

GI Tags and Women's Economic Empowerment in India's Handicraft Sector

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ABSTRACT

The handicraft sector in India is a vital domain for generating employment in rural areas, preserving cultural heritage, and earning export revenue. According to recent government and industry data, approximately 6.9–7.0 million artisans are engaged in handicrafts across the country, with over 56% of these workers being women. The high female presence in a traditionally informal sector points to significant gendered labour contributions. The introduction of Geographical Indication (GI) protection for region-specific crafts offers a potential mechanism to convert traditional artisanal labour into recognised, premium-value economic output. This transformation supports SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). This shift has the potential to elevate women artisans from informal workers to empowered stakeholders. This paper investigates whether GI tagging translates into real economic and social empowerment for women artisans in India, focusing on income augmentation, institutional participation, control over value chains, and social recognition. The study examines four representative GI-protected handicraft clusters across different regions and crafts. It demonstrates how women's economic outcomes vary across levels of institutional support, value chain structures, and market linkages. The analysis reveals that GI status holds significant potential for empowerment, but the actual benefits are highly uneven. Women fare better when they are supported by well-organised self-help groups (SHGs) or cooperatives that enable collective bargaining, quality assurance, and direct market access. In contexts where value-chain control remains male-dominated, and women artisans are excluded from high-value segments (design, marketing, export), GI tagging alone yields limited gains. The paper concludes that GI protection must be complemented by gender-sensitive institutional frameworks, access to finance, skill upgradation, and better integration into value chains for sustainable empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Geographical Indications (GI), Women Empowerment, Handicrafts, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Value Chains, India, Cultural Heritage, Gender, Rural Livelihoods, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

INTRODUCTION

India's handicraft sector is more than a cottage industry. It embodies centuries-old traditional knowledge and regional cultural expressions. It also supports the livelihoods of millions. In a country marked by social and economic inequalities, handicrafts serve as a vital means of survival for many households. This is especially true in rural and semi-urban areas where agricultural income is uncertain or migration pressures are high. Women play a crucial role in the sector. Yet this high labour participation rarely translates into proportional economic empowerment, resource ownership, or decision-making authority.

This gap directly contradicts the aspirations of SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The sector remains largely informal, with most enterprises operating without registration and artisans having limited access to institutional credit and formal markets. Control over key parts of the value chain, such as design, branding, pricing, and export, often rests with intermediaries or male traders. Consequently, despite their labour contribution, women artisans frequently remain marginalised in terms of earnings, agency, social recognition, and long-term economic security.

In recent decades, India's adoption of the GI framework, through the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, has opened up a new pathway. By legally protecting the identity of region-specific crafts and their traditional methods, GI aims to preserve cultural heritage. It also helps create brand value for authentic artisanal products. For handicrafts, GI recognition means potential access to premium markets, export orders, protection against imitation, and a differentiation advantage over mass-manufactured items.

For women artisans, GI holds the promise of transforming traditional crafts from informal labour into dignified and recognised economic activity. It also offers the potential to foster entrepreneurship. However, whether GI actually delivers on this promise depends on various structural, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. This paper examines the conditions under which GI tagging translates into meaningful economic and social empowerment for women artisans. Conversely, where and why does it fail? By examining empirical data and four distinctive craft clusters, the study explores the nuanced realities of GI-driven handicraft economies in India.

WOMEN ARTISANS, HANDICRAFTS AND GI IN INDIA

Official statistics from the Ministry of Textiles put the number of artisans in India's handicraft sector at 68.86 lakh (6.886 million), of which 38.61 lakh are female. This reflects a 56.13% share of women in the artisan workforce¹. Women comprise a significant portion of the handicraft workforce. This shows that the sector relies heavily on women's labour, particularly in embroidery, weaving, painting, pottery, lac work, and other crafts that are often conducted in or near the home.

On the demand side, the handicraft sector has shown robust performance. According to the latest data, India's handicraft exports in FY2024 were valued at approximately ₹31,095 crore (US\$3.8 billion)². This highlights not only the economic significance of the sector but also the global demand for traditional, handmade, and culturally distinct products. The growth in export potential heightens the stakes for authenticity, quality, and heritage branding, precisely the aspects GI protection seeks to safeguard. This strengthens the relevance of SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) in ensuring the authenticity and responsible branding of handmade goods. Yet, despite the high female labour participation and growing market demand, a stark gendered imbalance remains in enterprise ownership and control. According to reports, women entrepreneurs own only 22% of India's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), most of which are craft-related³.

The discrepancy between high labour input and low enterprise ownership suggests that women's role remains limited to manual production rather than decision-making or value capture. This institutional and structural context highlights a central tension. While GI offers the potential for upward mobility and economic recognition. Yet, women artisans may remain marginalised in the absence of supportive frameworks.

A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF FOUR ARTISAN CLUSTERS

To understand how GI-protected handicraft clusters function in practice, the study examines four such clusters. It also assesses whether these GIs contribute to women's empowerment. The clusters include Pashmina shawls from the northern region of Jammu and Kashmir, Channapatna toys from southern Karnataka, Madhubani painting from the eastern region of Bihar, and Kutch embroidery from western Gujarat. These purposively selected cases represent diverse craft traditions, regional contexts, and institutional arrangements. They also reflect different positions within the value chain. This enables a detailed examination of how GI status impacts women's economic and social outcomes.

Kutch Embroidery (Gujarat)

Kutch Embroidery, celebrated for its intricate mirror-work, vibrant colours, and tribal motifs, is practiced across several districts in Gujarat by tribal and pastoral communities, including Ahir, Rabari, and Meghwal. Traditionally, women from these communities have been the primary practitioners. Over time, the craft became informal wage labour mediated by intermediaries, often leading to exploitation and undervaluation of artisans' skills. Kutch embroidery received Geographical Indication (GI) registration in March 2013. Following its inclusion in India's GI list, women-led organisations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Qasab Kutch Craftswomen Producer Co. Ltd., and the Shrujan Trust stepped in to collectivise artisans. These organisations provided training in finishing, quality standards, design catalogues, and facilitated direct links to urban retail and export markets.

The combined effect of GI recognition and institutional support has been substantial. Qasab, for instance, comprises approximately 1,200 master craftswomen from 11 ethnic communities across 62 villages⁴.

“Hari Jari” and Women's Leadership

Pabiben Rabari's journey from a daily wage worker to a skilled artisan and entrepreneur is a powerful source of inspiration. Born into hardship, she supported her widowed mother from a young age by doing daily wage work. Without access to formal education, she learned traditional Rabari embroidery from her mother. Pabiben turned her mastery of traditional Rabari embroidery into a successful enterprise. For example, Pabiben, a Rabari artisan from Kutch, employs over Sixty women in her community to produce unique “Hari Jari” embroidered bags and accessories. Her *Pabi bags* have become popular among craft enthusiasts and celebrities alike.

Within the Rabari community, embroidery was historically tied to dowry obligations, placing heavy burdens on women and delaying their autonomy. She reimagined this tradition as a livelihood rather than a liability. By transforming customary embroidery into market-oriented products, she created sustainable income opportunities for rural women.

Pabiben has taken Rabari embroidery to global markets through her online platform. Thus, transforming it from a local craft into a global voice. Beyond economic gains, Pabiben's work has strengthened women's confidence, social recognition, and decision-making power within their households and communities. Rooted in a Gandhian vision of rural self-reliance, her Rural Business Model promotes sustainable village development. It demonstrates how craft-based entrepreneurship can foster women's empowerment while preserving cultural heritage.

During the early phases of post-earthquake reconstruction in 2001, the number of women working with Shrujan Trust rose from around 2,200 to over 5,000 within a few months, as embroidery emerged as a stable source of livelihood⁵. These initiatives improved women's incomes, bargaining power, and social recognition, aligning with SDG 5, SDG 8, and SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities). As a result, the interventions not only strengthened women's economic position but also enhanced their social recognition.

Additionally, individual entrepreneurs, such as Pabiben Rabari, have further exemplified the transformative potential of this craft⁶. Founder of Pabiben.com, based in Bhadroi village, Kutch, Pabiben has turned her mastery of traditional Rabari embroidery into a successful enterprise. Her business is women-led and employs over sixty local artisans. Through her initiative, she not only created a sustainable livelihood for women but also empowered them to gain confidence, social recognition, and a sense of ownership over their cultural heritage.

Women began to see themselves as custodians of cultural heritage, rather than wage workers, and gained greater respect within their households and communities.

Despite these successes, benefits remain uneven. Artisans outside cooperative networks, particularly in remote or marginalised villages, continue to sell through middlemen at low wages. Additionally, cheap machine-made embroidery labelled as “Kutch style” has flooded the market, undermining both the value of authentic crafts and the bargaining power of genuine artisans. Without strict enforcement of GI certification and wider market awareness, the advantages of GI recognition risk being diluted.

Madhubani Painting (Bihar)

Madhubani painting was historically practised by Maithil women as ritual wall art on the mud walls and floors of their homes. Over time, it has evolved from a domestic cultural tradition into a recognised craft-sector activity. Its transformation accelerated after the painting received GI status in 2007–08⁷. This recognition formalised authenticity and opened the door to legal and commercial protection. A 2023 report estimated that more than 10,000⁸ artisans continue to practise Madhubani painting as a primary or supplementary livelihood, indicating the scale of its contemporary economic relevance. Furthermore, cottage-industry reports from the region indicate pre-pandemic monthly turnovers of ₹25–30 lakh, demonstrating the sector’s substantial market presence.

Women artisans increasingly organised themselves into structured collectives as Madhubani painting shifted from a domestic practice to a market-linked craft. For example, under JEEViKA⁹, several villages in Madhubani district formed Producer Groups. As of 2020, it had organised more than 1.03 million¹⁰ SHGs across rural Bihar, including many focused on non-farm artisan and craft livelihoods. In these groups, women received seed capital to purchase handmade paper and natural colours. Through JEEViKA, rural women collectively mobilised substantial financial resources. SHG members accumulated nearly ₹1,056.90 crore in savings, and the programme facilitated access to over ₹10,650 crore in bank credit.¹¹ This credit access enabled women to invest in productive livelihoods rather than relying solely on irregular labour. They also collaborated to create paintings and sold them through JEEViKA’s artisan platform, Shilpgram Mahila Producer Company. Shilpgram initially brought together 13 producer groups across three districts. These groups worked on crafts such as Madhubani painting, Sikki craft, Sujani embroidery, stitching, and lac bangles. At launch, approximately 400 artisans were affiliated with the company¹². In the fiscal year 2019–20, the company earned approximately ₹50 lakhs¹³ from the sale of crafts and handloom products. This demonstrated real economic activity and strong market linkages. This model advances SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8 (Decent Work) by providing women access to credit, training, and formal markets. Yet, challenges remain in scaling international outreach and ensuring equitable returns across all artisan groups.

This model gave many first-time artisans access to steady work and formal markets. Social enterprises such as MITHILAsmita created their own clusters of women artists who were trained to create Madhubani designs on textiles, garments, stationery and home décor items. These clusters included women from

villages such as Ranti, Jitwaripur, and Simri¹⁴. In these villages, traditional wall painters learned to transform their art into contemporary products. These products could be sold in urban boutiques and on online stores. NGO initiatives added another layer of support. A clear example is the MG SocialCare Foundation's 2024 workshop in Hajipur, which brought together fifty rural women and trained them to paint on canvas bags, apparel and framed artworks. The programme enabled participants to earn independently by selling their work at small exhibitions and local craft fairs.

The Journey of “Petals Crafts¹⁵”

Petals Crafts, established in 1991, is a women-led cultural enterprise that reflects resilience, vision, and a commitment to self-reliance within a deeply patriarchal social context. Since its inception, the enterprise has grown from a small home-based initiative into a recognised organisation with national and international reach. Registered under the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises programme of the Government of India, Petals Crafts has represented Bihar's traditional arts on international platforms, including the India Show in St. Petersburg in 2009 and the World Indian Festival in Singapore in 2014. Although not directly engaged in exports, its products have accessed global markets through exhibitions and non-resident Indian networks. Within India, Petals Crafts supplies major institutional clients, including Indian Railways, the State Bank of India, and the Government of Bihar. Its Mithila paintings have been featured on trains such as the Gareeb Rath and Sampurna Kranti, contributing to the visibility of traditional art in public spaces.

Beyond commercial activity, Petals Crafts serves as a vehicle for empowering women economically. The enterprise primarily works with women artisans across Bihar, enabling them to transform their traditional skills into sustainable livelihoods. Key interventions include facilitating access to formal banking and digital payment systems, thereby contributing to the formalisation of income. The organisation also follows eco-friendly business practices, including the complete avoidance of plastic in its operations.

To deepen and institutionalise its social impact, Mithila Vikas Kendra was established in 2008 as part of the enterprise's corporate social responsibility framework. The organisation focuses on skill development, resource mobilisation for women-led micro-enterprises, and market access, primarily through women's self-help groups. It also supports education and health awareness initiatives for artisans and their families.

Together, Petals Crafts and its allied initiatives demonstrate how entrepreneurship rooted in cultural heritage can serve as a powerful instrument for women's economic empowerment and social recognition, positioning the enterprise as both a sustainable business model and a catalyst for social change.

Within this broader ecosystem of collective organisation and institutional support, individual women entrepreneurs have also emerged as key agents of transformation. One such example is Usha Jha, a woman artisan and entrepreneur from Bihar whose work draws deeply on the cultural traditions of Mithilanchal. Mithila art, historically associated with *kohbar* paintings created during weddings, was traditionally confined to domestic walls. Usha Jha reimaged this art form by adapting it to sarees, cloth, and paper, thereby extending its reach beyond ritual spaces and into commercial markets.

This innovation gradually evolved into a sustainable livelihood model. What began in a single room of her Patna home grew into “Petals Craft”, an enterprise that today produces Madhubani paintings across

nearly fifty product categories, including bags, stoles, lamps, and household items. Starting with only a few women artists, Usha Jha steadily expanded her network, and more than 300 trained women now work with her as independent artisans¹⁶. To strengthen and institutionalise this work, she established the NGO Mithila Vikas Kendra in 2008. The organisation focuses on women's financial empowerment and supports skill development, health awareness, and education for artisans and their children, primarily through women's self-help groups. In this way, Usha Jha's entrepreneurial journey reflects and reinforces the broader structural shift of Madhubani painting—from a domestic art form to a market-linked craft that enables women's economic empowerment.

These cases demonstrate how various organisational models, including state-supported groups, social-enterprise clusters, and NGO workshops, have collectively expanded opportunities for women Madhubani artisans, enabling them to secure livelihoods while preserving their cultural heritage.

Crafting Heritage Through Skill

The Channapatna Crafts Park was started ten years ago. Its goal is to revive and promote the traditional craft of Channapatna toys. The park is supported by state and central government agencies. It helps many toy-making units and provides access to modern woodworking tools. The park also runs training programmes for new artisans.

The director, Sreekala Kadidal, said the nearby expressway affects only a few shopkeepers. She said demand for lacquerware, especially educational toys, is growing in India and abroad. Last year, the park trained 300 artisans. Women are encouraged to join and earn extra income in their free time.

Channapatna Lac Toys (Karnataka)

Channapatna, locally known as *Gombegala Ooru* or “toy town,” has a toy-making tradition dating back to the 18th century, where skilled artisans, primarily men, have long specialised in wood-turning and lacquer work. After GI registration, demand increased and production patterns shifted. A Maya Organic-linked firm exported ₹80 lakh worth of toys that year¹⁷, mostly to Europe, and aimed to expand into the U.S. market. Women began entering the craft, primarily in lacquer finishing, painting, packaging, and other value-added tasks of low value. Women-led groups like the Annapoorneshwari SHG¹⁸ work to preserve the traditional toy-making heritage of the region while supporting the economic empowerment of women. For many women, toy-making provided a small but reliable income that helped cover household expenses, supported children's schooling, and enabled modest savings. Evidence from Maya Organic illustrates this shift clearly. Forty women who once relied on beedi-rolling and earned only ₹4,000–5,000 per month now receive a regular wage of ₹10,500 through organised toy production¹⁹. This substantial rise in income highlights how formal training and structured employment in the Channapatna craft cluster improve women's economic stability.

However, major inequalities persisted. The most important tasks, including wood-turning, design, marketing, and export compliance, continued to be handled by male master artisans. Women were confined to low-margin activities. Even with GI-driven visibility, their share in total value addition remained very small. Many SHG units also lacked capital and skills to meet export-quality standards. As a result, women mostly supplied lower-value domestic markets. Their long-term economic gains remained limited. Channapatna shows a clear lesson that women cannot achieve substantial empowerment from GI benefits unless they have access to high-value roles such as design, branding, and export.

Kashmiri Women Earn with Modern Charkha

Me & K is a shawl-manufacturing company founded in Srinagar in 2021 by Syed Mujtaba Qadri. It has revived the traditional practice of spinning pashmina and silk yarn among Kashmiri women. The company introduced modern foot-operated table-top charkhas. These make spinning faster, safer, and more convenient. Women can now work from home. Around 300 women have been provided with charkhas and trained to spin yarn. They earn up to Rs 5,000 per month. The initiative offers women from conservative households a sustainable livelihood. It also preserves a centuries-old craft that had declined due to political instability and the pandemic. Me & K purchases the yarn from these women for its hand-woven shawls. The program combines skill revival with economic empowerment and personal growth.

Pashmina Shawl Craft (Jammu & Kashmir)

Pashmina wool and shawls are among India's most prestigious handicrafts, celebrated for their fine craftsmanship and strong global demand. On August 5, 2013, Kashmiri Pashmina was granted GI certification²⁰. This certification has helped reinforce its brand value, guarantee authenticity, and boost its appeal among buyers both nationally and internationally. Production traditionally moves through several stages, starting with fibre collection and spinning, followed by weaving, and culminating in the processes of finishing, dyeing, marketing, and export. Recognising the potential of this sector, state-level rural livelihood missions promoted the formation of Umeed SHGs, which consisted of women spinners. With growing demand for certified Pashmina products, these groups started supplying hand-spun yarn directly to weaving units, such as Me & K²¹. The modern foot-operated charkha is enabling Kashmiri women to earn a living by spinning yarn from home.

The GI tag strengthened the legitimacy of their product as “authentic Pashmina,” increasing demand and enhancing their bargaining power. For instance, following GI-tagging, exports of handicrafts from the region, including Pashmina shawls, nearly doubled, rising from ₹563.13 crore in FY 2021–22 to ₹1,116.37 crore in FY 2022–23²². Consequently, women spinners and their families experienced modest gains in economic security and social recognition. Their specialised skill in producing raw Pashmina yarn gained greater visibility. This skill is a vital but previously undervalued part of the value chain. However, several structural constraints continue to limit meaningful empowerment. The high-value stages of the chain, including weaving, finishing, branding, packaging, and export, remain dominated by male traders and exporters, many of whom operate outside the Valley.

Despite being essential producers, women spinners rarely receive a share of the substantial profits generated from finished shawls. Additionally, political instability, supply chain disruptions, machine-made²³ and challenges in meeting export standards limit their ability to integrate into broader markets. Consequently, although the GI tag has boosted demand for raw Pashmina yarn, the economic gains for women spinners remain modest and fragile, and long-term empowerment is far from assured.

WHY DON'T GI BENEFITS REACH WOMEN ARTISANS?

Despite the promising link between GI protection and women's economic empowerment, multiple challenges continue to constrain the full realisation of benefits for women artisans. These issues operate at structural, institutional, and market levels, creating inequalities within craft value chains.

Limited Awareness and Access to GI Rights

Many women artisans lack awareness of their GI rights, the benefits of certification, enforcement mechan-

isms, and legal use rules. Research on GI implementation in India notes low awareness among producers about the benefits and legal implications of GI protection, which undermines uptake and effective management of GI tags. Studies on intellectual property rights in craft contexts highlight how intermediaries often capture the economic rent from traditional designs, leaving women artisans with little ability to benefit from GI branding. For instance, in traditional Nakshi Kantha supply chains, intermediaries and wholesalers commonly dominate market linkages and pricing, reducing the potential intellectual property value captured by women producers.

Inequitable Distribution of Market Benefits

Even when GI recognition increases visibility, profits and negotiation power often remain with male leaders or external agents, rather than with women artisans. Government data shows women make up a majority of artisans (64–71% in handloom and handicraft categories), but this does not always translate into leadership or market control²⁴. Studies on Indian handicraft entrepreneurship identify persistent gendered constraints in decision-making and business control despite high participation by women. In clusters where GI recognition increased product awareness, women weavers still often do not hold cooperative leadership positions or participate in sales negotiations, limiting their share of profits (similar dynamics are reported across craft sectors)²⁵.

Dominance of Middlemen and Exploitative Value Chains

Women artisans often rely on intermediaries for credit, raw materials, and market access, thereby reducing their bargaining power and profit shares. Literature on Indian handicraft livelihoods reveals that women artisans heavily rely on informal credit from middlemen, leading to debt cycles and exploitative pricing practices. Widespread reliance on intermediaries creates opaque pricing and lower returns for producers compared to end buyers or external agents. Across several rural handicraft clusters, women report selling products at undervalued rates due to dependency on local traders for advance payments and material supply.

Limited Design, Technology, and Innovation Support

Traditional techniques struggle to compete with machine-made goods; women artisans often lack design, technology, and digital marketing training. A sectoral study notes that handicraft workers (often women) have limited education, conventional marketing methods, and inadequate exposure to design and digital skills, which constrain their access to formal and global markets. Research highlights that less than half of the women Kantha artisans in a study reported awareness of online marketing avenues, limiting scalability and income diversification. In West Bengal's Kantha clusters, the majority of women artisans reported a lack of knowledge about online platforms, which hinders their market adaptability.

Gendered Constraints and Social Norms

Patriarchal norms, mobility restrictions, unpaid care workloads, and domestic responsibilities limit women's productive time and public engagement. Broader research finds women artisans face acute time poverty due to household responsibilities, often unpaid and unrecognised, limiting professional growth. Sector studies in India reveal how handicrafts are deeply embedded within domestic roles, making it socially challenging for women to attend exhibitions or negotiate access to markets. In many handicraft clusters, women artisans work around household duties and lack autonomy over income and mobility, reinforcing economic marginalisation.

Lack of Access to Finance and Institutional Credit

Women artisans often lack collateral or financial literacy, which limits their access to formal credit; instead, they often rely on informal loans with high interest rates. Sector research identifies limited access

to working capital and formal loan structures, with women artisans relying on moneylenders or middlemen credit, often with unfavourable terms. Government scheme data indicate that support reaches large numbers, but financial inclusion remains uneven, particularly for women in the informal handicraft sector²⁶. Women in the handloom and handicraft sectors often report that banks view craft-based livelihoods as risky, making it difficult to secure loans without male guarantors.

Insufficient Branding, Packaging, and Global Marketing

GI tag alone doesn't ensure market traction; women producers face a lack of branding resources, marketing channels, and intellectual property enforcement. Commentary on GI challenges notes that weak enforcement against counterfeiting and the absence of marketing linkages limit the economic value of GI recognition. Research in the handicraft sector highlights the need for improved market intelligence, brand development skills, and digital literacy, particularly among women artisans. Despite thriving GI crafts like Toda Embroidery and Sujani embroidery, local women artisans struggle to leverage GI status into premium pricing and export markets without structured branding support.

Fragmented Policy and Coordination Gaps

Government support schemes are often disjointed, poorly communicated, and lacking gender-targeted monitoring, reducing their effectiveness. Policy analyses highlight that India's handicrafts support ecosystem involves multiple institutions with limited coordination, which diminishes collective impact on craft clusters. Even where large numbers of artisans are registered under government schemes (e.g., Pehchan), targeted evaluation of gender-specific impacts remains weak²⁷. While over 32 lakh artisans are registered nationally (with significant female representation), the evaluation of scheme outcomes by gender remains limited, indicating policy/monitoring gaps.

POLICY PATHWAYS FOR SUPPORTING WOMEN ARTISANS

The findings of this study suggest that targeted, gender-sensitive interventions are essential for ensuring that GI protection translates into meaningful empowerment for women artisans. To begin with, women's participation must be strengthened across the entire value chain. This requires enabling them to move beyond low-value activities such as spinning, painting, and finishing, and creating pathways into design, branding, quality certification, retail negotiations, and export compliance. Women-led cooperatives, SHGs, and producer companies should be promoted and supported, building on successful models such as SEWA, Qasab, and JEEViKA. Such organisations should receive policy incentives, simplified registration processes, and tailored marketing support, enabling women to collectively bargain and access markets more effectively. At the same time, gender-sensitive enforcement of GI rights is crucial. Awareness campaigns must inform women artisans about certification rules and legal protections. Stronger monitoring systems must also be implemented to curb counterfeits and machine-made imitations that erode the value of authentic GI crafts. Expanding women artisans' access to institutional credit, working capital, and financial literacy is equally important. Special credit lines, low-collateral loans, and digital banking support can significantly enhance women's capacity to invest in raw materials and scale their production. Alongside financial inclusion, strong support for market capacities, especially in branding, packaging, digital literacy, and e-commerce is essential. Establishing district-level GI marketing facilitation centres, providing training in online selling, and integrating GI crafts into tourism and heritage circuits can substantially widen market outreach. Design innovation should also be prioritised through collaborations between artisans and design institutes, ensuring that GI crafts remain competitive while retaining cultural authenticity. Addressing gender norms and social constraints is another critical

component. Safe mobility, women-friendly workspaces, and childcare facilities within craft clusters can significantly reduce the burden of care and increase women's productive time.

Furthermore, greater coordination among government agencies is necessary, along with the implementation of gender-disaggregated monitoring of all GI-related schemes. Ministries responsible for textiles, rural development, handicrafts, and commerce must work together to streamline interventions and eliminate duplication. Annual evaluations should track women's participation, incomes, leadership roles, and access to credit to ensure accountability. Finally, transparent and ethical value chains must be created by encouraging direct procurement from women's collectives, implementing fair pricing guidelines, and using traceability technologies like QR codes to publicly recognise women artisans' contributions. Collectively, these measures can build an enabling ecosystem in which GI protection becomes a genuine instrument of women's economic and social empowerment rather than a symbolic label that reinforces existing inequalities.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated whether GI protection translates into meaningful economic and social empowerment for women artisans in India's handicraft sector. Evidence from four representative GI-protected craft clusters—Kutch embroidery, Madhubani painting, Channapatna toys, and Pashmina shawls indicates that GI status alone is insufficient to generate transformative empowerment. Instead, outcomes depend critically on value chain structures, the nature and strength of institutional support, the presence of collectivisation mechanisms, and women's position within production and marketing systems.

Across clusters, women remain the backbone of production. However, their work often remains confined to low-value segments, such as embroidery finishing, painting, lacquering, or yarn spinning, which limits their ability to capture the enhanced economic rents associated with GI-protected crafts. While GI recognition can open avenues for higher prices, authenticity branding, and premium markets, the benefits for women are often modest. Intermediaries, male traders, or external agencies frequently control design, pricing, and market linkages. Gender norms, restricted mobility, limited access to credit, low digital literacy, and inadequate exposure to design innovation further constrain women's capacity to leverage GI-driven opportunities.

Nonetheless, clusters with strong institutional ecosystems demonstrate that GI protection can foster significant improvements in income, bargaining power, and social recognition. In Kutch, organisations such as SEWA and Qasab, and in Bihar, initiatives like JEEViKA and Shilpgram, show that when women are collectivised through SHGs, cooperatives, or social enterprises, they gain better access to quality raw materials, bank credit, training, and curated markets. In these contexts, women also develop a clearer sense of ownership over cultural heritage and enhanced decision-making authority within households and community networks.

Overall, the study confirms that GI protection has substantial potential to empower women artisans. However, its benefits are uneven and depend on gender-sensitive institutional arrangements, equitable participation in the value chain, and sustained capacity building. Without targeted interventions, GI risks reinforce existing inequalities rather than closing them. For GI to function not merely as a commercial marker but as a tool of gender-equitable development, it must be embedded within broader systems of support. These systems should recognise women not only as producers but also as stakeholders, entrepreneurs, and custodians of India's craft heritage.

These suggestions closely align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Strengthening institutional support for women artisans advances SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by promoting equal economic participation, enhancing leadership opportunities, and reducing structural barriers to knowledge, credit, and markets. Capacity-building initiatives, fair-trade mechanisms, and improved governance of producer groups contribute to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by formalising women's labour, ensuring fair wages, and fostering inclusive value chains. Additionally, improving GI implementation, safeguarding traditional craft knowledge, and ensuring ethical commercialisation uphold SDG 11.4 (Protecting Cultural and Natural Heritage) by preserving intangible heritage and supporting communities engaged in heritage-based livelihoods. Together, these strategies position GI-protected handicrafts as a powerful tool for achieving gender-responsive, culturally grounded, and locally sustainable development.

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