol. 54, Issue No. 40 found that some of the health hazards associated with women workers include weakened eyesight, early cataract, loss of vision, high or low blood pressure, heart problems, lung damage, filaria, arthritis, etc. It has been found that major factors behind health hazards of handloom workers are prolonged nature of work, harmful raw materials, poor ventilation, and less workspaces.

Health of Women Workers

Health is an important and major aspect of every human being. The woman's health is also important for her family, working place and nation. If the woman is healthy and literate, she develops her family, society and nation. But, with limited access to education or employment, high illiteracy rates and increasing poverty levels are making health improvements for women exceedingly difficult. Women working in handloom industries often perform tasks that involve prolonged periods of sitting or standing in fixed positions, repetitive motions, and heavy lifting. These activities put significant strain on the back muscles and spine, increasing the risk of developing back pain and related musculoskeletal disorders. The women workers are often engaged in tasks that require prolonged periods of standing, squatting, or kneeling,

putting excessive strain on their knees and joints. This repetitive stress leads to the development of knee and joint pain, impacting their health. Another important aspect is related to eyes and vision. These workers often perform intricate tasks that require prolonged periods of focus on small details, such as threading needles, weaving patterns, and inspecting fabric. This can lead to eye strain, fatigue, and discomfort, especially in poorly lit or poorly ventilated work environments. Women's health is closely linked to economic empowerment. Healthy women are better able to participate in the workforce, contribute to economic growth, and lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Investments in women's health lead to higher productivity, greater earning potential, and increased economic stability at both individual and societal levels. Prioritizing women's health is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in sustainable development, gender equality, and social justice.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the problems faced by womens working in handloom industries and to identify the opportunities available for them.
- To make the suggestions and recommendations for taking precautionary steps to improve health of women handloom workers.

Hypothesis :

Null Hypothesis (H0) : The working environment of handloom industries does not pose any significant health challenges for women workers. Alternative Hypothesis (H1) : The working environment of handloom industries poses significant health challenges for women workers.

Research Methodology

Overall sample of 750 women workers working in handloom industries were selected randomly for the study purpose and their responses were taken with the help of questionnaire. The main socio demographic variable i.e. Age has been considered as it is directly related to the health issues of women workers working in handloom industries. The number of respondents within each age group is significant as a guide to the volume of women’s working in handloom industries. The responses to questions in the given variables were scaled using the “five-point-scale” or Likert scale system and given weight with 5. Strongly Agree (SA) and close with 1. Strongly Disagree (SD).

Data Analysis

The following table depicts the age groups of the sample female respondents.

Table No. 1
Age Group of Selected Women Workers

Age Group	No. of Respondents	Percentage
21 – 30 Years	151	20.13%
31 – 40 Years	380	50.67%
41 – 50 Years	155	20.67%
Above 50 Years	64	08.53%
Total	750	100%

Source : Compiled from Questionnaire

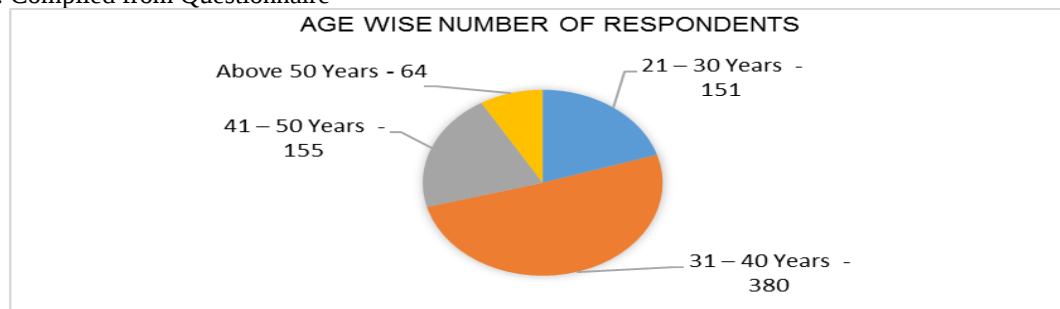


Table No. 1 depicts that among 750 respondents, maximum 380 (50.67%) respondents are in the age group of 31 to 40 years, whereas 64 (08.53%) respondents are of the age more than 50 years. Maximum respondents from the age group of 31-40 years were selected intentionally as their opinions would make understand their health problems while working in the handloom industry.

Health is an important and major aspect of every human being. The woman's health is also important for her family, working place and nation. If the women is healthy and literate, she develops her family, society and nation. But, with limited access to education or employment, high illiteracy rates and increasing poverty levels are making health improvements for women exceedingly difficult.

Table No. 2 highlights on the various problems related to the health of women workers in handloom industries.

Table No. 2

Summarised Analysis of Health Issues at Workplace

Sr.No	Health Issues	Very High	High	No Pain	Low	Very Low
1.	Back Pain	159	120	00	39	24
2.	Knee & Joint Pain	36	23	01	08	03
3.	Leg Pain	39	17	00	16	04
4.	Chest Pain	12	05	00	01	05
5.	Eye Problems	09	06	02	04	07
6.	Respiratory Diseases	12	04	00	00	08
7.	Headache	22	12	04	17	13
8.	Chronic Diseases / Asthama	08	02	03	04	08
9.	Sugar	14	08	00	05	03
10.	Blood Pressure	32	07	00	16	08
	Total	343	204	10	110	83

It can be clearly seen from the table that from 750 women worker respondents working in handloom industries of Maharashtra State, maximum 343 and 204 i.e. about 73 % have very high and high health issues at their workplace. Minimum only 83 i.e. 11% of respondents have less problems related to

their health.

Graph Showing the Opinion of Women Workers Towards the Health Problems Faced at Workplace

Women handloom workers are unaware of their personal well-being and health needs due to their socio-economic conditions.

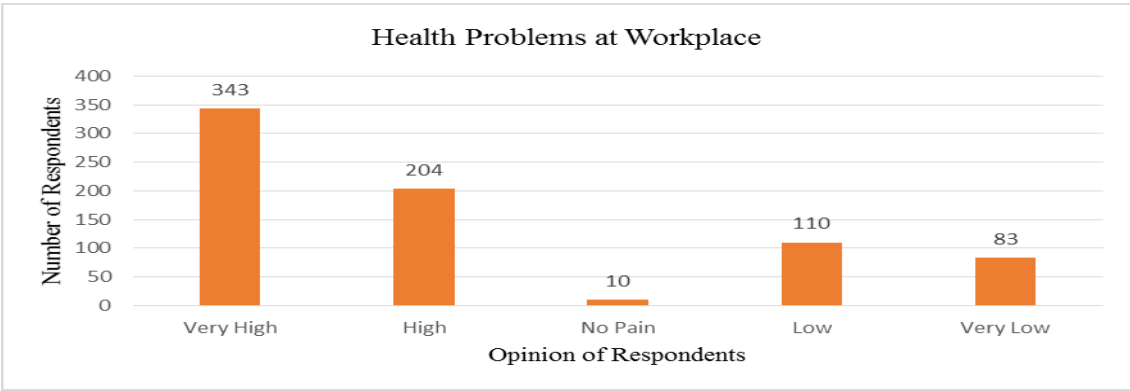


Table No. 3 shows the health problems faced by women workers with their respective Age

Table No. 3

Health Issues at Workplace and Age of the Respondents

Sr. No	Health Issues	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	None (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Weighted Mean
	Age							
1.	21 – 30 Years	62 (08.27)	41 (05.46)	04 (00.53)	33 (04.40)	11 (01.47)	151 (20.13)	3.73
2.	31 – 40 Years	174 (23.20)	89 (11.67)	04 (00.53)	55 (07.33)	58 (07.74)	380 (50.67)	3.70
3.	41 – 50 Years	73 (09.73)	54 (07.20)	02 (00.27)	16 (02.13)	10 (01.33)	155 (20.67)	4.06
4.	Above 50 Years	34 (04.53)	20 (02.67)	00 (00.00)	06 (00.80)	04 (00.53)	64 (08.53)	4.16
Total		343 (45.73)	204 (27.20)	10 (01.33)	110 (14.67)	83 (11.07)	750 (100)	

Note : Figures in Parenthesis represent percentage to the total figure.

The above table shows that maximum 174 (23.20%) respondents from the Age group of 31-40 years ‘Strongly Agree’ that they face health problems due to their work. They opined that they had severe Headache when worked for number of hours continuously. Even they complained about the Back Pain.

Minimum 4 (00.53%) respondents from Age group of above 50 years, strongly disagreed and said that they had no health problem. It is also observed that maximum women’s of the age group of Above 31-40 years face health problems related to headache and back pain due to continuous work on handlooms. **The calculated weighted mean values of the woman workers from various age groups indicate that they are facing various health problems at their workplace. Hence the Alternative Hypothesis (H1) : “The working environment of handloom industries poses significant health challenges for women worker” is Accepted..**

Findings

- It is important to note that the women workers have to face various health issues such as Back Pain, Leg Pain, Headache, Blood Pressure etc.
- Due to prolonged time of standing or kneeling, the excessive strain on knees and joints leads to the pain in knee and joints.
- Inadequate workspace design and equipment contributes to awkward postures and increased stress on the body, leading to musculoskeletal issues.

- Working for long working hours contribute to stress, fatigue, and overall poor health.

Recommendations

- Sitting arrangement while working should be designed in such a way that it should promote proper posture and reduce strain on the body. Comfortable and adjustable chairs, footrests and other equipments should be provided to minimize musculoskeletal disorders.
- Adequate ventilation systems and dust control measures should be installed to minimize exposure to airborne particles and fibers, reducing the risk of respiratory illnesses.
- Clean and hygienic work environments should be provided, including restrooms and washrooms, to prevent the spread of infections and promote overall well-being.
- Periodic health screenings and check-ups should be arranged to monitor workers' health status and detect any early signs of illness or injury.
- As the work is delicate on looms, there is a strain on their eyes, so monthly checkups for their eyes should be made mandatory. Also free calcium and iron medicine should be distributed among women workers as low deficiency is found in maximum women workers.

Conclusions

Ensuring the health and well-being of women workers in handloom industries is not only a matter of social justice but also crucial for sustainable development, poverty alleviation, and gender equality. Efforts to improve their health must encompass comprehensive measures including access to healthcare, safe working conditions, social support systems, and opportunities for education and skill development.

Efforts to prevent and manage back pain should be integrated into occupational health and safety initiatives, with a focus on empowerment, education, and access to resources and support services.

Eye health among women workers in handloom industries is essential for promoting their safety, productivity, and well-being. Efforts to prevent eye strain, protect against occupational hazards, provide access to eye care services, and promote vision safety should be integrated into occupational health and safety initiatives, with a focus on empowerment, education, and advocacy.

Government should take initiatives in implementing and enforcing strict regulations to ensure safe working conditions for women workers such as setting standards for workplace ergonomics, ventilation, hygiene, and the use of personal protective equipment, also it should establish healthcare programs and facilities that are easily accessible to women workers, especially those in rural and remote areas.

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