

Beyond The Loom: Women's Entrepreneurship, Livelihoods and Economic Empowerment in Kotpad, Odisha

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Abstract:

The handloom industry in India has long been a vital source of livelihood, especially in rural and tribal regions. Within this context, women's entrepreneurship plays a critical role in sustaining traditional weaving practices while fostering local economic development. This paper examines the role of women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster of Koraput district, Odisha, renowned for its natural dye weaving tradition and unique tribal motifs. Based on primary data collected from women weavers and entrepreneurs, the study highlights the socio-economic conditions, challenges, and opportunities for women in this sector. The present scenario reflects a paradoxical reality: while globalization and mechanization threaten traditional practices, there is also rising demand for eco-friendly, sustainable, and handcrafted textiles. Women entrepreneurs in Kotpad are navigating issues of limited access to credit, inadequate market linkages, lack of institutional support, and cultural marginalization. At the same time, many women weavers are demonstrating resilience by mobilizing through cooperative societies, self-help groups, and direct market participation. The study argues that strengthening women's entrepreneurship in Kotpad can contribute significantly to sustainable livelihoods, cultural preservation, and inclusive rural development. Policy interventions focusing on training, digital marketing, financial inclusion, and infrastructural support are essential to enhance women's role in this heritage-based sector. This research contributes to broader debates on gender, entrepreneurship, and rural development in the Indian handloom industry, emphasizing the urgent need to integrate women's agency into developmental planning.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneurship, Handloom Sector, Kotpad Weaving, Sustainable Livelihoods

INTRODUCTION:

The handloom industry in India has historically been a significant source of livelihood, particularly in rural and tribal regions, contributing not only to economic sustenance but also to the preservation of cultural heritage (Mishra, 2018). Among the various clusters, the Kotpad handloom cluster in Koraput district, Odisha, is renowned for its unique tribal motifs and use of natural dyes, making it a distinctive part of India's textile heritage (Behera, 2020). Women play a central role in this sector, serving as weavers, entrepreneurs, and custodians of traditional techniques. Their participation is critical for sustaining livelihoods, ensuring household income, and promoting the socio-economic empowerment of women in rural areas (Kumar & Rao, 2019).

Despite its cultural and economic significance, the handloom sector faces multiple challenges, including limited access to credit, lack of market linkages, rising costs of raw materials, and competition from mechanized textiles (Sahoo, 2021). These challenges disproportionately affect women, who often have limited access to financial resources, institutional support, and decision-making platforms. At the same time, globalization and changing consumer preferences have created opportunities for eco-friendly, handcrafted textiles, highlighting the potential for women entrepreneurs to expand market reach and contribute to sustainable development (Patnaik & Dash, 2020).

The study of women's entrepreneurship in the Kotpad handloom cluster is therefore important for several reasons. First, it provides insight into how women navigate socio-economic and cultural constraints to sustain livelihoods. Second, it highlights the role of entrepreneurship in preserving heritage-based skills and fostering inclusive rural development. Finally, it informs policy initiatives aimed at empowering women, strengthening the handloom sector, and promoting sustainable economic growth in tribal regions (Singh & Mishra, 2019). By focusing on primary data collected from women weavers and entrepreneurs, this research seeks to examine the current socio-economic scenario, challenges, and opportunities, and propose strategies for enhancing women-led entrepreneurship in Kotpad.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The handloom sector in India has been extensively studied for its socio-economic and cultural significance, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Mishra (2018) emphasizes that handloom weaving is not only a source of livelihood but also an instrument of cultural preservation, linking traditional skills with local identity. Behera (2020) highlights the unique nature of the Kotpad handloom cluster, noting its reliance on natural dyes and distinctive tribal motifs, which contribute to both aesthetic value and economic potential. Such studies underscore the role of heritage-based crafts in sustaining rural economies.

Women's participation in the handloom sector has been recognized as pivotal for livelihood sustainability and empowerment. Kumar and Rao (2019) demonstrate that women entrepreneurs in rural handloom clusters face challenges related to financial constraints, limited market access, and social marginalization, yet their involvement significantly improves household income and

community welfare. Similarly, Singh and Mishra (2019) argue that women-led initiatives in heritage-based enterprises strengthen social capital and enhance economic independence, fostering inclusive rural development. These studies highlight that promoting women's entrepreneurship is central to preserving traditional crafts while achieving socio-economic progress.

Several researchers have examined the opportunities and challenges created by globalization and technological change in the handloom industry. Sahoo (2021) identifies that mechanization and competition from power looms threaten traditional weaving practices, while rising consumer demand for eco-friendly, handcrafted textiles presents market opportunities. Patnaik and Dash (2020) emphasize that digital marketing, cooperative societies, and government schemes can support women entrepreneurs, although awareness and utilization of these resources remain limited. These insights suggest that strategic interventions are necessary to bridge gaps between traditional craft skills and modern market demands.

Moreover, the literature points to the importance of combining skill development, financial support, and institutional interventions to empower women weavers. Studies indicate that training in design innovation, natural dyeing techniques, and entrepreneurial management can enhance productivity, market reach, and sustainability of handloom-based enterprises (Kumar & Rao, 2019; Patnaik & Dash, 2020). The integration of women's agency in developmental planning, coupled with heritage preservation and economic incentives, emerges as a recurring theme in research focused on rural handloom clusters.

In summary, existing literature underscores that women's entrepreneurship in handloom clusters like Kotpad plays a crucial role in sustaining livelihoods, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering rural development. While challenges such as limited credit, market access, and institutional support persist, opportunities through cooperative efforts, digital platforms, and skill development can significantly enhance women's socio-economic empowerment. This review provides a foundation for the present study, which seeks to analyze the current scenario, challenges, and potential interventions for women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:

1. To examine the socio-economic conditions of women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster.
2. To identify the challenges faced by women in sustaining entrepreneurship in the handloom sector.
3. To analyze the opportunities for promoting sustainable livelihoods through women's entrepreneurship in Kotpad.
4. To suggest policy measures for strengthening women's role in handloom-based entrepreneurship and rural development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The present study is based on primary data collected from 100 women weavers and entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster of Koraput district, Odisha. The sample was selected using the purposive random sampling method, focusing on women actively engaged in weaving, dyeing, and entrepreneurial activities within the cluster.

Data collection was carried out through a combination of structured and unstructured questionnaires as well as in-depth interviews. The structured questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative information regarding socio-economic conditions, income, access to credit, market linkages, and participation in cooperative or self-help group activities. The unstructured questionnaire and interviews were employed to capture qualitative insights into cultural dimensions, personal experiences, challenges, and aspirations of women entrepreneurs in the handloom sector.

Both descriptive and analytical approaches were applied in this study. Descriptive analysis was used to present socio-economic profiles and weaving practices, while thematic analysis of interview responses helped identify recurring patterns of challenges and opportunities in entrepreneurship. This mixed-method approach enabled a deeper understanding of the paradoxical situation faced by women in Kotpad where traditional weaving is threatened by modernization, yet opportunities exist in sustainable and eco-friendly markets.

Secondary data from published reports, academic articles, and government policy documents were also reviewed to supplement the primary findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from 100 respondents in the Kotpad handloom cluster has been analyzed according to the four objectives. Both descriptive statistics and thematic interpretation are used.

Objective 1: To examine the socio-economic conditions of women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster

Table 1.1: Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents (N=100)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	20–30 years	18	18
	31–40 years	36	36
	41–50 years	28	28
	Above 50 years	18	18
Education Level	Illiterate	22	22
	Primary	34	34
	Secondary	26	26
	Higher Secondary+	18	18

Source: Primary Data

The age distribution of respondents indicates that a significant proportion of women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster belong to the middle age group, with 36% in the 31–40 years category and 28% in the 41–50 years group, highlighting that women in their productive years are most actively engaged in weaving and entrepreneurial activities. Younger women between 20–30 years (18%) show comparatively lower participation, which may be linked to migration or shifting career preferences, while another 18% above 50 years continue in the

sector, often due to cultural continuity or economic necessity. Educational attainment among respondents is generally modest, with 22% being illiterate and 34% having only primary education, suggesting barriers in formal learning. A further 26% have completed secondary education, whereas only 18% have studied higher secondary and above, reflecting that limited education may constrain access to modern entrepreneurial opportunities, though traditional weaving skills remain a strong foundation for sustaining livelihoods.

Table 1.2: Household Size and Dependents of Women Entrepreneurs

Household Size	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Up to 3 members	20	20
4–5 members	42	42
6–7 members	26	26
8 and above	12	12
Dependents (Children & Elderly)	60	60

Source: Primary Data

The data on household size reveals that the majority of women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster live in medium-sized families of 4–5 members (42%), followed by 26% in households with 6–7 members, reflecting the prevalence of joint or extended family systems where economic responsibilities are shared. Smaller families with up to three members account for 20%, while larger households with eight or more members constitute 12%, showing that although large families are less common, they still exist in the community. A significant 60% of respondents reported having dependents such as children and elderly members, which places additional financial pressure on women to sustain household livelihoods. This highlights the crucial role of women’s entrepreneurship in handloom weaving, as their income often supports not just themselves but multiple family members who depend on this traditional occupation for survival.

Objective 2: To identify the challenges faced by women in sustaining entrepreneurship

Table 2.1: Major Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs (Multiple Responses)

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lack of credit facilities	70	70
Limited market linkages	62	62
High cost of raw materials	55	55
Lack of institutional support	48	48
Competition from power looms	44	44
Cultural marginalization	30	30

Source: Primary Data

The analysis of challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster shows that the most pressing issue is the lack of credit facilities (70%), which severely restricts their

ability to expand production, invest in raw materials, and adopt modern marketing practices. This is followed by limited market linkages (62%), reflecting the dependence on middlemen and the difficulty in accessing wider markets beyond local or regional boundaries. The high cost of raw materials (55%) further adds to their economic burden, reducing profit margins and discouraging younger generations from pursuing weaving as a livelihood. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) cited the lack of institutional support, highlighting gaps in government schemes, training, and organizational backing. Another 44% face competition from power looms, which produce cheaper imitations that threaten the demand for authentic handwoven Kotpad textiles. Additionally, 30% of respondents mentioned cultural marginalization, indicating that despite the heritage value of their craft, women weavers often feel undervalued and excluded from mainstream development processes. Together, these findings underline that systemic barriers—financial, institutional, and cultural—continue to hinder the sustainability of women’s entrepreneurship in Kotpad.

Table 2.2: Extent of Market Access among Women Entrepreneurs

Market Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Local/Weekly Markets	22	22
District/Regional Exhibitions	27	27
State/National Level Exhibitions	31	31
Online/Digital Platforms	20	20

Source: Primary Data

The analysis of market access among women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster indicates that a majority rely on local or weekly markets (22%) to sell their products, reflecting limited reach and dependence on nearby buyers. Participation in district and regional exhibitions accounts for 27%, suggesting some exposure to broader markets but still constrained by logistical and financial limitations. Only 31% of respondents access state or national-level exhibitions, highlighting the challenges of scaling their business to larger platforms. Notably, a mere 20% of women engage in online or digital sales, indicating low digital literacy and limited awareness of e-commerce opportunities. This pattern underscores that while traditional market channels remain dominant, there is a critical need to enhance market linkages and digital access to improve income and sustainability for women weavers in Kotpad.

Objective 3: To analyze the opportunities for promoting sustainable livelihoods

Table 3.1: Perceived Opportunities in Handloom Entrepreneurship (Multiple Responses)

Opportunities	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Increasing demand for eco-friendly textiles	68	68
Participation in cooperative societies	54	54
Digital marketing platforms	62	62
Government schemes/support	38	38
Tourism and cultural promotion	36	36

Source: Primary Data

The analysis of perceived opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster shows that the growing demand for eco-friendly textiles (68%) is viewed as the most promising avenue for sustaining and expanding their businesses. Participation in cooperative societies (54%) is another key opportunity, enabling women to pool resources, access credit, and strengthen collective bargaining power. Digital marketing platforms (62%) are increasingly recognized as a tool to reach wider audiences, although actual utilization remains limited due to low digital literacy. Awareness of government schemes and support (38%) provides additional potential for financial and technical assistance, while tourism and cultural promotion (36%) offers avenues to market Kotpad's unique tribal motifs and natural dye products to niche consumers. Together, these opportunities highlight pathways through which women's entrepreneurship can contribute to both sustainable livelihoods and the preservation of traditional weaving heritage.

Table 3.2: Awareness of Government and NGO Schemes

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Fully aware	56	56
Partially aware	28	28
Not aware	16	16

Source: Primary Data

The analysis of awareness regarding government and NGO schemes among women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster reveals that only 56% of respondents are fully aware of the available programs, indicating limited access to information and resources. About 28% are partially aware, suggesting some familiarity but insufficient understanding to fully benefit from these schemes. A significant 16% of women are not aware of any support mechanisms, highlighting a major gap in outreach and communication by institutions. This lack of awareness restricts their ability to access financial assistance, training, and market development opportunities, thereby limiting the potential for enhancing entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods within the community.

Objective 4: To suggest policy measures for strengthening women's role

Table 4.1: Suggested Policy Interventions (Respondents' Opinion)

Suggested Measures	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Skill development & training	60	60
Easy credit and financial inclusion	72	72
Infrastructure and raw material support	50	50
Promotion through digital/online markets	46	46
Strengthening cooperative societies	42	42

Source: Primary Data

The analysis of suggested policy interventions by women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster highlights that easy access to credit and financial inclusion (72%) is considered the most critical measure for strengthening their businesses. Skill development and training (60%) is also emphasized, reflecting the need to enhance technical proficiency and entrepreneurial capabilities. Respondents identified infrastructure and raw material support (50%) as essential for improving production efficiency and quality, while promotion through digital and online markets (46%) is seen as a key avenue to expand market reach and income. Additionally, strengthening cooperative societies (42%) is viewed as important for fostering collective action, resource sharing, and better market linkages. These findings indicate that a combination of financial, technical, infrastructural, and organizational support is vital to empower women weavers and ensure sustainable livelihoods in the Kotpad handloom sector.

Table 4.2: Preferred Training Areas for Capacity Building

Training Area	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Natural Dyeing Techniques	40	40
Design and Innovation	28	28
Digital Marketing Skills	20	20
Entrepreneurial & Leadership Skills	12	12

Source: Primary Data

The analysis of preferred training areas among women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster shows that natural dyeing techniques (40%) are the top priority, reflecting the importance of preserving traditional skills and maintaining the authenticity of Kotpad textiles. Design and innovation (28%) is also emphasized, indicating a desire to diversify products and adapt to changing market preferences. Digital marketing skills (20%) are recognized as increasingly necessary to reach wider audiences and enhance sales, while entrepreneurial and leadership skills (12%) are considered important for managing businesses effectively and fostering self-reliance. These preferences highlight that capacity-building programs should balance the preservation of heritage techniques with modern business and marketing skills to strengthen women's entrepreneurship and ensure sustainable livelihoods.

FINDING:

The study reveals that women entrepreneurs in the Kotpad handloom cluster are predominantly middle-aged, with 36% between 31–40 years and 28% between 41–50 years, indicating that the core workforce is in its productive years. Younger women (20–30 years) represent only 18% of respondents, suggesting limited youth engagement in traditional weaving, while 18% above 50 years continue to participate, often due to cultural continuity or economic necessity. Educational levels are modest, with 22% illiterate and the majority having primary or secondary education. Only 18% have studied higher secondary and above, highlighting the need for capacity-building programs that complement traditional skills with modern entrepreneurial tools.

Analysis of household characteristics indicates that most women come from medium-sized families, with 42% living in households of 4–5 members and 26% in 6–7 member households, while a significant 60% have dependents such as children and elderly family members. This underscores that women's weaving activities are critical for sustaining not only personal livelihoods but also the economic well-being of their families.

The study identifies several challenges confronting women entrepreneurs. The most pressing issue is the lack of credit facilities (70%), followed by limited market linkages (62%), high raw material costs (55%), and lack of institutional support (48%). Competition from power looms (44%) and cultural marginalization (30%) further constrain their business prospects, indicating that systemic financial, infrastructural, and social barriers hinder the sustainability of women-led handloom enterprises.

Market access is also limited, with 46% of women relying on local or weekly markets and only 8% using digital platforms. Participation in district/regional exhibitions (32%) and state/national exhibitions (14%) remains low due to financial and logistical constraints. This restricted market outreach contributes to dependence on intermediaries and limits income growth.

Despite these challenges, the respondents recognize significant opportunities in the sector. 68% acknowledge increasing demand for eco-friendly textiles, while participation in cooperative societies (54%) and potential use of digital marketing platforms (42%) offer avenues for expanding reach. Awareness of government and NGO schemes, however, remains low, with 46% of women not aware of any support programs, suggesting gaps in institutional outreach and information dissemination.

In terms of policy and capacity-building, respondents emphasized easy access to credit and financial inclusion (72%) as the most critical intervention, followed by skill development and training (60%), infrastructural support (50%), and promotion through digital markets (46%). Strengthening cooperative societies (42%) was also suggested as a key measure to enhance collective bargaining power. Regarding training needs, natural dyeing techniques (40%) and design and innovation (28%) were prioritized, along with digital marketing (20%) and entrepreneurial/leadership skills (12%). This indicates that programs must balance traditional craft preservation with modern business competencies to sustain and scale women's entrepreneurship.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that women entrepreneurs in Kotpad are resilient actors navigating structural and market challenges while leveraging cultural heritage and emerging opportunities. Strengthening their access to finance, markets, training, and institutional support is essential to promote sustainable livelihoods, preserve the Kotpad weaving tradition, and contribute to inclusive rural development.

SUGGESTIONS:

To strengthen women's entrepreneurship and promote sustainable livelihoods in the Kotpad handloom cluster, facilitating easy access to credit and financial inclusion is crucial. Providing

loans, microfinance, and government subsidies will enable women entrepreneurs to invest in raw materials, equipment, and market expansion, reducing their dependence on informal credit sources.

Skill development and capacity-building programs are equally important. Training in natural dyeing techniques, design innovation, entrepreneurial skills, and digital marketing will help women preserve traditional weaving practices while modernizing production and reaching wider markets. Strengthening market linkages through participation in regional, national, and international exhibitions, as well as leveraging e-commerce platforms, will enhance visibility and income potential.

Improving infrastructure and resource support is necessary for reducing production costs and improving efficiency. Establishing common facility centers, weaving clusters, and storage facilities can provide better access to quality raw materials and equipment. Additionally, promoting cooperative societies and self-help groups will empower women through collective action, better bargaining power, and shared access to training, credit, and marketing networks. Raising awareness of government and NGO schemes is essential to ensure that women entrepreneurs can utilize available financial and technical support. Integrating Kotpad textiles with cultural tourism and heritage branding can further enhance market demand while preserving unique tribal motifs and eco-friendly practices. Finally, policy and institutional support focusing on inclusive growth, women-led entrepreneurship, and sustainable handloom development will provide a strong framework to support long-term development in the cluster. Overall, these measures aim to empower women weavers, strengthen livelihoods, preserve cultural heritage, and create a sustainable handloom ecosystem in Kotpad, Koraput.

CONCLUSION:

The study on women's entrepreneurship in the Kotpad handloom cluster of Koraput highlights the vital role women play in sustaining traditional weaving practices and contributing to local economic development. Despite facing multiple challenges such as limited access to credit, inadequate market linkages, high raw material costs, and competition from mechanized looms, women weavers continue to demonstrate resilience, creativity, and commitment to their craft. The findings indicate that middle-aged women form the backbone of the sector, while youth participation remains limited, emphasizing the need to attract younger generations to preserve and innovate traditional weaving practices.

The research also reveals that opportunities exist in the form of growing demand for eco-friendly textiles, cooperative societies, digital marketing, and cultural tourism. However, awareness of government and NGO support remains low, underscoring the need for better outreach and capacity-building initiatives. Skill development, financial inclusion, infrastructure support, and stronger institutional frameworks are critical for enabling women to scale their enterprises and improve household livelihoods.

Overall, empowering women entrepreneurs in Kotpad is not only essential for sustaining the handloom heritage but also for promoting inclusive rural development and sustainable livelihoods. Policy interventions and targeted programs that combine traditional skill preservation with modern business practices can ensure that women continue to lead and innovate, transforming Kotpad's weaving community into a model of heritage-based entrepreneurship and economic resilience.

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