Skill Building for Scale and Sustainability for Women Artisans in India: Understanding the Policy Landscape

Abstract

The handicraft industry in India is highly feminized, not only because it is highly labour intensive, and provides minimal income, but because it is considered *women*'s work. This devaluation of women's work also leads to specific forms of invisibilisation of their needs and requirements related to capacity building and skill enhancement. One of the major challenges that women face in terms of practicing their craft is the policy push towards 'scale'. On the one hand, government policies assume that sustainability of livelihoods is a problem of scale, and have pushed towards mechanization of production. Conversely, artisans and civil society actors have articulated that skills training must focus on enhancing traditional knowledge systems of the artisans themselves, and nurturing their independence, agency and creativity to create sustainable livelihoods. To understand this contentious relationship, this paper will use data emerging from a year-long study that examines women's craft production in two specific craft industries in Karnataka, India – Ilkal sarees in Bagalkot , and Channapatna toys in Channapatna – and will (1) document the systematic ways in which sustainability of craft is tied to both the livelihoods and identities of women, and (2) how skill-building can be leveraged to build scale and sustainability for women artisans.

1. Introduction: The Gendered Artisan

The handloom and handicraft practices (referred to as craft practices henceforth) have a rich history in the Indian subcontinent and are an indelible part of India's historicity. India has a long-standing tradition of producing several forms of handlooms and handicrafts including Paithani, Kalamkari, Kanjivaram, Ikat, Kasavu, Sambalpuri, Lepcha, Chikankari, Jamdani and Pasmina and handicrafts such as Bidriware, Bamboo and Cane craft, Madhubani paintings, Dhokra, Kashmiri Carpets, Gond art, Warli paintings, Pattachitra, and Tanjore paintings, to name just a few. As is true for handlooms and handicrafts all over the world, the artistic resplendence of these crafts that are manifested through vivid imagination is also equally a product of arduous physical labour. While being utilitarian, they are embedded in the idea of cultural heritage, traditions, creativity and are replete with religious and cultural symbolism (Majeed, 2018). More importantly, even while handicrafts and handlooms are an

aesthetic public good, they are also a means of livelihoods for many marginalised communities.

A glimpse into the global scenario puts the significance of craft practices in perspective. According to a 2020 World Bank Report, 78% of globally unorganized workforce is engaged in handicraft work and 87% of the handicraft workforce globally, comprises women artisans (Bhattacharjya, n.d). It is an established fact that India's economy is heavily dependent on agriculture, handicrafts and handlooms are the second largest sector that engages millions of Indian citizens within its terrain. It follows, but naturally that crafts work in India also engages a significant number of women artisans. The All-India Handloom Census (2019-2020) estimates that about 38 million women are part of the handloom industry, amounting to about 72% of the total handloom artisans (25,46,285 Women working…*)*. In 2019, the Ministry of Textiles estimated that amongst 7 million handicraft artisans in the country, 56% were women (Indian Handicraft Industry and Exports). From the preceding data, it is evident that crafts work constitutes a highly feminized sector. Most of the craft practices are also located within rural areas in India. For example, around 90% of weaver households alone are located in rural areas (Fourth All India Handloom Census). Despite these staggering figures, there has been a continuous decline in budgetary allocations (in proportion to the rising costs of production) towards handlooms and handicrafts (Reddy, 2014).

1.1 Challenges in the craft industry

Historically, craft practices along with agriculture constituted a robust, mutually interdependent ecosystem of self-sustenance even though issues of upward mobility, fair compensation and government support posed specific challenges. This ecosystem historically suffered a blow due to India's history of colonization as well as post-colonial economic processes of structural readjustments and liberalization. It is within the context of these three forces that the development vision and agenda for India's way forward was formulated. The economic reforms in the 1990s aimed to 'modernise' these practices which translated into investment in automation rather than focussing on providing subsidies to crafts (Reddy, 2014). Added to this, influences of global capitalism systematically derecognized the highly advanced and complex skill sets, knowledge and wisdom of artisans. The current categories of unskilled labour and informalized sector which are commonly applied to artisans, are products of the aforesaid forces.

With the fragmentation of the crafts ecosystem, its viability became a huge challenge. The sector has systematically seen a change in the gender composition of artisans; while men of the family migrated to cities, the family run craft enterprises were left to women to care for. Thus, women who took up craftworks were stepping into an ecosystem left behind in shambles. Currently, sustainability of the crafts, especially for women artisans, poses one of the main challenges to the sector. Women artisans face double marginalization: by virtue of their gender as well as their labor.

Craft work has predominantly been a physical labor-intensive endeavor. Whilst participation of a greater percentage of women has entailed greater livelihood

opportunities for women artisans, it has failed to ensure a decent living wage for them. Women's labour in crafts is severely underrated on two specific accounts: firstly women take part in those processes in the craft value chain that warrant drudgery, but which reaps negligible monetary remuneration, as is aptly demonstrated by Mies in case of women lace workers of Narsapur (1981). Secondly, the value of women's care work and unpaid domestic labor subsidizes the various stages of craft work, which again, is not recognized as part of the crafting process.

As an instance, many women in the weaving industry undertake the preparation of the raw materials – dying, tying, and embellishment of garments – activities crucial before the actual weaving takes place which is taken over by men. But what gets much more visibility is the more lucrative work done by men, including the buying of the raw materials, negotiating the sales of the materials, or being part of the decision-making process of future sales. Thus, artisans who are often 'recognised' as artisans are men. Even in government enumerations like the Census, men are listed as primary workers, and women listed as housewives or secondary workers.

The devaluation and designation of women's work as secondary translates to lower wages, as their work is often categorised as 'home-based' work. For example, in the garment industry, women are seen as "piece-rate" workers: receiving work from subcontractors and intermediaries and paid a piece-rate. They often lack direct access to the market, and depend on factories and contractors for purchase of raw materials. They often have to secure their own tools and have to bear the cost of electricity and infrastructure (SEWA, 2014). The lack of social protection and non-wage benefits adds to the precarity of the circumstances of their work. Moreover, there is no provision for refurbishment of any depreciation costs on equipment or reimbursement of transport costs associated with delivery of finished goods or acquiring raw materials incurred by the home-based workers (Mitra, 2021), and this holds true for women as well.

There are other structural reasons such as rampant poverty, ill health, and illiteracy (62%) that negatively influence women's capabilities and act as deterrents towards their full engagement in handloom and handicrafts production (Pande, 2016). These structural problems are also compounded by caste and religious discrimination. This was exemplified by our important field work observation in Channapatna. It was observed that while artisans from dominant communities had better access to self-help groups and work at artisan producer companies, it was artisans from marginalized communities that were involved in independent work who were being systematically deprived. Part of the reason was their exclusion from SHG groups and consequently, the benefits of collective bargaining and access to schemes.

Gender also acts as a deterrent on account of cultural notions. For example, there are cultural taboos around women's bodies (such as menstruation) that hinder their full participation. Women are often denied access to looms and tools during their menstrual cycles. Additionally, unpaid household labour and care work further exacerbate women's time poverty in the crafts industry. It is safe to assume that the current viability of craftwork heavily relies on the unacknowledged work done by women.

Moreover, the feminization of craft work and its systematic devaluation appear to be a mutually interdependent phenomenon.

1.2 Rationale and boundaries of the research

Our research study and our exploration of this study was motivated by several factors. From an economic point of view, handcrafted products provide an immense boost to India's economy. India is one of the largest exporters of handcrafted products globally. The global market for handloom products itself is valued around 353.9 million (Indian Handloom Industry) whereas the export value of handicrafts reached a staggering 3.5 billion in 2020, thus contributing 7% to India's GDP (Kumar, 2025). Handlooms and handicrafts especially provide employment to the marginalized communities in India predominantly women from these communities. Considering that the labor force participation rate in India is around 56% (India releases first-ever…), the sector presents itself as having a huge potential for employment generation. Additionally, the traditionally decentralized structure of the craft industry is one of its strengths because there exists a well-developed supply chain which decreases reliance on global imports (Reddy, 2019).

From a socio-cultural and historical point of view, craft practices are a part of India's rich intangible cultural heritage and are symbolic of resistance and resilience, both personal and political. Craft skills have been transferred intergenerationally through drastic historical, political as well as economic changes. Despite continuous adversities, craft practices have remained resilient and have stood the test of time. Their strength is also meaningful especially if we take into consideration their history of resisting British imports in the 1920s under the call for *Swadeshi* under the leadership of Gandhi (Bhattacharja, n.d). Despite low levels of literacy amongst artisans (whereby literacy and formal education can be considered as one of the many forms of knowledge systems), they consistently demonstrate an exceptional sense of artistic intuitiveness involving colors, textures and designs making these elements skillfully interact with each other (Ghose and Ali, 2023).

Rural economies have heavily relied on craft practices for self-sustenance whereby they offer superior ecologically sustainable livelihood options. Considering that India's ecological footprint is staggeringly high, (a whopping 1.5B hectares, ranking it as third in the world in 2025 according to World Population Review), a boost to handlooms and handicrafts can work towards a drastic reduction in our carbon footprint. There is low environmental impact in craft work since electrical consumption is minimal, use of chemicals is much lower, and the sector generates less non-biodegradable waste leading to reduced carbon emissions (Bhattacharja, n.d).

Lastly, if we view this through a gendered lens, craftwork is built on women's labour, creativity, and ideas. Apart from the fact that it provides flexibility in terms of time and space to women, there is tremendous entrepreneurial potential for women artisans as has been demonstrated by women led artisan producer companies.

1.3 Objectives

The objectives of the study are primarily twofold. The study aims to document (1) the systematic ways in which sustainability of craft is tied to both the livelihoods and identities of women, and (2) the role skilling programmes can potentially play in creating sustainable livelihoods for women. Other motivations are to:

1) Understand the policy landscape and map it with the needs expressed by women artisans
2) Understand gendered nature of craft production as well as supply chain to identify structural barriers faced by women artisans
3) Understand the landscape of skilling programs against the training and capacity building needs of women to devise gender sensitive pathways to scaling and sustainability of the crafts sector

1.4 Methodology/process

This study employed a qualitative research design, integrating policy analysis with field-based interviews to examine the craft sector in two identified craft clusters, particularly focusing on the skilling ecosystem for women artisans. The study was governed by principles of feminist inquiry inculcating an intersectional lens in the research design, data collection and data analysis processes. The specific methods undertaken are delineated below:

Secondary Literature Review: An extensive literature review was undertaken to understand the political economy of the crafts sector, its current status and its issues. Gender was a specific focus where we engaged with specific issues of women artisans as well as the gender neutrality of policies and programs designed for the sector. We undertook stakeholder mapping to chart out the craft production chain as well as the supply chain to delve deeper into how gender played out at each step of these cycles.

Policy Analysis

An extensive review of existing Union and State-level policies pertinent to the promotion of the craft sector was undertaken. The selection criteria for this secondary analysis encompassed policies aimed not only at enhancing the production of craft-based products, but also at the welfare and skill development of artisans and marginalized communities. This structured approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the policy landscape affecting the craft sector.

Key Informant Interviews

To supplement the policy analysis, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 domain experts who have engaged with artisan communities across various regions of the country. These key informant interviews provided insights into the general challenges faced by the sector and offered a nuanced understanding of the skilling landscape for women artisans. The qualitative data obtained from these interviews corroborated several findings from the policy analysis.

Field-Based Interviews

Further, the study incorporated interviews with women artisans and key stakeholders in the selected field areas of Bagalkot and Channapatna. A total of 28 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with women artisans to explore the value chains of specific crafts and to identify emerging needs within these communities. A snowball sampling technique was employed to identify 56 artisans across the two craft clusters, from which the 28 interviewees were selected. This approach facilitated the gathering of rich, contextual data pertinent to the research objectives.

2. Background on Ilkal and Channapatna

To understand the policy landscape that women artisans are functioning with, it is important to provide contextual information about the handicrafts itself. Both Ilkal sarees and Channapatna toys are situated in the Indian state of Karnataka. The two craft forms that we have chosen – Ilkal sarees and Channapatna toys – have historical roots in the region. Ilkal saree weaving in Karnataka started around the eighth century during the Chalukya dynasty (R. Kavitha, 2020). These sarees are renowned for their unique weaving technique, where the body and the pallu are woven separately and then joined together, often characterized by the distinctive "Tope Teni" border. The craft flourished under the patronage of the Vijayanagara Empire between the 14th and 17th centuries, which significantly influenced the designs and techniques used. Today, Ilkal sarees continue to be produced in the town of Ilkal, with the Ilkal saree weaving industry forming a crucial part of the state's textile sector and providing employment to around 20,000 weavers across more than 15,000 families, according to some estimates.

The women weavers in Ilkal have low literacy rates which is one of the reasons why other employment opportunities are difficult to access. Thus, women choose to take up weaving in circumstances where other options are not always available. Majority of women weavers are a part of joint families which means increased household responsibilities of domestic chores as well as care work. Many of the households sustain on products of just one loom; powerlooms are accessible to more affluent artisans. Since weaving skills have been transferred intergenerationally and women perceive it as “easy” work, they continue the endeavour even though some women artisans undertake other small jobs too. There is an overarching sense of dissatisfaction with the remuneration received for the work that artisans undertake. Moreover, women weavers seldom get access to markets which is predominantly considered to be a male endeavour. However, it was clear from the field visits that nothing could be further than reality. The essence of the labor that women invest into weaving and their expertise in the same has been succinctly captured in the following statement by one of the women weavers interviewed by a CBPS researcher: *“On the pit loom, coordination between the eyes, hands and legs are of utmost importance. If you mess up the rhythm even a little, it will ruin a whole line of design. Weaving shirts on the pit loom requires a lot more physical exertion and often, women do a much better job than men (Interview with S, Ilkal).”*

Channapatna toys also have some similar histories, but they are a much more recent craft form, as compared to Ilkal sarees. The toys traditionally associated with the town Channapatna are wooden lacquered craft, known for its design, varieties, durability, and non-toxic bright natural colours. Dating back to the 18th century, it has been recognized for its geographic uniqueness and is protected as a Geographic Indication (GI) under the World Trade Organization (WTO), administered by the Karnataka Government. According to recent estimates, around 1200 to 4000 artisans rely entirely on Channapatna toys for their livelihood.

Our fieldwork in Channapatna led us to meet women entrepreneurs, independent women artisans as well as those working for artisan producer companies. Interventions by NGOs like Maya Organics have definitely led to involvement of more women in the craft. But as was true for Ilkal, women participated in making a part of the entire product which fetched less price for them. There is little scope for design innovation as women work on predetermined orders with set designs. Design innovation, wherever applicable, was taken up by men artisans. One of the very moving aspirations shared by a woman artisan during the fieldwork was the expression of her desire to be trained in making the entire product so that she could see and feel the same which would bring her a sense of pride.

One of the primary reasons for focusing on these two craft forms in our study is because these are also the craft forms that are of particular interest to the state government of Karnataka. The state is invested in ensuring that there is significant support provided to women artisans in these sectors, given the historical underrepresentation of women within these craft forms. While there have been some efforts by the state to include women within these traditional craft forms, these efforts have met with some challenges and constraints, some of which are listed below.

3. Challenges and Constraints faced by Women Artisans

Based on secondary literature, interviews with organisations working with artisans, and interviews conducted with some artisans themselves, we were able to establish some preliminary challenges and constraints that are particularly faced by women artisans.

Artisan identity: One of the major challenges faced in both the craft forms was that women were not seen as *artisans*. Even while they performed the majority of the tasks, these were considered 'preparatory' and therefore, unskilled. So, not only were they not recognized for their skills or knowledge, but they were also treated as workers rather than artisans. Because women were only seen as 'workers,' they were not always aware of the entire supply chain of the craft form. This meant that women were almost always at a disadvantage, whether it was related to wages, skills, or opportunities for specialization or expertise.

Women's role in the craft chain: When we studied the craft chains of Ilkal and Channapatna closely, we realized that certain processes which were labour intensive

and less remunerative were entirely taken up by women. The issue of sustainability is thus a highly gendered one posing the question whether the said parts of the craft chain are less remunerative because women do that work or vice-versa.

Poor working conditions: Working hours and conditions for many of the artisans, whether that was related to preparing materials or making the artifacts, were very poor, with cramped spaces, no relief from varying temperatures, and few rest periods.

Economic viability of the sector: The economic viability of crafts in both the sectors is severely undermined by competition from mass production and globalizing forces. Other problems related to this are the lack of market access, difficulties in procurement of raw materials, rising production costs and the seasonal, sporadic and supplementary nature of the work.

Structural inequalities: The social structures and cultural perceptions around the production of the craft form perpetuate significant structural inequalities. As many craft forms are linked to specific caste categories, artisans are often unable to move beyond their inherited possessions and positions, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and marginalization.

Resource intensity: Both the craft forms are very labour and skill-intensive. Yet not only are there no social support for them, the burden of sustaining the craft form is often disproportionately borne by women. Because of the high labour associated, families associated with caste are also leaving the profession, leaving the sector vulnerable to even more penury.

4. Examining the Policy Landscape

Even though the challenges to the craft sector are well-documented, there have been glaring inadequacies related to policies. As a simple example, there are no relief programs specifically targeting the losses in market or any other exigencies for the artisans. The socio-economic conditions of artisans are also often neglected in government responses and interventions, and while there is focus on upgrading skills (in general), the form that it takes is not often in consultation with the artisans themselves (Solanki, 2008).

Policies fail to address the unique needs of artisans, such as market linkage and financial support tailored to the specificities of handicraft production (Solanki, 2008). For example, artisans' dependence on middlemen to negotiate the procurement of raw materials and selling their craft to the markets means two things. On the one hand, artisans are protected from the vagaries of the market forces, but on the other hand, they also lose opportunities to influence the markets. It is therefore important to examine policy responses, keeping in mind the needs and requirements of women artisans.

While the policy responses have been well-intentioned, when we examined the policy landscape (through a detailed listing and analysis of all policies associated) as well as interviewed artisans, we found that there were several challenges that were particular to the policy response of the government. The overarching issues with policies include inadequate enforcement of existing laws and schemes, government prioritizing of powerlooms, and weak protection of intellectual property rights(Planning Commission, 2012). For eg: in 1995 the Handloom Reservation Act reduced the number of handloom products within its purview from 22 to 11 which enabled cheap imitations and synthetic products to be sold unregulated in the markets adversely affecting and introducing unfair competition to handlooms(Reddy,2019) .

Some of the specific issues pertaining to policy interventions that we found during our study have been listed below:

Nature of interventions: Most of the interventions were designed to homogenise populations, were not context-specific or context-responsive, and expedited for bureaucratic convenience. The nuances of the craft forms, the history of the craft communities or the ecosystems and the gendered nature of craftwork were rarely taken into consideration.

Insufficiency of direct and practical support to artisans: Many artisans felt that governments at both state and central levels did not understand the precarity of crafts as a livelihood. Most welfare measures are either limited to insurance coverage (death or disability) or financial assistance. There is no protection against indebtedness, even though it is an extremely high-risk livelihood.

Implementation challenges in procurement of raw materials: Important policies targeting the craft sector recognise that raw material supply at a subsidized rate is important for the artisans. However, despite targeted focus on this through several initiatives such as the National Handloom Development Program and Comprehensive Handicraft Cluster Development Scheme, the beneficiaries do not receive the timely supply of raw materials which affects their production process.

Access to credit or financial information or training: While loans have been instituted both at the Centre and the State level government, it demands intensive documentation which is not available with the artisans. There is corruption in disbursement of loans as stated by artisans themselves in Channapatna. They then have to rely heavily on informal credit, often extended to them by local lenders, who set very exploitative conditions of repayment. The artisans are thus caught in a cycle of debt with every cycle of craft production beginning with a loan which is increasingly difficult to repay.

Nature of Skilling Programmes: The skilling initiatives by the government are quite ambitious. However, given that most of them are target- and certification-specific, they are geared towards procurement of jobs in the formal markets, rather than catering to

the specific issues plaguing the artisan communities including limited market access, lower income potential, and inadequate support systems.

Based on our secondary data analysis, the policies that exist for artisans do not specifically address their needs, and there appears to be minimal redressal government mechanisms in place to address the structural issues that hinder women's participation and growth within the craft industry.

5. Scale and Sustainability

The over-emphasis on 'scale' as the answer to the challenges is one of the prominent reasons for decline of the sector as well as reason for the failure of women artisans to be adequately supported. The idea of scale in crafts has been deliberated on in oppositional ways by different actors. While the solutions presented to the issues of artisans are often couched in terms of connections to markets or scaling of their products, how the achievement of 'scale' translates to sustainable and economically mobile livelihoods is not always clear.

On the one hand, government policies seem to push aggressively for mechanised production with power looms due to the greater quantity of products and perceived profits. The government's vision of scale appears to be a maximization of production of crafts for commercial purposes and an impulse to draw more artisans into this system of production. While production centers could help artisans meet quality standards and access markets, it requires systematic capacity-building and investment to achieve sustainability of production.

While the government is of the firm view that mechanisation is the only way in which crafts can be made sustainable, interviewees had an entirely different perspective. In their view, it was not feasible to think of scale in large terms for crafts. It was difficult to imagine traditional artisans being capable of producing such large quantities combined with high quality. In fact, one of the arguments raised was that smaller scales of production are better suited to sustaining the craft and livelihoods. It was continually discussed that if artisans were able to take on a limited number of orders at a time, they would be able to maintain the balance between remuneration and labour as well as cultivate the opportunity for artisans to determine their workloads. Thus, it was seen as more advantageous to keep the scale small. Smaller scale also meant that there was a particular form of responsiveness and flexibility that was built within the craft ecosystem. A constant scale of production also meant that different or changing needs of the buyers could not be catered to.

Thus, scale expansion was not considered as the immediate solution to craft being sustainable; instead, it was deemed better to focus on finding a balance between quality, product, and price point. As most crafts also have unique characteristics and components, artisans could make pieces that were sold at the appropriate price that reflects the value, rather than making bulk orders. For instance, Channapatna toys lose

their authenticity when they are substituted with synthetic dyes or different woods to cater to bulk demand. It is also difficult to make the traditional handmade toys in such quantities because they will be priced much higher and may not have as many consumers.

Another observation about the issue with scale expansion was that craft markets are limited in scope. Therefore, the ostensible benefits of a larger scale of production (more orders i.e., more profits) get further distributed, and even within a small group of artisans, some will not be able to gain the benefits of the profitability margins. One interviewee declared that given that craft markets are quite volatile, it was not easy for everyone to take risks with their production. Therefore, key entrepreneurial artisans should be supported to build an environment where their craft could thrive. It seemed that the consensus was that given the current circumstances of how markets and supply chains work, to reach a fairly reasonable compromise between adequate remuneration and decent work, smaller scales of production were more beneficial. In these conversations, scale and sustainability are not only discussed in conjunction with each other, but also with another critical aspect: skilling or skill-building.

6. Skill and Sustainability

In our extensive review of the literature as well as existing policies that are related to skill programmes for artisans in India, we found that one of the major connections made between scale and sustainability was *skilling*. Many civil society organisations working with artisans felt that if there were comprehensive, sensitive, and responsive capacity building frameworks built into the state programmes that support artisans, the sustainability through smaller scales can be possible. However, a few of the challenges related to capacity building or skilling programmes are summarized below.

Women Participation in Skilling Programmes and Workforce after skilling is skewed: The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) began the Skill India initiative in July 2015. Since then, it has improved the lives of over 35.36 lakh women by enabling them to get better and more employment via skill development. During its trial period, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) trained 19.85 lakh applicants for 375 employment positions. Around 2.53 lakh applicants have reportedly placed out of the total training candidates amongst whom women shared a tiny portion (Prabhakar and Nimesh, 2022). For women aged fifteen and above, skilling schemes / programmes and vocational training in both formal and informal sectors show a considerable gap compared to men. Specifically, in rural area, the percentage of women receiving formal vocational training is significantly lower than men, which in turn means that they are unable to participate fully in the crafts economy.

Resources for skilling are very limited: Although the budget allocations for skill development have seen a significant rise from Rs. 98.55 crore in 2019-20 to Rs. 493.34 crore in 2020-21, there have been significant gaps in the skilling ecosystem in the

handloom and handicraft sector. The push from the government in terms of budgetary allocations does not necessarily translate into improved livelihoods of artisans as even with an increased budget for skilling, the number of weavers in Ilkal has declined by 75%from 20,000 to 5000 artisans in just a decade (Goudar, 2019).

Infrastructural constraints: Infrastructural deficiencies such as clean workspaces, storage facilities, safe drinking water, access to roads, and electricity supply hinder the productivity and economic stability of the sector and often create precarious outcomes for women.

Nature of skilling programs: Skill development programs often do not include training in modern design techniques, quality control, or market trend analysis. This limits the ability of artisans to innovate and meet the demands of contemporary markets.

Identity of artisan neglected: Often, the skilling programmes are not focused on asserting ownership of one's creative endeavors – this was one of the crucial elements that artisans felt lacked in most training programmes. They felt that the skilling frameworks should, along with remunerative livelihoods, be focused on the way their Identities and Livelihoods

One of the major findings of our research was that the reason why 'scale' was presented as the solution of sustainability, and the reason that skilling programmes were heavily underutilized was singular: *crafts cannot be treated only as 'work'*. During the course of our research, what emerged from the analysis was that not only are there deep cultural roots and artistic soul of the craft embedded within the artisan (Ranganathan, 2018), crafts are also indelibly tied to daily lives, social relationships, identities, and integrity of the artisans. As such, the artifacts produced cannot be treated in the same manner as a mass-produced commodity. Yet, all policies related to sustainability of the livelihoods only confine themselves to economic sustainability instead of engaging with the autonomy of the artisan.

7. Lessons and Recommendations

Although our work in this space is ongoing – we are in the process of creating a capacity building module that builds on these lessons – we have specific lessons and recommendations that emerge from this study.

Nothing about artisans without artisans: While the handicraft sector is the second largest employer in the country (after agriculture) in the rural areas, artisans are often treated as marginal in policy discussions. In fact, we find that there is a significant absence of policy committees dedicated to addressing their specific problems, which are clearly different from those of non-farm workers or agricultural labourers (Solanki, 2008). Therefore, there is a strong need to ensure that the artisans are considered primary stakeholders in programmes that are meant to improve their livelihoods and we are able to provide tools, methodologies, or policies that can help them gain access

to critical information related to craft designs, new markets, product pricing, market potential, raw material costs, and government schemes, and that there are specific policies to address these requirements.

Centering women: Given that in each successive census enumerations, women are still being recorded as the secondary worker, any policy related to crafts must reject this secondary status and start recognising women as artisans in their own terms. This is the most important mindset shift in influencing any policies related to crafts. In fact, what emerged common in the conversations around emphasizing scale and skilling within policy was that most policies and programmes (1) undervalued or invisibilized women's significant unpaid work in the production cycle, and (2) undervalued women's own knowledge systems regarding the craft. Therefore, it was clear from our analysis that one of the central connections that can potentially change the nature of the discourse or advocacy is to center *the identity of the woman artisan* in all intervention frameworks, whether they are associated with conversations of scale, sustainability or skilling.

It is also important to recognise that while traditional skills and information have to be recognised, considerations related to the unpaid labour, care work and the invisible knowledge systems of women have to be integrated into the larger policy landscape. In order to ensure the centrality of women's knowledge systems and their identities as artisans within any conversation of sustainable livelihoods, the following characteristics have to be incorporated into any skilling frameworks or capacity building modules.

- **Co-creation of learning spaces:** Although it is important to provide technical training related to new methods, innovative techniques and accessing markets, it is equally important to ensure that these knowledge systems are co-created with diverse stakeholders

- **Clarity of the policy ecosystem:** Before any module has been created, it is important to build it in the context of a larger ecosystem of policies (such as those related to credit and microfinance, cooperative models of operation, or even laws related to gender equality and protective legislation) that might be of use to women artisans within the community. Understanding this interaction between the citizen and policy within the craft space is of primary importance.

- **Experimentation and failure:** While skill building (in the areas of modern design techniques, quality control, market trend analysis) are important, women are rarely given the space or even asked to express their own artistic vision. Therefore, it is important to build spaces where women's own perspectives, visions, and current knowledge can be brought to bear on potential new ideas. Innovation cannot be assured without also the provision of opportunities to experiment and learn from failure. Given the policy environment seeks to

support women in this endeavour, it must focus on skilling that creates an open and safe space for experimentation and co-learning, whether it is related to the design, marketing or production of the craft.

- **Need for centering *identity and agency* of the artisan:** There is a need to ensure that conversations of sustainability and skill-building move away from viability or scale of the crafts to engaging with the identity and agency of the artisan. Based on the findings from our first year of study, we find that sustainability of crafts is not tied to the production or scaling of the products or artifacts, but to the identities of women, and the manner in which they are allowed to earn a livelihood through craft. For craft forms to provide a pathway to self-respect, dignity, and artistic expression, interventions must involve acknowledging and building knowledge systems of the artisans themselves, and devising policies and programmes that nurture their independence, agency, and creativity.

8. Conclusion

The craft sector in India has tremendous potential for generation economically and ecologically viable and sustainable livelihoods for women artisans. The current dire state of crafts can be alleviated through diverse measures including strengthening of policy landscape, investment in infrastructure and social protection measures, consumer knowledge building and capacity building of artisans themselves. Skilling programs by government are a crucial interlinkage that work for strengthening capacities of artisans, but the skill building frameworks need to be responsive to specific needs of women artisans and need to center the identities and indigenous knowledge systems.

In conclusion, we argue through the findings of this research that we must move from engaging with artisans as beneficiaries to artisans as citizens who have their own different knowledge systems, skills, and experience that can be leverage not only their own economic and social mobility, but can also benefit the economic and social health of the nation. We argue that one of the ways to do this to foundationally change our perspective on skilling and training programmes directed at women artisans in India. The three primary lessons that we have learnt through this process are:

- Skilling programmes must be rooted in local contexts and emphasise local artisan knowledge
- While skilling programmes must focus on enhancing their entrepreneurial skills, financial literacy, and understanding of market dynamics for artisans, it is also important to emphasise traditional knowledge systems of the artisans
- Training programmes must aim to be gender transformative in that they must engage directly with the recognition of women as independent artisans.

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