



Vocational Training And The Empowerment Of Marginalized Women: An Insight Into Home- Based Sozni Artisans Of Kashmir Valley

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Abstract : This paper explores how vocational training affects the economic and socio-cultural empowerment of the marginalized women artisans who practice Sozni embroidery in the Kashmir Valley. Sozni is a complex needlepoint embroidery that is applied on pashmina and other wool and silk fabrics; it is an important source of livelihood and cultural heritage to Kashmir however, its sustainability is gradually coming under threat due to globalization, political instability and market changes. Based on a mixed-method design that combines secondary literature analysis and use of qualitative case studies of home-based women artisans in the Budgam district, the research study investigates how vocational training influences skill acquisition, earnings, bargaining power and self-perception among Sozni workers. Results show that training programmes do not only increase technical expertise but in certain cases, income security but they do little to change structural barriers like reliance on middlemen, limited mobility, unpaid household chores, and exposure to markets and digital platforms. The article argues that vocational education can be used successfully to empower women and build preservation only when it is integrated into inclusive, context-sensitive programs that would bring in market connection, financial literacy and social provisions to caregiving responsibilities. Policy suggestions focus on the adaptation of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) to home-based women artisans in conflict-prone areas with the need to balance the economic goal with cultural preservation and gender equality.

Key Terms - Vocational training, women empowerment, Sozni embroidery, home based work, Kashmir.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the issue of women's participation in paid employment has been a focus point in the discourse of development, gender justice and poverty reduction in India. Policy frameworks are increasingly emphasising skills development as a crucial measure towards improving women employability, income and agency, especially women who are members of economically and socially marginalised groups. In places like Kashmir, where the political upheaval, market fluctuations and lockdowns become overlapped with long standing patriarchal values, the concerns of women labour and empowerment become further complicated.

The handicraft industry of Kashmir (carpets, shawls, papier-mache, Sozni embroidery, etc.) has been a major source of livelihood in the past (including for the women working from their households). However, communication limitations since 2019 and consecutive COVID-19 lockdowns have had a drastic effect on production and access to the market forcing several artisans into debt or in unemployment or leaving the profession altogether. In this precarious environment, vocational training is encouraged as a strategy of upgrading skills, product diversification, linking artisans to new markets and eventually enhancing the bargaining power in women at both the household and the value chain. (Din *et al.*, 2024).

This paper places the experiences of home-based women Sozni artisans in Budgam district in the context of these broader debates. It brings the following questions: How does vocational training empower or disempower marginalised women artisans and how does it intersect with preserving Sozni as an intangible cultural heritage practice?

1.1 Embroidery and Women Work In Kashmir.

Sozni (also known as Sozan-kaar or Sozani) is a very complex form of needlepoint embroidery, which is closely connected with the textile industry of Kashmir, especially on pashminas and finer types of wool or silk. The method entails the very tight satin and other similar stitches, and the intensity of work is between about five hundred stitches per centimetre; *allover* patterns can require months and even years to do. The floral motives, paisleys (buta), chinar leaves and other vegetal or geometric patterns are often involved, therefore, connecting the craft to the landscape of the valley and the cultural symbolism. (Majeed *et al.* 2023)

Traditionally, Sozni embroidery was dominated by male artisans, who operated in workshops run by their families, but the participation of women has increased, especially as household piece-rate workers, more so in rural and semi-urban areas. Various women also practice Sozni as a means of subsidizing agrarian earnings or sustaining their families in the absence of formal jobs and/or mobility restrictions, largely based on gender. Although the women artisans have a significant contribution, their activities are often viewed as assistance or hobby instead of craft. (Walker, E. 2003)

Competition by machine-crafted fakes, the volatility of tourist flows, the interrupted export, and impact of COVID-19 pandemic have increased the vulnerability of the industry, as the orders and incomes of artisans in the handicraft sector have been shortened drastically by the measures across all regions of Kashmir. In this unstable economy, vocational training is often introduced as a means of upskilling, diversification and market resilience among women Sozni workers (Sharma et al. 2020).

1.2 The Conceptual Lens: Vocational Training and Women Empowerment.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Hereafter, referred to as TVET) and skill-based education are widely recognised as a tool of employability, productivity improvement and poverty alleviation especially when they are designed in a manner that is responsive to local labour market demands and the social realities of learners. The recent research on access to TVET in India for women has highlighted the transformative potential of the same as well as the existence of structural barriers associated with the gender norms, mobility, role of care, and institutional design.

Empowerment is a multidimensional concept that includes economic resources, power to make decisions, self-confidence, mobility, and community and political life. Vocational training can support these dimensions if it goes beyond the mere transfer of technical skills to also incorporate financial literacy, market awareness, collective organisation and critical consciousness. (Diwakar & Ahamad, 2015) On the other hand, training that is based on a narrow consideration of transfer of skills without taking into account structural constraints may actually increase the workload of women or relegate them to low paying value-chain jobs. This study, therefore, conceptualises empowerment in four interrelated domains:

- Economic- income, savings, credit access, earnings control.
- Socio-cultural- mobility, negotiation within households, status within the community.
- Knowledge and abilities - technical, market, digital and financial capabilities.
- Cultural and symbolic-agency in maintaining and recreating Sozni as heritage.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research is in the form of mixed - methods design that combines secondary and primary data. Secondary data was sourced from scholarly articles, policy reports, NGO documents and reliable online sources on TVET, women's empowerment and handicrafts in India and Kashmir. These sources provided the contextual basis to place Sozni in the context of the national skill-development policies and discussions of inclusive vocational training. (Dagar, 2022)

Primary data were obtained from a qualitative case study of five home based women Sozni artisans of Budgam district by using purposive sampling method with variation in age, marital status and exposure to training. Data were collected through unstructured and in-depth interviews in the home of the participants and were supplemented by observation of the work environments and the daily activities. The open-ended format allowed women to tell the story of their life history, working trajectories and perceptions of vocational training, rather than limit their responses to predetermined response categories.

Thematic analysis and interviews were transcribed, analysed and the codes emerged around socio-economic background, division of labour, training experiences, income patterns, relationship with intermediaries and self-reported developments in confidence, status and aspirations. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms, owing to the sensitivity of conducting research in a conflict affected setting and within patriarchal family structures.

3. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Analysing the findings of the study, the following themes were found to be the most prominent. These are discussed as follows:

3.1 Socio - Economic Profile and Working Conditions

All five women artisans came from lower-income households where Sozni embroidery was an important, if often supplementary, source of income in addition to agriculture, wage labour or small trade. The majority of them first understood Sozni as an informal activity by female family members and it was considered an activity aimed at assisting the family but not as an independent occupation. Their employment was nearly all home-based and guided by the norms that limit the movement of women and also constrained by practical factors concerning childcare, household tasks and taking care of the elderly.

Women usually worked long hours, squeezing embroidery in between cooking, cleaning and caring for the children; one participant reported working a whole day on household chores and then spending afternoons and evenings on Sozni, but only making a small amount of money each day and sometimes having days with no orders at all. The working environment was far from comfortable: with makeshift seats, insufficient lighting, small working areas, which caused eye discomfort, backache, and exhaustion, which were also reflected in the general studies of women workers in Kashmir.

3.2 Dependence on Middlemen and Exclusion of Market

All participants relied on intermediaries (middlemen or contractors) for their raw materials, design briefs and payment, with literally no direct interaction with end consumers or retailers. This reliance gave them little bargaining power on the piece rates and no form of transparency on the final prices, profit margins and the destination market of their work. Some women were exploited, as they complained that middlemen were able to earn a lot in relation to their own efforts, but these women saw no other way because they could not move or use acquaintances due to their limited. (Yasmin & Bhat, 2013)

This precariousness was exacerbated by the exposure of the broader handicraft economy to both political and health crises: since the turmoil of the 1990s and early 2000s, and recently during the COVID-19 pandemic, orders have reduced exponentially, and some women have reported months with no work, in line with previous indications of other Kashmiri crafts. Vocational training, in

this case, was observed as the possible path to new customers or more expensive projects, yet hopes were usually higher than the results.

3.3 Experience of Vocational Training

All five women had some exposure to formal or semi-formal training, mostly through government run handicrafts departments or short-term local initiatives offering stipends. The training materials were oriented at much stitch-refinement and design imitation, and little on market analysis, costing, branding and digital capabilities. One participant who attended a government training centre after moving to the city described the training as largely procedural: many trainees attended the training merely for the daily allowance and not necessarily to develop their craft further, and there was little in the training to encourage customer linkages and product innovation.

Although these were the restrictions, there were positive reports made by some women: speed and neatness of work had been improved, there was more variety in motifs, and in some instances, they were awarded certificates which helped the individuals to be more eligible in future schemes or recognition. A long-time Sozni user who occasionally received training assistance gave her long-term cumulative effects of skill-based income, noting that she helped construct a permanent house and sent grandchildren to school, among other things.

3.4 Empowerment, Aspirations, and Lasting Obstacles.

In economic terms, vocational training had a modest impact on the earnings of some women and their feelings of contributing to household budgets in a meaningful way, which in turn improved their voice in the day-to-day decisions made in the household and their ability to contribute to the schooling or healthcare of their children. Frequency of even small incomes offered some stability during crisis, but was not quite sufficient to overcome more general crises in the market.

On the psycho-social level, most of the participants said they felt more self-confident about their skills and that they felt more pride to be linked with a treasured Kashmiri art, particularly when their products were moving to other regions. However, even empowerment was limited by the persistence of gender standards: even younger women with better formal education were not only dissuaded or even forbidden to have other jobs outside the family, but this prevented their vocational skills being exercised in more diversified or managerial jobs.

Some of them complained about bureaucracies and incomprehensible systems of selection of exhibitions, stalls, or credit schemes; one artist described how she was shunned off a stall at an exhibition despite all the paperwork, in part because of her poor education and no connections. This has highlighted the fact that vocational skills are not enough without similar developments in the area of literacy, access to information, and responsiveness in the institutions.

4. DISCUSSION

The results support the rest of the literature that suggests that vocational training may strengthen women technically and bring in incremental economic empowerment, but its transformative power depends strongly on the design of the programmes and the socio-political context. To the case of home-based Sozni artisans in a politically volatile and conflict-ridden region, training that emphasizes only on the stitching techniques is a danger of strengthening the subordinate role by them in value chains instead of confronting it.

To begin with, the continued use of middlemen points to a crucial deficiency: most programmes do not give women the skills to negotiate directly with buyers, join producer collectives and use online platforms and e-commerce, although it has been shown that this strategy can open opportunities to women entrepreneurs in other parts of India. Technical upskilling does not lead to an equivalent increase in income and bargaining power without paying attention to marketing, price level, quality levels, and customer relationships.

Second, when combined with the lack of compensated care services, lack of mobility constrains women to continue to get regular training, to take advanced courses or even participating in fairs and exhibitions. This is in line with the national TVET analyses which point out childcare, domestic and safety issues as key obstacles to women participation and advancement in skill programmes. In the case of Sozni craftspeople, the real inclusive vocational education would entail flexibility in schedules, centres located in neighbourhoods, childcare facilities on-site, and community-based approaches to negotiate with the families and the leaders of the community.

Third, in terms of cultural heritage, the training can be not only one that helps to preserve the traditional motifs and techniques but the woman artisans can also become active custodians and innovators of the Sozni tradition. At present, the content of the curriculum in training centres emphasises the reproduction of the conventional designs as opposed to allowing women to be creative or co-design with the current markets. This is a waste of the deep tacit knowledge already held by the old women artisans and restricts their visibility as designers and not just as people who realise the vision of others.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

Based on the analysis, a number of directions can be seen for the strengthening of the role of vocational training in the empowerment of marginalised women Sozni artisans:

1. Design women-centred, home sensitive TVET models. Provide community based, decentralized training centres near the houses of women, with flexible timelines and modules spread out so that women can pursue their care requirements. Integrate the support services like childcare, safe transport and counselling understanding the dual burden of paid and unpaid work.
2. Combine market literacy and digital skills. Move beyond stitch training to include costing, basic accounting, quality control, branding, storytelling for heritage crafts and the use of smart phones and social media for promotion. Collaborate with e-commerce platforms and ethical fashion projects to establish focused paths in which women craftsmen can sell directly or via clear cooperatives.
3. Enhance collective organisation and voice. Encourage the establishment and capacity building of women self-help groups, cooperatives or producer firms that can negotiate in common on prices, acquisition of raw materials and access government schemes.

4. Connecting training to social security and financial accessibility. Couple vocational courses with modules and on-the-spot enrolment in bank accounts, insurance, pension schemes (like PMSYM) and low-interest credit (CCSAW) based on women artisans. Provide simplified and understandable information on entitlements, including follow up support to navigate through application procedures and grievance redressal.

5. Appreciate and recognise Sozni as heritage work of women. Have women contributions to Sozni on record and in exhibits, local museums and online archives to reverse the historical invisibility of their labour. Promote trainings where senior women artisans are invited to teach, mentor, and co-design the curriculum to rebrand them as knowledge holders and custodians of the culture.

6. CONCLUSION

The example of home-based women Sozni artisans in the Budgam District to explain the potential as well as the constraints of vocational training as a means of empowerment in the context of the conflict-ridden, patriarchal world. The training has helped in skill development, slight increases in the income and a general feeling of self-confidence to most of the women, and has helped in maintaining a weak but symbolically rich craft tradition that has given Kashmiri cultural identity. At the same time, institutional barriers, such as reliance on intermediaries, uncompensated care, limited mobility, illiteracy, and uncertain markets, still limit the degree to which vocational competencies can be converted into meaningful autonomies and livelihoods.

To make vocational training a true tool of empowerment, as opposed to a close-minded technical intervention, it needs reconsideration in the context of a gender-responsive, context-aware, and heritage-conscious approach. This involves the incorporation of market connections, social protection, community organisation and acknowledgment of women artisans as economic agents as well as cultural carriers. This will be one way of making sure that the fragile threads of Sozni will not only be used to decorate the faraway markets, but also to create more fair and stronger futures of women, the labour of whom makes this an art.

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