

# A Study on Challenges Faced by Women Handloom Weavers: A Case of Dharmavaram Mandal, Andhra Pradesh

**Badimala Devika<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Manju M.K<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>IV Semester (M.A. in Economics), Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence, Kalaburagi

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of Economics, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence, Kalaburagi

## ABSTRACT

Women weavers hold an important place in traditional craftsmanship. Despite their vital role in the industry, women weavers are often marginalized due to gender bias and patriarchal traditions. The study involved 42 women weavers from Dharmavaram, Sri Sathya Sai district, Andhra Pradesh, chosen through purposive sampling, with data gathered via a structured questionnaire. Findings revealed that 85.71% of participants indicated that family obligations impacted their work, and various health issues such as eye strain (57.14%), back pain (47.62%), and knee pain (28.57%) were quite natural. There was a strong correlation between longer weaving hours and health issues. The study observed that more educated weavers earned more per month and securely employed weavers earned more stable incomes. The method of selling products also mattered significantly-selling directly cut down on the drain on resources from middlemen. The study underscores the necessity for targeted measures to tackle the challenges faced by women weavers, such as enhancing healthcare access, ensuring stable employment, reducing the exploitative role of middlemen, and increasing opportunities for direct market engagement to foster gender equality and economic empowerment in the Dharmavaram silk weaving sector.

**Keywords:** Women Handloom Weavers, Weavers Health Issues, Male-dominated norms, Weavers Job Security

## Introduction:

Textile industry facilitates significant contribution to the employment opportunity for the population. It is the second largest sector providing employment after agriculture. Textile industry in India contributes around 14 percentage to the industrial production, 11 percentage of exports and nearly 4 percentage to the overall gross domestic product. Handloom industries contribute around 43 percentage and allied workers directly or indirectly. According to the Handloom Census 2019-20, about 35,22,512 Handloom workers were employed across the country, out of which 25,46,285 were Women workers with a share of 72.29% of the total handloom workers. In addition, there are around 16,87,534 Women Handicraft artisans registered with Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts). The figures showing the number of women working in the unorganized sector viz. Handlooms and Handicrafts sector of the textile industry. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that women in the handloom workforce have been turned a blind eye

to for centuries now. Women weavers, who constitute a significant portion of the workforce, experience even greater hardships. Nearly 72% of handloom weavers in the country are female, according to The Fourth All Indian Handloom Census, 2019–20. There are 38 million women weavers in India today. Most of them belonging to traditional families of handloom weavers in India, and ever since they were young girls, they have been handling most of the pre-weaving work, such as preparation of the yarn and the looms, dying and/or tying and dyeing yarn and fabric, and embellishing garments by hand embroidering them. Even if women are not weaving, they will still be part of the allied workforce since it involves the entire family. Three allied workers are required by the main weaver for handloom, and they would be from the same family, involving womenfolk. They work long hours under difficult conditions yet receive lower wages than men. Alongside weaving, many women must also manage domestic responsibilities, adding to their physical and emotional burden. The lack of formal recognition and financial independence further limits their growth opportunities. Additionally, health issues such as vision problems and musculoskeletal disorders are common due to the intricate and repetitive nature of their work. Ensuring better wages, access to healthcare, and training programs is essential to empowering women weavers and securing their long-term participation in the industry.

The modernization of the Indian handloom industry ironically pushes women more firmly towards the margins. Their earlier participation in contributing to the handloom sector is dwindling at a fast pace due to factors such as the mechanisation of looms, the rise of middlemen, and opportunistic city-based designers.

Most of the profits are pocketed by middlemen and the many greedy fashion garment retailers. Health issues resulting from poverty add to their misery. Tuberculosis, anaemia, asthma, fading eyesight, and various skin and bone-related problems are common. Over 50% of the women are semi-literate or illiterate, making them heavily dependent on men, be it, husband or sons. The school drop-out rate among girls in their families is also quite high. They are neither given the chance nor the encouragement to do the weaving on their own and increase the earnings of the family.

In spite of most efforts and time towards the completion of a handloom textile, the women have no say in the domain of sales, raw materials, design, etc. The family males usually get formally enlisted as the owners and primary workers, while women are enlisted primarily as housewives who assist men, hence are secondary workers. With the patriarchal nature of the Indian society that puts women in a lower status, to begin with, womenfolk automatically face gender discrimination in the workplace even when they function independently. Skilled women weavers are dominated even by their less experienced sons only because of gender discrimination.

Dharmavaram, a small town about 40km from Puttaparthi in the Sathya Sai district of Andhra Pradesh's Rayalaseema region, is renowned across India for its exquisite silk sarees, celebrated for their craftsmanship and elegance. The town has also earned global recognition for its thriving silk weaving industry.

Originally a humble weaving center with some 100 families working in handloom production, dharmavaram is now a successful handloom cluster. The tradition of weaving supports more than 28,000 weaver families in the Sri Sathya Sai district and the rest of the Rayalaseema region, making it a significant hub for India's rich textile heritage.

Dharmavaram sarees have been awarded a Geographical Indication (GI) tag by the Andhra Pradesh, acknowledging their cultural and artisanal value. Due to their widespread popularity, the area now has over 1,500 silk manufacturing units and over one lakh operational looms. With a turnover of the industry

in excess of ₹500 crores annually, the silk weaving industry is a key driver of rural economic development and livelihood sustenance.

Despite the prosperity of the Dharmavaram silk industry, weavers face numerous challenges that threaten the viability of traditional handloom weaving. Erratic raw silk prices, rising production costs, and competition from power looms put immense pressure on artisans. Many weavers struggle with low wages and irregular income, making it difficult to sustain their families. Additionally, middlemen often exploit them by reducing their profit margins, leaving weavers with minimal earnings despite the high market price of their sarees.

This research seeks to investigate the issues that women handloom weavers in Dharmavaram experience, who, although they make an important contribution, are marginalized in the sector. Gender discrimination, based on patriarchal attitudes, denies them any influence on important decisions related to sales, raw materials, and design, whereas men are legally acknowledged as major workers and owners. Women are usually classified as secondary labourers or supporting housewives, restricting their economic autonomy and career development. Even well-trained women weavers are dominated by less experienced male relatives, perpetuating workplace discrimination. This study aims to bring these systemic obstacles to light and push for policy interventions that support gender equality, formal recognition, and economic empowerment of women artisans in the Dharmavaram silk weaving sector.

Several studies, including A & Lawrence (2024) and Ramanathan (2016), stress the urgent need for focused interventions to address the persistent challenges faced by women in the handloom sector. A & Lawrence shed light on key issues such as extended working hours, meager wages, and limited awareness of government welfare schemes, proposing that self-help groups can serve as effective tools for empowering women and improving their financial stability. Ramanathan (2016), on the other hand, offers a historical lens, highlighting how women's participation in socio-political movements and access to education have gradually shifted the narrative from mere development to true empowerment. Both studies collectively underline the importance of systemic reforms that ensure gender equality, social recognition, and economic autonomy for women artisans.

### Objectives of the study:

- To identify the key challenges faced by women traditional handloom weavers in Dharmavaram
- To examine the relationship between the number of hours spent on weaving and the prevalence of health problems among women weavers.
- To analyse the impact of educational qualifications on the average monthly income earned by women through weaving.
- To assess the association between job security and income levels among women engaged in weaving activities.
- To study how different mediums of selling products affect the role of middlemen and their influence on the profit margins of women weavers.

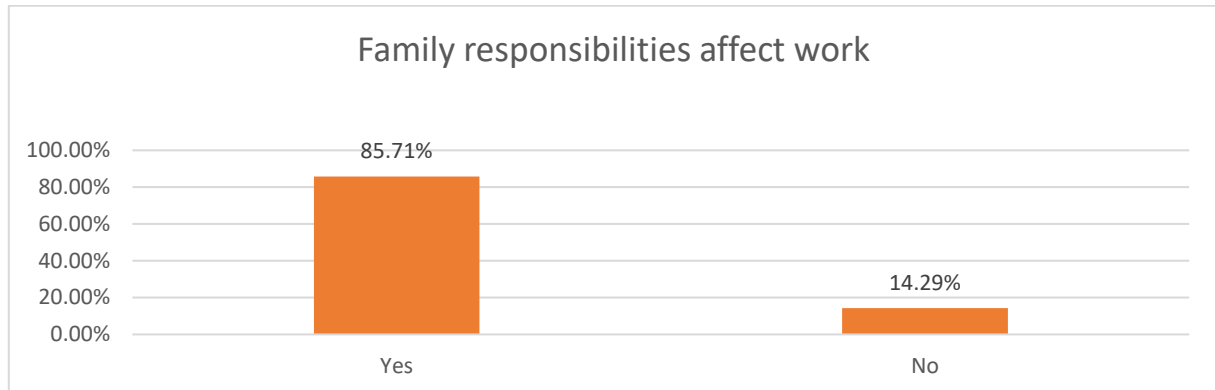
### Results and Discussions:

The present study was carried out in Dharmavaram, a major silk weaving cluster in the Sri Sathya Sai District of Andhra Pradesh. A total of 42 women weavers were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on those directly involved in weaving or related activities. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire, capturing variables such as educational qualification, income level, work hours,

type of loom used, health issues, access to raw materials and government schemes, marketing practices, and family responsibilities. These variables helped identify the economic, social, and gender-based challenges faced by the participants. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative insights. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and participant confidentiality, were strictly followed.

## 1. The key challenges faced by women traditional handloom weavers in dharmavaram.

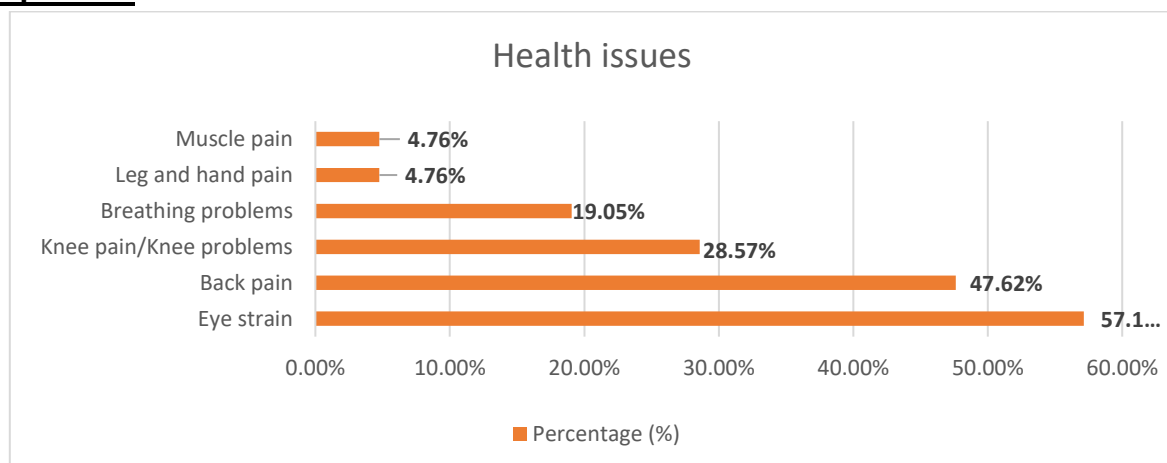
### Social problem:



**Fig.1.Family responsibilities affect work**

Figure 1 shows that majority (85.71%) of the respondents reported that family responsibilities affect their work as a weaver. This suggests that domestic and caregiving duties significantly burden women weavers, affecting their ability to focus on their weaving tasks. Only 14.29% of the respondents indicated that family responsibilities do not affect their work. This finding highlights that women weavers in Dharmavaram face a double burden of balancing work and family responsibilities, which affects their productivity and income potential.

### Health problem



**Fig.2 Health issues**

The statistics from Figure 2 point out that 57.14% of respondents reported eye strain due to prolonged focus on intricate weaving patterns, poor lighting, and close-up work. Eye strain is often associated with headaches, blurred vision, and reduced concentration, which negatively impacts productivity. 47.62% of the respondents experienced back pain, likely due to long hours of sitting in a fixed position while weaving. Prolonged sitting without proper lumbar support can lead to chronic back issues, further

deteriorating their health. 28.57% of respondents reported experiencing knee pain, which may be attributed to sitting for long hours without movement. Weavers often work in confined spaces with limited leg movement, increasing the risk of joint and knee problems.

19.05% reported breathing problems, most likely caused by prolonged exposure to cotton dust and lack of ventilation. Respiratory problems, if not treated, can lead to chronic conditions such as asthma. 4.76% of respondents reported muscle pain, indicating excessive strain on the body due to repetitive movements. Leg and hand pain is also reported by a small percentage, further emphasizing the physical toll of the weaving process.

## 2. The Association Between Experiencing Health Problems and Hours Spent on Weaving

**Null Hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>):** There is no association between experiencing health problems and hours spent on weaving.

**Alternative Hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>):** There is a significant association between experiencing health problems and hours spent on weaving.

**Table-1: Association Between Experiencing Health Problems and Hours Spent**

Test Statistics		
	Experiencing health problems	Hours spent on Weaving
<b>Chi-Square</b>	30.857 <sup>a</sup>	38.714 <sup>b</sup>
<b>df</b>	1	2
<b>Asymp. Sig.</b>	.000	.000
<b>Exact Sig.</b>	.000	.000
<b>Point Probability</b>	.000	.000
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 21.0.		
b. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 14.0.		

A non-parametric Chi-Square test was used to examine the relationship between experiencing health problems and the number of hours spent on weaving. The results showed a statistically significant association (Chi-Square = 30.857 and 38.714, p-value = 0.000). This indicates that the amount of time a person spends weaving is significantly linked to the likelihood of experiencing health issues. In other words, as the number of working hours increases, the probability of encountering health-related problems also rises. This could be due to prolonged physical exertion, poor posture, or lack of rest, which are commonly associated with intensive manual labour like weaving.

## 3. The Association Between the Education Level and Average Monthly Income from Weaving

**Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>):** Educational qualification does not affect the average income from weaving.

**Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>):** Educational qualification significantly affects the average income from weaving.

**Table-2: Results for the Association Between the Education Level and Average Monthly Income**

Test Statistics		
	Educational Qualification	Average Monthly Income from Weaving
<b>Chi-Square</b>	46.571 <sup>a</sup>	52.000 <sup>b</sup>

df	4	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000
Exact Sig.	.000	.000
Point Probability	.000	.000
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 8.4.		
b. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 14.0.		

The relationship between educational qualification and average monthly income from weaving was analysed using a non-parametric Chi-Square test. The findings were statistically significant (Chi-Square = 46.571 and 52.000, p-value = 0.000), suggesting a strong association between the level of education and the income earned from weaving. This implies that individuals with higher educational qualifications tend to earn more from weaving compared to those with lower education levels. This could be attributed to better management skills, exposure to market trends, or the ability to access and utilize profitable resources and techniques.

#### 4. The Association Between Job Security and Income from Weaving

**Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>):** There is no association between job security and income from weaving.

**Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>):** There is a significant association between job security and income from weaving.

**Table-3: Results for the Association Between Job Security and Income**

Test Statistics		
	Job Security	Income From Weaving
<b>Chi-Square</b>	21.429 <sup>a</sup>	29.429 <sup>b</sup>
df	1	3
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000
<b>Exact Sig.</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>
Point Probability	.000	.000
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 21.0.		
b. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 10.5.		

To assess the association between job security and income from weaving, a non-parametric Chi-Square test was conducted. The results revealed a significant relationship (Chi-Square = 21.429 and 29.429, p-value = 0.000). This indicates that job security is closely related to income stability among weavers. Those who perceive their weaving job as secure tend to have more consistent and possibly higher income levels. The finding underscores the importance of ensuring stable employment in the weaving sector to support the economic well-being of workers.

#### 5. The Association Between Medium for Selling Products and Influence of Middlemen on Profits

**Null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>):** The medium of selling has no association with the impact of middlemen on profits.

**Alternative hypothesis (H<sub>1</sub>):** The medium of selling significantly influences how middlemen affect profits.



**Table-4: Results for the Association Between Medium for Selling Products and Influence of Middlemen**

Test Statistics		
	Medium for Selling Products	Middlemen affect Profits
Chi-Square	35.286 <sup>a</sup>	9.524 <sup>b</sup>
df	2	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.002
Exact Sig.	.000	.003
Point Probability	.000	.002
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 14.0.		
b. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 21.0.		

A non-parametric Chi-Square test was employed to analyse the association between the medium used for selling products and the impact of middlemen on profits. The results were statistically significant (Chi-Square = 35.286 and 9.524, p-values = 0.000 and 0.002, respectively). This suggests that the way products are sold—whether directly to consumers, through shops, or via online platforms—has a significant effect on how middlemen influence weavers' profits. Selling directly or using online platforms may reduce reliance on middlemen, thereby increasing profit margins for the weavers.

## CONCLUSION

In dharmavaram, women weavers who weave handloom textiles are essential to preserving this traditional craft, yet the women weavers of dharmavaram face a complex array of challenges that affect their overall progress. These challenges include financial hardship, social inequality, and deteriorating health, all of which collectively limit their ability to advance. Studies and statistics indicate a clear link between long working hours and health problems, while higher education levels and stable jobs significantly enhance income. Despite these benefits, many women remain burdened with household chores, receive little recognition for their work, and continue to rely heavily on male family members for financial decisions and autonomy. The involvement of middlemen further diminishes their earnings, limiting the benefits they obtain from their labour. However, the growing availability of direct-to-consumer avenues and online marketing platforms offers a promising alternative that could shift power back to the weavers. To ensure lasting and meaningful empowerment, targeted measures are necessary to improve healthcare access, secure employment, address the exploitative role of middlemen, and expand opportunities for direct market participation.

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