



Assessment of Women's Contribution to the Handloom Industry in Bangladesh: A Case Study of Sirajganj District

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ABSTRACT

The traditional technique of Handloom weaving, an ancient approach to textile production, possesses a profound historical heritage and has undergone notable evolutions throughout its existence. Initially utilized as a method of offering safeguard, the practice of weaving has transformed and now holds significant importance in the realms of fashion and performance. Sirajganj is recognized as a prominent center for the handloom industry, with women playing a significant and influential role in this sector. This paper explores the handloom industry's historical, cultural, and socioeconomic importance in Sirajganj District, Bangladesh. It emphasizes the roles, issues, and potential solutions for women's involvement in this industry. This study utilizes a combination of secondary data and primary field surveys to scrutinize the demographic characteristics, working hours, income, and level of empowerment among female weavers. Despite several obstacles, such as limited financial resources, potential health hazards, sexual harassment, and exploitation, women make substantial contributions to the economic landscape of the business. The study highlights the necessity for enhanced working conditions, equitable remuneration, and competency enhancement. The results highlight the capacity of the handloom industry to empower women and positively impact socioeconomic development, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive strategy to improve the well-being of female weavers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's Handloom industry and weavers serve as the presenters of the traditional cultural practices. The rich cultural heritage of Bangladesh is deeply linked with its industrial sector. The handloom industry is one of the largest cottage industries in the nation. This sector contributes around forty percent of the nation's internal textile consumption. Sirajganj, a district of Bangladesh, is recognized as one of

the regions in Bangladesh that boasts a significant presence of handloom industries. Undoubtedly, it is an established reality that a significant majority of the individuals of the weaver's family are actively involved in various facets of the handloom industry, and the significance of women's involvement is paramount. Moreover, amidst the myriad of societal obligations, women consistently demonstrate outstanding skills in weaving.

The viability of the weaving sector is heavily contingent upon the labor and expertise contributed by women. Women exclusively carry out the pre-weaving procedure. Also, women occasionally engage in the production of fabric through the process of weaving. Throughout history, women have persevered in weaving despite facing several challenges and constraints. Despite the meager remuneration and limited prospects for family success, they have steadfastly dedicated themselves to this ancient art form.

The historical, conservative ideology regarding women limited their societal roles primarily to domestic settings over an extended period. Women in the Sirajganj District have demonstrated a strong inclination towards conservatism and actively engage in weaving within enclosed spaces and in outdoor settings to cope with the challenges of existence. The significant participation of women in the Handloom industry has led to the dual outcomes of addressing unemployment concerns and fostering the empowerment and advancement of women. In tandem with the growing significance of women within familial and societal contexts, discernible transformations are seen in the dynamics between men and women. In the context where fabric production heavily relies on women's participation, these female employees are entangled in a complex web of challenges in the weaving sector. The significance comes in the irony associated with several adverse consequences, such as low earnings, diminished dignity, impaired hearing and vision, sexual harassment, potential mortality risks, and exploitation. Inevitable crises are specific to female employees, while others pose challenges for male and female individuals. Crises can be attributed to a combination of factors, including women's gender identity and the work environment. Efficient measures should be implemented to address the current situation and establish a conducive working environment for women employed in the Handloom industry due to the significant potential for female employment within the weaving sector.

Many women entered the workforce as handloom laborers and have since transitioned into proprietors of handloom enterprises. Women's attainment of economic self-reliance facilitated the advancement of women's freedom. Consequently, there has been a rise in women's freedom of opinion and freedom to express themselves.

In contemporary culture, women have gained the ability to exercise freedom and make decisions about various matters within familial and social contexts. Numerous widows and women their spouses have forsaken have assumed control over household affairs by weaving.

Consequently, the conventional familial balance between males and females has changed. Women are actively participating in advancing both the family unit and society, working alongside males. The weaving sector in Sirajganj holds significant importance within the national economy of Bangladesh, mostly because of the remarkable contributions made by women.

Archaeological sites across the globe have yielded evidence of the presence of woven cloth [1]. The major aim of woven fabrics was to protect the form of clothing and shelter [2]. Weaving is a textile production technique wherein two sets of yarns or threads are intertwined perpendicularly to create a woven fabric [3]. The earliest known instances of weaving may be traced back to the Neolithic Period, specifically between 7,000 and 2,000 BC [4]. Numerous weaving techniques exist in ancient civilizations, such as Peru, North America, Iraq, and Egypt. The examination of archaeological sites has provided evidence indicating that the Indus civilization is home to the earliest documented cotton textiles. The weavers of the early Basak group are often regarded as the authentic weavers who resided in the geographical region associated with the basin of the Indus Civilization.

Subsequently, their initial settlement took place in Murshidabad, located in the West Bengal region of India, followed by subsequent

migrations to Rajshahi, Kishoreganj, and Dhaka in Bangladesh. The history of the weaving business in Bangladesh is of considerable antiquity.

The textile craft of weaving holds the distinction of being the most prominent cottage industry in the nation of Bangladesh. A significant proportion of the nation's overall population is directly or indirectly affiliated with this business. This sector produces around 700 million meters of cloth on an annual basis. This sector plays a significant role in the overall economic landscape of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is home to numerous districts that boast a significant presence of handloom industries. Notably, Sirajganj stands out as one of the renowned districts known for its handloom production. The Sirajganj District is in the Rajshahi Division of Bangladesh, inside the North Bengal area. It holds significant economic importance within the country of Bangladesh. Sirajganj was established as a thana in the year 1885. Officially located within the Dhaka (Previously Dacca) Division under Mymensingh District's jurisdiction, it was reassigned to Pabna District on 15 February 1866. In 1984, the area transformed and was elevated to the status of a district [5]. The Kacharibari of Shahjadpur in Sirajganj is a renowned and highly regarded monument associated with the world-renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindra University, Bangladesh, and Shaheed M. Monsur Ali Medical College are also in Sirajganj District.

To enhance the study process, the focus has been narrowed down to examining the roles, crises, and potential solutions for women workers in the weaving industry, specifically within the Sirajganj area. This district is renowned for its significant presence in the weaving sector, therefore warranting a more localized investigation rather than a broader analysis encompassing the entirety of Bangladesh.

The study primarily evaluates the historical and cultural importance of the handloom industry in Sirajganj District and its impact on the local economy. It aims to analyze women's diverse

roles and responsibilities, the socioeconomic circumstances, and the empowerment prospects women obtain through their participation in the handloom industry. This paper also explores women's obstacles and limitations in the handloom sector. Additionally, this study proposes policy suggestions and interventions to augment women's participation, income creation, and empowerment in the handloom industry.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Malley (1923) reported in the Bengal District Gazettters, Pabna 1923, that the total number of handlooms within the Pabna area amounted to 9500. According to the gazetteer, Calcutta was known for producing high-quality handloom items that catered to the upper class during that period. Specifically, these goods were manufactured in Sadullapur, Nischintapur, and Aminpur, located in the Sirajganj subdivision [6].

BBS (2003) has reported that Sirajganj district is home to a substantial number of handlooms, exceeding 135,000. According to the Weaver Census of 2003, the total number of families is 14,870[7].

Jalil (2019) has stated that local folk tunes indicate women's significant role in weaving activities in Sirajganj. This traditional melody effectively portrays the involvement of women in the weaving sector alongside men. Moreover, inside these communities, the cultural expressions of rhymes, stories, and songs prominently highlight the significance of women's weaving practices [8].

Hosen (2015) has reported that the weaving industry in Sirajganj district has been established since the early stages of the weaving industry in Bangladesh. The weaving industry experienced growth in this particular area during the reign of Subedar Farrukh Siyar (1685-1719) in Bengal. The weaving industry was formed in certain regions of Sirajganj Sadar, Ullapara, Shahjadpur, and Belkuchi within the Sirajganj subdivision of the Pabna district during that period [9].

BBS (2018) has stated in the Bangladesh Weaver Census 2018 that there has been a decline of 725,000 weavers in Bangladesh over 28 years, specifically from 1990 to 2018. Over the past 15 years, there has been a notable decline in the population of weavers, with a reduction of 586,368 individuals reported in the Weaver Census 2018. An analysis of census data reveals that in 1990, women weavers accounted for 44.35% of the overall population of weavers. In 2018, the proportion of women weavers accounted for 55.78% of the overall population of weavers. A comprehensive examination of the data derived from the Weaver Census reveals a notable decline in the overall population of weavers over the last 28 years. However, it is worth noting that there has been a concurrent rise of 11.43% in the proportion of female weavers [10].

The economic activities undertaken by the weaving family are intricately intertwined with the daily functioning of the entire household. Many occupations are conducted within one's residence or near the property. Including girls in any form of labor is commonly categorized as domestic employment. The works above need to be recognized as economic.

Haque (2020) has written that the reason for women to participate in weaving activities is to supplement the overall household income.

Begum and Haque (2004) have written that limited employment prospects and prevailing societal inequalities pose significant barriers to the advancement of women in society [11].

Joli (2017) has written that familial, societal, and governmental factors frequently impede the typical progression of a woman's growth and maturation. This struggle frequently makes a woman reliant on others [12].

Khan (2014) has stated that the loudness emitted by the loom has resulted in hearing loss among numerous female workers. Numerous studies indicate that a significant portion of the population experiences hearing impairment. The excessive noise emitted by power looms poses a significant nuisance for workers. Excessive noise exposure poses considerable

risks to the auditory system, cognitive function, and cardiovascular health [13].

Mukhopadhyay (2001) has written that in addition to handicrafts, the majority of yarn required in Bengal was sourced by women. Spinning and nattu were engaged in yarn spinning while attending to their household duties [14].

Begum and Haque (2004) have written that limited employment prospects and prevailing societal inequalities pose significant barriers to the advancement of women in society [15].

Muhammad (2020) has mentioned that the economic activities undertaken by the weaving family are intricately intertwined with the daily functioning of the entire household. Including girls in any form of labor is commonly categorized as domestic employment. The works above lack recognition as economic [16].

3. METHODOLOGY

The study incorporates both secondary research and primary field survey methodologies. The secondary research is derived from a comprehensive review of scholarly articles, academic journals, books, newspapers, and official government publications. A comprehensive field survey was undertaken to collect essential data from the Sirajganj handloom industry stakeholders and experts through individual and focus group interviews. Additionally, representatives from both governmental and non-governmental supporting organizations were also interviewed. The informants can be classified into weavers, owners, academics, and experts. The study gathered pertinent data from participants regarding their employment characteristics, working circumstances, possession of handloom equipment, reliance on handloom activities within their families, involvement of family members in handloom-related labor, and corresponding earnings. The present work provides a concise analysis and discussion of the findings and observations.

It has been noted that the sample size of this study will be determined by using the following formula suggested by Yamane (1967).

$$*n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where;

n = Sample Size,

N= Population Size

e = Level of Precision (+/- 5%)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the survey findings, a significant proportion (40%) of female weavers falls within the age range of 21 to 30 years. Thirty (30%) of women engaged in weaving are between 31 and 40 years old. According to the data, a significant proportion, specifically 20%, of female weavers fall within the age range of 10 to 20 years. A total of 7% of female weavers fall between the age ranges of 41 to 50 years. A mere 3% of female weavers fall into the age category of 50 years and above (Figure 1)

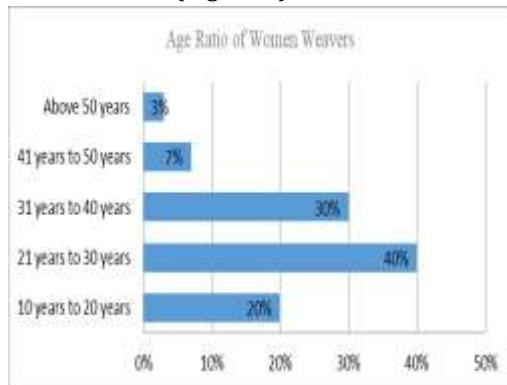


Figure 1: Age ratio of women weavers

Based on the survey's results, it was determined that 60% of female weavers engage in work for 7 to 9 hours daily. A quarter (25%) of the female weavers engage in weaving activities for four to six hours daily. Ten percent of the female weavers engage in their craft for one to three hours daily. According to the data, a minority of female weavers, specifically 5%, work for a duration exceeding 9 hours daily (Figure 2).

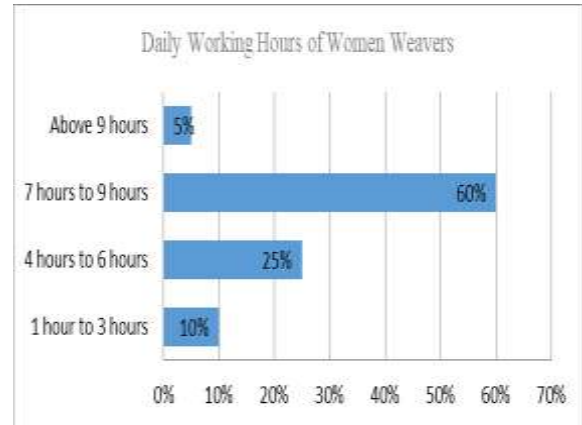


Figure 2: Daily working hours of women weavers

Based on the findings of the survey, it was observed that around 30% of female weavers make a daily income of Taka 100 or less. According to the data, 45% of female weavers have a monthly income ranging from Taka 101 to Taka 200. Approximately 15% of female weavers have a monthly income ranging from Taka 201 to Taka 300. A total of 8% of female weavers have a monthly income ranging from Taka 301 to Taka 400. Only 2% of female weavers generate a monthly income of Taka 400 or above (Figure 3).

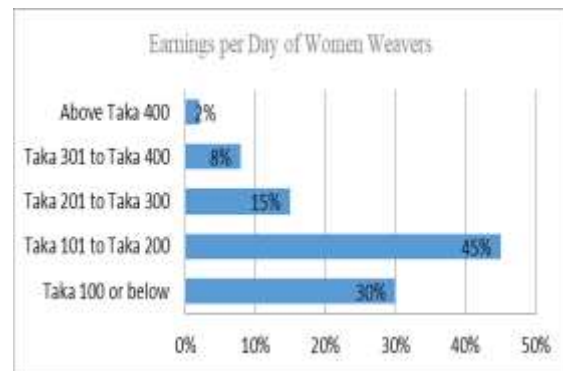


Figure 3: Daily earnings of women weavers

Based on the findings of a survey, it has been determined that the economic situation of 25% of female weavers has yet to experience any improvement. The observed increase in the economic status of 65% of women weavers is deemed satisfactory. The significant enhancement of the economic situation for 10% of women weavers is highly commendable (Figure 4).

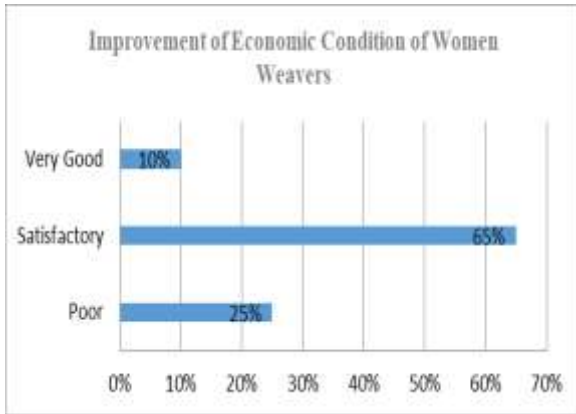


Figure 4: Improvement of the economic condition of women weavers

In addition to weaving, women weavers engage in several pre-weaving activities such as dyeing, trimming surplus yarn during the design process, preparing the warp, denting, reeling, etc. According to the study results, it was discovered that 5% of female weavers engage in the activity of weaving, while 40% of female weavers are involved in reeling. Additionally, 10% of female weavers participate in denting, 20% in yarn trimming, and 25% in warp preparation (Figure 5).

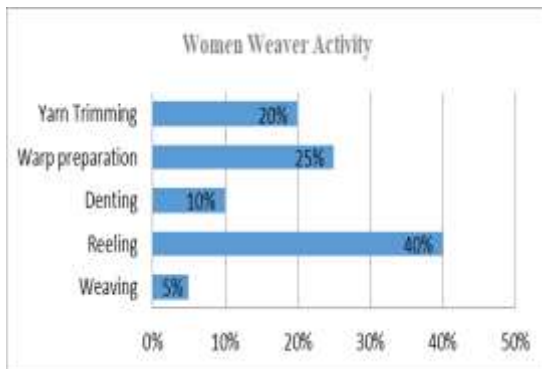


Figure-5: Different activities involved by women weaver

From 1980 to 1989, the amount of money received by female weavers for producing Saree, Lungi, and Gamsa was recorded to be Taka 15 to Taka 20, Taka 8 to Taka 10, and Taka 3 to Taka 5, respectively. From 2020 to 2023, the amount of money received by female weavers for their production of Saree, Lungi, and Gamsa gradually increased. Specifically, the wages for creating Saree ranged from Taka 35 to Taka 50, while the wages for producing Lungi ranged from Taka 30 to Taka 35. Lastly, the wages for manufacturing Gamsa ranged from Taka 20 to Taka 25 (Figure 6). It is noted that the wage rate exhibits regional variation within the Sirajganj District.

Nevertheless, the figures are provided with consideration for the prevailing salary rates in various locations. A comprehensive examination of wage rates reveals a limited growth in earnings over the past four decades. The growth rate of wages has not kept pace with the growth rates observed in commodity prices and living standards. This is the underlying cause of the deplorable living conditions experienced by female weavers.

The weaving industry, especially in the region of Sirajganj, has generated employment prospects for numerous women. Consequently, women can fulfill their own and their family's financial requirements through income generation. Commencing the practice of weaving, many families have experienced increased economic prosperity.

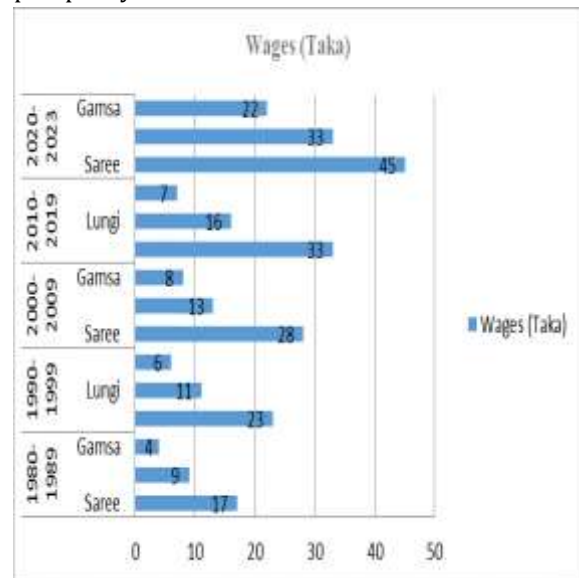


Figure-6: Wages trend of women weavers

A significant number of male individuals engaged in the practice of weaving have transitioned to alternative occupations. Nevertheless, a notable influx of women has been transitioning from various works to weaving in recent years.

The individual began weaving due to an imperative need to provide financial assistance for her husband, who manages the family's affairs, and to cover her medical expenses. The family's financial stability was not solely reliant on the husband's income.

A considerable proportion of females were born into households involved in weaving and initiated their weaving endeavors during their early years. Moreover, a significant number of women who have lost their husbands engage in the occupation of weaving as a means of livelihood. Certain women engage in the work of weaving as it presents a more accessible employment opportunity compared to other available options[17].

The women residing in this location disregarded established religious doctrines and societal constraints, opting to engage in weaving out of sheer necessity. Women involved in weaving experience more socioeconomic advantages than women who do not partake in this occupation.

The remarkable contribution of female workers in the Handloom sector is noteworthy. Throughout history, women have played a crucial part in upholding and perpetuating the weaving business throughout this region. The majority of weavers believe that the completion of labor is unattainable only via the efforts of males, necessitating the assistance of women[18].

Many women work weaving to support their children's educational needs financially. Many children from the Weaver family (locally *tati poribar*) are enrolled in prestigious educational institutions nationwide, including universities.

Women in the region have encountered significant challenges in their efforts to participate in the labor market. There exists societal disapproval towards women engaging in the practice of weaving.

Discrimination against women is prevalent within the handloom weaving sector, manifesting in diverse ways. Significant factors include salary, working hours, and the importance of the work. The production of fine sarees is often restricted to women. Once again, women who work longer hours than males receive disproportionately low earnings[19].

A significant number of women have experienced visual complications as a result of prolonged and concentrated looks during weaving activities. A substantial number of individuals experience impaired functionality due to visual impairments.

Many female laborers have experienced auditory impairment due to prolonged exposure to the high decibel levels generated by the loom machinery.

The issue of sexual harassment within the weaving business raises concerns about women's safety in the working environment. A significant number of female individuals encounter unsolicited advice from their colleagues throughout the process of weaving on a loom. Sexual harassment represents a significant challenge faced by women.

Low pay is a significant challenge encountered by women employed in handloom weaving. The execution of any task undertaken by female weavers necessitates a substantial investment of time. Moreover, the remuneration needs to be increased to support a household adequately.

The mortality from lightning has emerged as a significant predicament for female laborers.

Female weavers endure diverse manifestations of exploitation by employers and lenders. If even the smallest issue arises during the execution of a task, individuals are subjected to verbal abuse of an indescribable nature. A deduction of funds was made from her wages. The remuneration provided for labor is insufficient and also lacks punctuality in disbursement. Occasionally, the amount of money owed is remitted in a reduced manner.

Women employees are subjected to significant health hazards due to prolonged weaving periods in damp and unclean environments. Moreover, using dyes, acids, and other chemicals has manifested many intricate ailments among women.

The need for a distinct and efficient organizational structure for women in the handloom industry is visible. The need for a responsive party to address the proprietor's concerns, grievances, and other issues and provide support under challenging circumstances is evident. The absence of a defined salary structure has resulted in wage discrimination among many women.

Based on the results, numerous solutions can be proposed to address these challenges and promote the advancement of women in this industry.

Implementing measures to create secure and favorable working environments for women weavers, explicitly addressing ventilation, lighting, and ergonomics concerns, is essential to safeguard their physical and mental health. Safety equipment, including glasses and ear protection, is essential to reduce weaving-related health concerns.

It is imperative to employ strategies to effectively decrease noise levels within the weaving facilities, minimizing the potential for hearing impairments among female workers.

To establish a uniform and equitable remuneration framework for female weavers, which duly accounts for the complexity of their craft and the amount of time dedicated to their labor. With the prevailing market structure, it is advisable to increase the remuneration of female employees. In this scenario, a fixed salary structure can be developed.

Ensuring that women workers are well informed on proper power utilization is essential. Simultaneously, employing electrical equipment that adheres to safety standards is imperative. Appropriate training and awareness programs should be implemented to address occupational health and safety concerns effectively, focusing on educating individuals on correctly utilizing protective equipment.

To enhance the market reach of women weavers, it is recommended to implement design innovation and product diversification workshops. These workshops aim to broaden

the range of products women weavers create, expanding their market reach.

To establish and execute inclusive policies and protocols that are sensitive to gender issues within the handloom sector, aiming to prevent and redress cases of sexual harassment and exploitation. Implementing a comprehensive set of strategies aimed at preventing and effectively managing incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace is crucial. These measures should encompass various initiatives such as raising awareness through targeted campaigns, providing training programs, and ensuring rigorous enforcement of anti-harassment regulations.

To provide skill development programs, workshops, and training sessions to enhance female artisans' weaving proficiency. It would enable them to produce superior quality items that can be sold at more competitive pricing in the market.

To establish partnerships with nearby vocational training institutes to offer specialized instruction in sophisticated weaving techniques and design innovation.

To implement health and wellness initiatives to address female weavers' physical and emotional health needs. These initiatives should include the provision of routine health examinations, facilitating access to healthcare services, and conducting awareness campaigns focused on promoting eye and ear care.

Promote establishing a nurturing community network that recognizes and commemorates the valuable contributions made by women weavers, fostering a collective sentiment of self-esteem and inclusivity.

To curate and coordinate events, exhibitions, and cultural showcases to showcase female weavers' artistic abilities and craftsmanship. These initiatives aim to increase awareness and foster interest in the handloom products created by these women.

To engage in collaborative efforts with governmental entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and pertinent stakeholders to actively promote policy measures to safeguard the rights and welfare of women involved in the weaving industry.

Advocate for the implementation of labor regulations that are sensitive to gender considerations, the establishment of social safety nets, and the provision of healthcare services tailored to address the unique requirements of female artisans.

For implementing sustainable practices within the handloom industry, including utilizing environmentally friendly materials and techniques, to secure the industry's long-term sustainability and beneficial effects on women and the natural environment.

It is recommended that workers remain on standby. Employers and financial stakeholders must support and assist employees experiencing illness or financial difficulties.

Enhancing women weavers' financial literacy and entrepreneurship skills is necessary, enabling them to properly manage their income and potentially develop their businesses.

By implementing these suggested measures, various stakeholders in the handloom sector can collaborate to establish a more comprehensive, empowering, and environmentally sustainable setting for female weavers in the Sirajganj District. These initiatives possess the potential to empower women, improve their socio-economic standing, and make a positive contribution to the holistic growth of the handloom sector and the community it caters to.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has conducted an extensive investigation on the significant contribution of women in the handloom sector, specifically within the distinctive environment of Sirajganj District. By employing a rigorous combination of historical analysis, socio-economic investigation, and direct field surveys, this study has shown

the intricate and diverse aspects related to the involvement of women in this historical art. It has also shed light on the various contributions made by women, the obstacles they confront, and potential solutions that might be explored.

The research findings highlight the significant influence of female weavers on the handloom sector, emphasizing their essential role across different phases of textile manufacturing. The women in question have qualities that extend beyond their occupation as weavers. They serve as a fundamental pillar of culturally significant heritage, contribute to economic stability, and play a transformative role in society.

The investigation into demographic attributes, employment duration, and financial remuneration has provided insight into the complexities of women's participation. Despite challenges such as limited financial resources and potential health risks, these courageous women demonstrate an unwavering commitment to weaving, frequently shouldering the responsibility of supporting their families through their exceptional skills.

The study has highlighted the pressing necessity for specific interventions to improve the livelihoods of women engaged in weaving. It is imperative to propose measures that focus on strengthening working conditions, guaranteeing equitable compensation, and facilitating chances for skill development. These recommendations are essential for empowering women, promoting their overall welfare, and cultivating a more equal environment within the sector. The handloom sector can facilitate constructive transformation, functioning as a medium for women's advancement and socio-economic development. By acknowledging and tackling the obstacles highlighted in this study and adopting the recommended policy measures, relevant parties can contribute to developing a more comprehensive, dynamic, and enduring prospect for both the female weavers in Sirajganj District and the sector.

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