

“Women, Weaves, and Welfare: Gendered Impact of Handicraft Schemes in Gujarat”

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Abstract:

This research paper critically examines the gendered impact of handicraft welfare schemes on women artisans in Gujarat, a state renowned for its rich textile and craft traditions such as Ajrakh block printing, Bandhani tie-dye, Tangaliya weaving, and Patola silk weaving. Women have historically played a central yet often under-recognized role in sustaining these crafts. While government and non-government interventions—through schemes like Hastkala Setu Yojana, Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana, and the Gujarat State Handloom and Handicraft Development Corporation—have aimed to enhance artisans’ livelihoods, their gender-specific outcomes remain uneven.

Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this study draws on fieldwork conducted across six key districts: Kutch, Surendranagar, Jamnagar, Patan, Banaskantha, and Surat. These regions represent diverse craft ecosystems—from Patan’s world-famous double ikat Patola to Banaskantha’s wool embroidery and Surat’s intricate Sadeli wood inlay and textile work. By engaging with women artisans through interviews and focus group discussions, and analyzing official policy documents and NGO reports, the paper explores how women are accessing—or being excluded from—the benefits of these schemes.

Findings indicate that although some women have achieved greater income and mobility, systemic challenges remain: digital illiteracy, time poverty, lack of asset ownership, and minimal representation in leadership roles. Often, male family members act as gatekeepers to formal schemes, limiting direct access for women. The study underscores the urgent need for gender-inclusive policy reforms, tailored digital training, and enhanced recognition of women’s leadership in the craft sector. It concludes with policy recommendations that aim to promote holistic empowerment for women artisans across Gujarat’s rural craft economy.

1. Introduction

Gujarat, renowned for its cultural richness, is home to an extensive array of traditional handicrafts, including weaving, dyeing, embroidery, and woodworking. These crafts, spanning from Kutch to Banaskantha, not only represent artistic heritage but also serve as essential livelihoods for countless rural households, particularly women. Women artisans have been pivotal in sustaining and advancing these crafts, passing down skills across generations and contributing significantly to their communities.

However, despite their indispensable role, women artisans often remain marginalized, facing economic and social challenges. Patriarchal norms, lack of formal recognition, and limited access to education and resources hinder their progress. While government and NGO-led welfare schemes aim to uplift these artisans, the specific impact on women’s empowerment

and inclusion remains under-explored. This paper examines the effects of these schemes on women artisans in key Gujarat districts, focusing on economic opportunities, skill development, and leadership roles, and identifies persistent barriers like digital illiteracy and mobility constraints. Ultimately, it seeks to propose gender-sensitive policies that empower these women.

2. Objectives of the Study

This research aims to critically examine the intersection of gender, traditional craftsmanship, and policy interventions within Gujarat's rural handicraft sector. Women have long played a central role in sustaining the region's artistic heritage, yet their contributions often remain undervalued and invisible. The study addresses this gap through four interlinked objectives:

2.1 Understanding Women's Traditional Roles in Handicrafts

This objective explores the cultural and historical involvement of women in crafts like embroidery, weaving, and woodwork. Passed down generationally, these skills are deeply embedded in family life. However, men frequently receive the recognition and economic benefits, while women's labor remains unacknowledged. This study seeks to document and analyze the nuanced, often hidden, contributions of women to Gujarat's artisanal legacy.

2.2 Evaluating the Gender Responsiveness of Government Schemes

Government schemes claim inclusivity, yet rarely account for the specific challenges faced by women artisans—such as low literacy, restricted mobility, and time constraints due to domestic work. This objective assesses whether programs like HSY, AHVY, and those by GSHHDC are designed with gender-sensitive frameworks and if they use gender-disaggregated data to measure outcomes.

2.3 Measuring Socio-Economic Impact

This objective focuses on real-world outcomes for women artisans in districts such as Kutch, Patan, and Surat. It evaluates changes in income, decision-making power, mobility, and overall well-being resulting from policy interventions. Regional disparities and intersecting social factors like caste and community are also considered.

2.4 Recommending Gender-Inclusive Policies

The final objective is to develop actionable policy recommendations that promote women's agency. This includes localized training, digital literacy programs, mobile outreach, leadership development, and recognition initiatives to ensure women are seen not just as contributors but as leaders in Gujarat's craft economy.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-method approach grounded in feminist research ethics to examine the gendered impact of handicraft welfare schemes on women artisans in Gujarat. The focus is on amplifying women's voices and understanding their lived experiences within the context of craft-based livelihoods.

3.1 Research Design

A multi-site case study approach was used, spanning six districts: Kutch, Patan, Banaskantha, Jamnagar, Surendranagar, and Surat. This allows for comparative analysis of gender roles, caste, religion, and NGO involvement across diverse regions.

3.2 Mixed Methods and Sampling

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observations enriched the data, complemented by household income and participation data. Purposive and snowball sampling identified approximately 100 women artisans, 20 male artisans, and 15 stakeholders.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and life histories, alongside secondary data from documents, reports, and academic literature.

3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data was coded thematically using NVivo, while descriptive statistics were used to quantify income, training access, and tool ownership.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols ensured informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, with limitations addressed through triangulation and reflexivity.

4. Scope of the Study

This study examines the impact of welfare schemes on women artisans in Gujarat's handicraft sector, focusing on geographical, thematic, and demographic factors.

4.1 Geographical Scope

The research covers six districts—Kutch, Patan, Banaskantha, Surendranagar, Jamnagar, and Surat—representing a diverse mix of craft traditions and varying levels of policy implementation, including embroidery, weaving, and woodwork.

4.2 Thematic Scope

The study explores three key themes:

1. **Women's Empowerment:** Changes in income, mobility, and decision-making.
2. **Policy Impact:** Assessing gender equity in schemes.

3. **Cultural Continuity:** How craft work preserves identity.

Intersectional factors such as caste, religion, and location are considered.

4.3 Temporal and Demographic Scope

Spanning 2010–2025, the study captures shifts over time, especially post-COVID. Respondents are women aged 18–65, representing diverse backgrounds.

4.4 Institutional Scope

The study includes stakeholders like government agencies, NGOs, and cooperatives to understand their influence on women's livelihoods.

4.5 Conceptual Scope

Framed by feminist political economy, the study examines informal labor, state resource access, and empowerment.

5. Gendered Assessment of Government Handicraft Schemes in Gujarat

5.1 Hastkala Setu Yojana (HSY)

Overview

Hastkala Setu Yojana (HSY), launched by the Government of Gujarat, aims to modernize the traditional craft sector by equipping rural artisans with training, toolkits, infrastructure, and digital marketing support. Based on a cluster development model, the scheme fosters collective action, offering potential benefits to women engaged in home-based crafts.

Gendered Assessment

In regions like Kutch and Surat, women artisans involved in Ajrakh, embroidery, Sadeli, and zari have accessed new avenues for product enhancement and occasional exposure to broader markets. Yet, many women remain unaware of the scheme or depend on male intermediaries for access. Low literacy and digital skills limit their participation in online training and marketing. Additionally, societal norms restrict their movement, reducing attendance at workshops and events.

The scheme lacks gender-disaggregated data, making it difficult to evaluate how many women truly benefit. Generic references to “artisans” often mask gender disparities in resource allocation.

While the scheme shows promise, it reaches women only indirectly. Without tailored outreach like mobile workshops or quotas for women-led SHGs, it risks leaving gender inequalities intact.

5.2 Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana (AHVY)

Overview

AHVY, a centrally funded initiative, focuses on empowering artisans from Scheduled Castes,

Scheduled Tribes, and other marginalized groups. The program supports SHG formation, skill training, toolkits, raw materials, and participation in exhibitions. It also maps craft clusters to strengthen grassroots development.

Gendered Assessment

Women from SC/ST backgrounds, especially in crafts like beadwork, bamboo, and embroidery, have joined SHGs under AHVY, particularly in districts such as Banaskantha and Dahod. However, leadership often remains male-dominated, even in women-dominated groups.

Implementation quality varies by region. Where NGOs are active, women participate more fully; elsewhere, bureaucratic hurdles and low awareness persist. Training modules frequently overlook traditional skills already practiced by women, creating a disconnect. Social barriers also play a role—women need male approval to attend training, and widows or unmarried women struggle to join SHGs despite being skilled.

AHVY offers a strong platform for inclusive growth, but it needs more gender-sensitive planning and local support to become truly effective for women artisans.

5.3 Gujarat State Handloom and Handicraft Development Corporation (GSHHDC)

Overview

The GSHHDC works as a state-level facilitator, promoting Gujarat's crafts through exhibitions, trade fairs, marketing support, and digital sales via platforms like Garvi-Gurjari. It also offers loans, design workshops, and artisan training programs to expand market reach.

Gendered Assessment

Women artisans from regions like Patan and Surat have participated in GSHHDC events, gaining income and visibility, especially when affiliated with SHGs or family workshops. However, rural women face mobility issues and domestic responsibilities that prevent travel. The absence of safe lodging and support services further discourages their participation. Despite the rise of online sales, many women lack access to smartphones or the skills needed for digital engagement. Efforts to build women-led clusters have increased, especially post-COVID, but most training remains gender-neutral, not accounting for the time and constraints women face.

GSHHDC holds institutional capacity to support women but must improve accessibility, training customization, and digital outreach to make its impact more equitable.

6. Gendered Analysis of Scheme Impact

6.1 Economic Empowerment

Handicraft schemes in Gujarat have contributed to income generation, especially in districts like Banaskantha and Jamnagar, where women participate in SHGs. Women involved in crafts such as embroidery, wool work, and tie-dye have seen increased earnings. However, the financial gains are often seasonal and controlled by male relatives, limiting women's financial autonomy and decision-making power in both households and enterprises.

6.2 Skill Development

Skill development programs in areas like Patan and Kutch have enhanced women's craft knowledge. However, low participation rates persist due to time poverty, as women balance domestic duties with income-generating activities. Furthermore, training centers are often located in urban areas, creating accessibility challenges for rural women who face transportation and safety barriers.

6.3 Digital Divide

With the rise of e-commerce, digital literacy has become essential, but many women artisans, especially in Surat, lack the skills to use technology. While younger women are adapting, older generations are excluded. The lack of follow-up support and culturally sensitive digital training means many women struggle to engage with online platforms or digital payment systems.

6.4 Recognition and Leadership

Despite their significant contributions, women artisans often do not receive formal recognition. Leadership roles in artisan communities, such as master trainers or SHG leaders, are typically held by men, limiting women's visibility and opportunities for advancement.

7. District-Wise Observations

7.1 Kutch

Women working in Ajrakh and embroidery crafts have benefitted from NGO initiatives like Khamir. Yet, market access and entrepreneurial training remain insufficient. Despite technical skill, many women remain stuck in the role of producers rather than transitioning into independent entrepreneurs.

7.2 Patan

In the Patola weaving process, women assist in labor-intensive tasks such as dyeing and thread preparation. However, these contributions are often labeled as domestic help rather than skilled labor. This perception limits policy recognition of their role and excludes them from craft-specific benefits or accolades.

7.3 Banaskantha

SHGs have enabled women to participate in embroidery and wool-based crafts. However, caste dynamics continue to affect leadership and inclusion. Women from Dalit and tribal

backgrounds often face exclusion from decision-making spaces within SHGs, reducing the democratic potential of such groups.

7.3 Jamnagar

Bandhani tie-dye production involves a large number of Muslim women. While their participation ensures household income, they rarely manage business functions such as order fulfillment or supply chain logistics. Gender norms restrict their physical mobility, preventing broader entrepreneurial engagement.

7.4 Surendranagar

Women involved in Tangaliya weaving face numerous health issues due to poor ergonomic work conditions. Prolonged sitting and repetitive motions without proper support lead to chronic physical ailments. Training programs often ignore these occupational health concerns, making sustainable participation difficult.

7.5 Surat

In Sadeli woodwork and textile processing, women are primarily employed as piece-rate laborers. These informal work settings offer low wages and minimal job security. Women are often excluded from safety measures and formal benefits, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

8. Key Challenges

- **Scheme Awareness:** Many women remain unaware of schemes or are enrolled under male relatives' names.
- **Time Poverty:** Domestic responsibilities hinder full participation in training and exhibitions.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Lack of transport and childcare restricts engagement.
- **Digital Illiteracy:** Poor access to devices and digital skills blocks entry into online markets.
- **Recognition Gap:** Awards and accolades disproportionately favor male artisans.
- **Social Exclusion:** Caste, religion, and gender-based discrimination further marginalize women artisans.

9. Policy Recommendations

- Conduct gender audits across all government craft schemes.
- Develop women-only training and leadership workshops with flexible schedules.
- Introduce mobile training units and local childcare services.
- Launch digital platforms tailored for women artisans.

- Create award categories exclusively for women to ensure equitable recognition.
- Mandate gender-disaggregated data in scheme evaluations.
- Fund and mentor women-led cooperatives to foster sustainable entrepreneurship.

10. Conclusion

Handicraft schemes in Gujarat have opened new avenues for rural development, but gendered inequities remain deeply entrenched. Women artisans contribute significantly across all stages of craft production yet face systemic barriers in visibility, access, and autonomy. A gender-sensitive reorientation of welfare schemes—one that prioritizes education, health, recognition, and leadership—is essential for genuine empowerment. By centering the voices and experiences of women artisans in policy design, Gujarat can transform its craft economy into a more inclusive and equitable space. The way forward involves continuous monitoring, grassroots engagement, and deliberate policy innovation to ensure that the welfare framework is truly inclusive and empowering for all artisans, especially women.

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