

## IMPACT OF CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES ON EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN WEAVERS IN HANDLOOM INDUSTRY

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**Abstract:** Handloom industry in India is an ancient cottage industry. References to the use of Handloom are abundant in the recorded details of epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharatha. The handloom industry is constantly associated with Indian rural economic scenario ever since. It is the largest co-operative network in Kerala. Handloom is the only manufacturing sector wherein one finds large number of women producing products which are worn by large number of women. A survey research was conducted at Balaramapuram village of Trivandrum district of Kerala where there is a considerable number of handloom units and allied co-operative societies. A large number of co-operative societies are functioning in Balaramapuram and the sample selected were the members who joined it for benefits and security. Some of them had received trainings from the society and were actively participating in the activities of the society. A personal gain index was computed statistically and it was correlated with many other variables. Statistical analysis proved that socio-economic factors and some health and dietary patterns have a significant relation with the empowerment attained through co-operative societies. Women were found to be socially, personally and economically empowered through the co-operative societies.

**Key words:** Handloom, weavers, women, cooperatives, empowerment.

**Introduction:** Handloom industry in India is an ancient cottage industry with a decentralised set up, scattered in all nooks and corners of the country with more than 2.5 crore people directly depending upon it to eke out their livelihood. It is next to agriculture in providing employment. Women contributed substantially to the economic prosperity of India. Because Indian society commonly is considered to be highly centralised and patriarchal, women's control over and use of economic resources remains mysteriously disconnected from gender norms that subordinate women to men in other arenas.

Handloom sector is the only manufacturing sector where one finds a large number of women producing products that are worn by large number of women. There is no recognition to women's work as weavers, even though women play a major role in all pre-loom operations and take on labour intensive activities. Women do not have access to government identity cards except in cases where they are widowed or are members of cooperatives. They also lack direct access to wages since weaving is a household enterprise and men take the final products for sale. (1) The main thrust of cooperative societies is to promote the working of the Handloom industry as well as the economic conditions of the weavers by providing infrastructural support. (2) Another principal benefit of cooperative societies is that it allows women the opportunity to gain a decent wage still leaving time and freedom for other responsibilities important to them. Cooperatives provide not only economic empowerment, but also socio-political empowerment to the women involved. (3) Women weavers have been the principal

stabilisation force through years of crises in the sector. But there is no recognition to women's work as weavers, their working, living and wage conditions need to be improved. In this context, this study was designed to assess the socio-economic status, status of work, health and nutritional profile and the overall impact of co-operative societies on the empowerment of women weavers.

**Methodology:** Survey method was conducted at Balaramapuram village of Trivandrum district of Kerala where there is a considerable number of handloom units and allied co-operative societies. A sample of 100 women weavers were selected randomly from nine co-operative societies. A well structured questionnaire was administered to collect primary data from the weavers. The data thus collected were coded, tabulated and analysed statistically.

**Results and discussion:**

**Socio-economic background of the women weavers:** Majority of the women were between 40 and 49 years of age. 30 per cent were below 40 years and remaining 17 percent were 50 years and above. The trend reveals that majority have taken up weaving earlier in life as handed over from generations. Religious status showed that 77 per cent belonged to Hindu religion, 3 per cent to Islam and 20 percent to Christianity. Marital status showed that majority are married and belonged to nuclear families. 58 per cent were educated only till high school level and 27 percent were matriculates. This can be attributed to the rural background.

**Nature and status of work:** Data shows that 80 percent of women had more than five years of experience in handloom industry. Majority of women

were in middle age and had taken up the job early in life. The major reason for joining the industry was to overcome poverty by finding a source of income through weaving. 87per cent women spent almost eight continuous hours in weaving per day. But only 19 percent of the women had received any formal trainings through the cooperative societies they have joined. Others were elder weaver women who continued work through informal trainings and practicessince the women weavers were members of cooperative societies, they were paid wages based on the output and profit by the societies. 99 percent were receiving weekly wages.

**Health profile and dietary pattern of the women weavers:** The health and dietary profile were assessed from the data gathered through specific questionnaires. 94 per cent were non vegetarians and cereals was the most frequently used foodstuff, followed by pulses and green leafy vegetables. Even though their diets are unbalanced, majority were satisfied with the foodstuffs they consumed because they were unaware of the nutritive value and requirements. The respondents were asked about certain ailments which they had during the previous month of the survey.

**Table 1:** Distribution of weavers regarding the occurrence of health problems

Sl. no	Health problems	Yes	No	% (affected the work)
1	Asthma	12	88	11
2	Cough and cold	19	81	1
3	Headache	29	71	3
4	Eye problems	32	68	15
5	Stomach ache	16	84	7
6	Neck pain	12	88	12
7	Urinary infections	9	91	3
8	Leg/joint pain	30	70	6
9	Nervous problems	12	88	0
10	Chest pain	14	86	1

The data shows that Asthma was a problem experience by 12 percent of the respondents and it affected the work of 11 percent. As weaving requires a lot of physical exertion, women with asthma couldn't work effectively during the period. Eye problems also affected many of the respondents' work and 12 percent had neck pain which affected their work. Leg and joint pains were felt by 30 per cent of the women, but only 6per cent refrained from the work due to the problem. Since they are paid on the basis of piece rate, majority of the women chose to ignore their health issues and continue the work.

**Cooperative societies and its impact:** All the respondents were member of one or other cooperative societies in the village. When asked about the reason for joining the society, 53 per cent stated that they joined to overcome their economic difficulties in procuring raw materials, selling etc. 36 percent joined societies to get some employment in any units and 10 per cent chose to join for empowerment through the trainings and supports given. Among these, 90 per cent were silent members of the cooperative society whereas 5 were committee members and one each were treasurer and president of their respective societies. 60 percent women got finances through cooperative societies to start a weaving unit.

Women weaves had experienced some empowerment through the cooperative societies. Data showed that 79 percent felt that they have increased their self confidence. 80 percent realised their efficiency to run enterprises successfully. Majority opined that they could improve their skills and knowledge through the activities of the cooperative societies. 61 per cent agreed that they could realise their potentials through the cooperative societies. Regarding the economic gains, 80 percent felt that they became self-sustained and 98 percent do not have to depend on their spouse for minor financial needs.

**Individual Gain Index:** An individual gain index was computed and the scores of the 24 questions on individual gain after joining cooperative societies were added together to get 'total score of individual gain'. The distribution of respondents based on individual gain index is presented in table 2.

**Table 2:** Individual gain index of the respondents

Sl.no	Individual Gain Index	Freq uenc y	Percentage
1	Low	28	28
2	Medium	49	49
3	High	23	23
Total			

Data shows that 49 percent women have medium IGI after joining cooperative society and 23 percent have high IGI which reveals that the membership nd activities in cooperative societies have a positive impact on women empowerment.

**T-test** was administered to find out the difference in the Individual Gain Index of the respondents belonging to APL (above poverty line) and BPL (below poverty line) categories.

**Table -3:** t-test for IGI of women in BPL and APL categories

Individ ual Gain	Catego ry	N	Mean	
	Below	5	17.4545	

Index	poverty line	5		
	Above poverty line	45	16.1556	
T test for equality of means				
	t	d	Sig-2 tailed	Mean difference
	3.021	98	.002	1.2989

Mean score of IGI is higher among the weavers from BPL category compared to those of APL category. The result shows that the difference in the scores is significant at .002. This may be due to the fact that women weavers belonging to the lower strata who joined societies for better support and benefits have more Individual Gain Index because of their involvement and hard work.

g) ANOVA test was administered to find out the significance of Individual gain Index and the years of experience of the women weavers.

**Table 4:** ANOVA test for IGI and years of experience

Sl.no	Years of experience	N	Mean	Std deviation
1	<=7	36	15.9167	2.182
2	8 - 15	33	17.4242	1.392
3	16 >	31	17.3871	2.319

	Sum of squares	d f	Mean square	f	Sig
Between groups	51.145	2	25.572	6.358	.003
Within groups	390.165	97	4.022		

Table reveals that women with 8 to 15 years of service have the highest IGI and women with less than 7 years of service have the lowest IGI. The standard deviation is also highest among women who has 8-15 years of experience in weaving. From the ANOVA statistics, it can be seen that the years of service of the respondents and their IGI is highly significant at 0.003. This is in line with the assumption that greater the number of years of experience, higher the Individual Gain index.

**Correlation between socio economic variables and level of empowerment:** Socio economic variables such as age, age of joining the industry, educational status and monthly income was correlated with Individual Gain Index scores to find out the associations.

**Table- 5:** Correlation between socio economic variables and IGI

Sl no	Variable	Pearsons correlation coefficient	Significance
1	Age of the respondent*Score of IGI	0.076	0.203
2	Educational status *IGI	-0.062	0.543
3	Monthly income*IGI	0.048	0.635
4	Age of joining work* IGI	-0.035	0.730
5	Duration of work per day*IGI	0.021	0.833

Results shows that the correlation coefficient between the age of the women weavers and IGI is only a slight positive one. There is a slight increase in individual gain with the increase of age in respondents, but the result is not significant. The duration of work per day and level of empowerment also shows a slight positive association. As work time increases there is increase in IGI. Age of starting the work is slightly negatively associated with IGI of the respondents.

**Summary and Conclusion:** The findings of the study showed that majority of the women weavers were in middle age and were from rural background with a low economic and educational background. They were having nuclear families and majority had opted the weaving job to overcome poverty and unemployment. Some of them had inherited and practised it from the previous generations. They were either working in their own independent unit at home or working in a separate industry. Health status showed that they had major illnesses of joint pain, strain and infection of eyes and other such ailments which are common to this kind of workers. As they spent long hours, mostly 7-8 hours per day in weaving, they experienced these ailments at one or other time. Dietary pattern and habits revealed that majority were non vegetarians and satisfied with the food they consumed though unaware of the requirements and nutritive value of food stuffs. Cereals were the major food item in their diet. Overall diet, though not well balanced, was found to be satisfying the requirements.

A large number of co-operative societies are functioning in Balaramapuram and the sample selected were the members who joined it for benefits and security. Some of them had received trainings from the society and were actively participating in the

activities of the society. Procurement of raw materials at cheaper rates and profitable selling of products were facilitated through the cooperative societies. Availability of loans at low interest rates was the most beneficial part from the societies. A personal gain index was computed statistically and it was correlated with many other variables. Statistical analysis proved

that socio-economic factors and some health and dietary patterns have a significant relation with the empowerment attained through co-operative societies. Women were found to be socially, personally and economically empowered through the co-operative societies.

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