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Health Issues of Women Artisans in the Chikankari Sector: An In-Depth Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Lucknow, the city of Nawabs takes pride in being the exclusive hub for Chikankari and has received the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) status in December 2008. Lucknowi Chikankari, the art form has been cherished for centuries for its intricate and delicate designs, reflecting the aesthetic sensibilities of Indian culture. Chikankari, an exquisite art form of hand embroidery, has been a part of India's cultural heritage since time immemorial. This traditional craft has not only played a pivotal role in preserving the country's rich textile heritage but has also become a significant source of livelihood for countless artisans, especially women. Over the years, Chikankari has become an integral part of Indian fashion, sought after both nationally and internationally. As a significant source of employment for women, it plays a crucial role in their economic empowerment.

Chikankari, the ethnic handicraft has not only enriched the fabric ornamentation techniques but also empowered countless women by providing them with employment opportunities. However, the women working in the Chikankari sector face numerous health issues due to the nature of their work, poor working conditions, and societal pressures. This research paper aims to explore the health challenges that women working in the Chikankari industry face. It will also discuss the physical, mental, and social health issues arising from the demanding nature of this work and the social and economic factors affecting these women.

KEYWORDS: Chikankari, Health, Problems, Social Health, Solutions, Women Artisans

I. INTRODUCTION

Chikankari, a traditional form of hand embroidery, has been an integral part of Indian culture and fashion for centuries. This exquisite ethnic handicraft has not only enriched the fashion industry but also proved a boon to countless women by providing them with employment opportunities. However, the women working in the Chikankari sector face numerous health issues due to the nature of their work, poor working conditions, and societal pressures. While the craft itself is celebrated for its beauty and cultural significance, it is essential to shed light on the health issues faced by the women who work in this sector. It is highly necessary to delve into the health concerns affecting these women, shedding light on the physical, mental, and social aspects of their well-being.

The Chikankari sector has significantly contributed to women's economic empowerment in India. By engaging in this craft, women can earn a livelihood and support their families. This economic independence has led to a shift in the social dynamics of many households and has enabled women to have a more substantial say in family decisions. Working in the Chikankari sector provides women with the opportunity to acquire a unique and valuable skill. This engagement not only enriches their personal lives but also enhances their self-esteem and confidence.

Just because the Chikan craft was unorganized, it was the entrepreneurs and manufacturers that thrived even as the female workers silently endured exploitation. Women artisans are often underpaid, with no concept of incentives, a low standard of living, and no health insurance. Because of their illiteracy, the craftsmen did not know any offices or associations from which they could complain about low wages and exploitation. They have no vocational or advanced

training and, ultimately, no social security. In some cases, artisans involved in Chikankari embroidery work in exploitative conditions, facing low wages, long working hours, and lack of access to social security benefits.

II. THE ETHNIC CRAFT OF CHIKANKARI

Chikankari is characterized by its use of fine threadwork and a variety of stitches to create intricate designs on fabric, most commonly cotton, muslin, or silk. The craft involves a skilled artisan using a thin, pointed needle to create various patterns on the fabric, employing stitches like 'Taipchi,' 'Bakhia,' and 'shadow work.' The process demands a high level of precision and skill, as well as a deep understanding of the different types of stitches and their applications. The embroidery work itself can be categorized into several different styles, including 'Tepchi,' which is fine needlework; 'Bakhia,' which creates a mesh-like effect; 'Keel Kangan,' involving satin stitches; and 'Murri,' which incorporates knot work. Each style requires a distinct set of skills and techniques, passed down through generations.



The Process & Exclusive Chikan Apparel

Mostly the Chikan embroidery is done by women and is practised everywhere in and around the traditional Lucknow households. The entire process of Chikankari takes place over months or sometimes even years. The native women began to earn a regular source of income. Apart from working in the factories, sometimes they bring these pieces to their homes. In this manner, their entire free time is devoted to this craft. They have to depend on these handicrafts to earn income for their family.

The Chikankari sector is known for its skilled women artisans who bring these intricate designs to life. Typically, this craft is labour-intensive, with women spending hours creating beautiful hand-embroidered pieces of clothing or fabric, such as sarees, kurtas, and dupattas. This research paper aims to explore the health challenges that women working in the Chikankari industry face. It will discuss the physical, mental, and social health issues arising from the demanding nature of this work and the social and economic factors affecting these women.

Today Chikankari has become a household name globally, so much so that it is a must-have garment in every woman's wardrobe. The variety it offers lures women in all age groups. And remember, no two pieces of Chikankari are the same. This is the uniqueness of this beautiful craft of Lucknow.

III. THE CHIKANKARI INDUSTRY AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Women have played a pivotal role in sustaining and propagating the Chikankari tradition. They are involved in various aspects of the sector, including designing, embroidery work, quality control, and sales. These women often come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and rely on Chikankari as a source of income for their families.

Presently, there are approx. 5000 families earning their livelihood by doing Chikankari embroidery in and around villages of Lucknow. Most of the artisans belong to the local Muslim community. Nearly 90% of Chikankari's work is done by women artisans. The native women in purdah began to earn a regular source of income and the skills have been passed down through generations in Lucknow, with women traditionally playing a central role in this unorganized industry.

Today, Chikankari sector employs a significant portion of the female workforce, employing thousands of women. This has led to increased financial independence for these women and has improved their socio-economic status to some extent. However, it also comes with a set of challenges, particularly related to health. Most of the artisan population lives in a single-roomed house. 22% of people have no toilets, 66% have no bathrooms, and 33% have no electricity. The workers live in penury and unhealthy environments.

Numerous Chikankari artisans operate in traditional environments with little access to contemporary equipment and technology. Their productivity and calibre of work may be hampered by outdated machinery and inadequate facilities. Inadequate infrastructure and outdated tools might reduce the productivity and efficiency of chikankari artists. Their efficiency can be increased with access to embroidery machines, design software, and training.

Unfortunately, apart from the everyday challenges brought on by poverty, they also contend with serious health issues, mostly weakening eyesight and painful cervical spondylosis, for which also they have no money to seek treatment. The embroiderers develop a lot of medical issues because of continuously working for long hours over a period. These artisans start developing weak eyesight at an early age; many middle-aged women end up with cervical spindly it is and other backbone problems because there is a lot of exertion. The sector being an unorganized one the artisan has no medical insurance.

IV. HEALTH ISSUES FACED BY WOMEN IN THE CHIKANKARI SECTOR

Women working in the chikankari sector face a range of health issues due to the often challenging and precarious nature of their work. These health issues can be influenced by various factors such as working conditions, socioeconomic status, and access to healthcare. Despite the economic empowerment and skill development opportunities provided by the Chikankari sector, women artisans face a multitude of health issues that need to be addressed. These issues can be categorized into physical, mental, and social dimensions.

Physical Health Issues

Musculoskeletal Problems--The Chikankari process involves hours of fine hand embroidery work. Maximum (56.67%) long hours of static work with awkward posture, and repetitive motion result in musculoskeletal problems, including carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, and back pain. Prolonged periods of sitting in the same position also led to posture-related issues. The nature of Chikankari work requires women to sit for extended periods while maintaining a fixed posture, often leading to musculoskeletal problems such as backaches, neck pain, and carpal tunnel syndrome.



Women artisans of Chikankari

When the lady is bending forward to do the embroidery work it leads to further complication because, in a lot of places, she must crane her neck to do justice to the intricacies of embroidery involved. Poor neck posture leads to a forward head position which aggravates the situation.

Eye Strain -- The intricate and detailed embroidery work required in Chikankari demands intense focus in dimly lit rooms and workshops. This often leads to eye strain and contributes to long-term eye and vision problems, such as myopia as workers need to focus closely on their needlework for long hours.

Respiratory Issues--Many Chikankari units operate in poorly ventilated spaces and lack proper ventilation, exposing workers to dust and fumes from dyes and chemicals. This leads to respiratory problems and allergies. The dyeing and bleaching of fabrics in the Chikankari process involve exposure to harmful chemicals, which sometimes result in skin issues and long-term health concerns.

Reproductive Health-- Several women working in the Chikankari sector are of childbearing age, pregnant or breastfeeding. The lack of maternity benefits, long working hours, and inadequate breaks during the workday can impact their reproductive health and pose challenges to balancing work and family life. Inadequate financial resources and a lack of awareness about healthcare options often result in delayed or limited access to medical care. This exacerbates health issues and leads to more serious conditions. Irregular and low-income also result in inadequate nutrition, leading to malnutrition and related health problems.

Infectious Diseases: Those in the unorganized sector may have limited access to clean water and sanitation, increasing their susceptibility to waterborne diseases. Additionally, crowded living conditions can facilitate the spread of infectious diseases.

Mental Health Issues

Anxiety -The compulsion for tight production deadlines and maintaining high-quality standards of chikankari embroidery is extremely taxing to poor women artisans. Uneducated women in this industry often suffer from stress and anxiety, impacting their overall mental well-being.

Work-Related Stress: The pressure to meet deadlines and produce intricate chikankari designs for the elite and global market can lead to work-related and mental health issues among women working in the chikankari sector.

Isolation & Monotonous Work Patterns: Many Chikankari workers operate from their homes or small workshops, which leads to social isolation. Lack of interaction with peers and limited social support networks contribute to feelings of loneliness and depression. Repetitive and monotonous work patterns lead to mental fatigue, lack of motivation, and a sense of boredom among Chikankari workers.

Lack of Work-Life Balance: Balancing the domestic responsibilities of children and families with the demands of the Chikankari industry proved to be challenging for rural women artisans. This imbalance results in mental exhaustion and feelings of inadequacy due to work setup. The absence of social support and interaction contributes to mental health issues.

Social Health Issues

Gender Disparities: Although Chikankari provides economic opportunities for women, gender disparities still exist. Women often earn less than men in the chikankari sector. Gender discrimination persists in this industry with women receiving lower wages and fewer opportunities for career advancement compared to their male counterparts.

Lack of Social Security: Women working in the Chikankari industry often lack access to social security benefits and healthcare. This puts them at risk in case of illness or accidents. In some communities, women engaged in Chikankari work face societal stigmatization, as embroidery work is often seen as inferior to other professions.

Income Inequality: Despite being a handicraft-intensive industry, Chikankari workers, especially women, often receive low wages. This income inequality can lead to financial stress and hinder their ability to access healthcare. In some cases, women are subjected to exploitative labour practices, working long hours for meagre pay. These practices have a severe impact on their overall well-being. Moreover, low wages lead to inadequate nutrition, affecting their overall health.

Child Labor: In some cases, women in the Chikankari sector involve their children in work due to economic constraints. This not only perpetuates a cycle of poverty but also exposes children to similar health risks as their artisan mothers.

V. INITIATIVES AND INTERVENTIONS

To address these health issues, the chikankari industry needs to implement better working conditions, provide access to healthcare, offer training on ergonomics and workplace safety, and ensure fair wages and job security. Government regulations, NGOs, and industry associations can play a vital role in improving the overall health issues and well-being of women working in the chikankari sector.

Social Security Measures: One of the major drawbacks of the unorganized sector of Chikan is the lack of social security benefits such as healthcare, pensions, and maternity leave for women artisans. Governments should introduce schemes that extend these benefits to artisans in the chikankari sector. This not only provides a safety net for vulnerable women artisans but also encourages them to participate in formal employment. Expanding social protection programs can provide a safety net for chikan artisans in the unorganized sector, reducing their vulnerability to economic shocks.

Health Camps and Awareness Programs --NGOs and government agencies must organise regular health camps to provide medical check-ups and awareness programs to educate women workers about health issues and preventive measures. Access to affordable and quality healthcare services should be ensured for Chikankari workers, with a focus on reproductive health and frequent check-ups.



Health Checkups of women artisans

Mental Health Support-- Employers and organizations should offer mental health support, including counselling and stress management programs, to help workers cope with the psychological challenges of the job for women artisans.

Advocacy for Workers' Rights -- Efforts to advocate for better working conditions, fair wages, & medical protections through Group Insurance for Chikankari workers have gained momentum, helping to address physical and economic disparities. It should be implemented in all clusters of chikankari.

Labour Laws and Regulations: Reforming labour laws and regulations is crucial to bridge the gap between the unorganized and organized sectors. Governments should strike a balance between protecting chikankari women artisans' rights and making it easier for entrepreneurs to hire skilled women artisans.

Improved Working Conditions -- Employers in the Chikankari sector should provide better working conditions, including large workshops, ergonomic chairs, proper lighting, and adequate ventilation, to reduce physical health problems among women workers.

Elimination of Gender Discrimination -- Efforts should be made to eliminate gender discrimination in the Chikankari sector by promoting equal wages for equal work and creating opportunities for women to advance in their careers. Chikankari workers should be given legal protections, maternity leave and social security benefits, to ensure the well-being and economic security of women artisans and their families.

Education, Digital Literacy and Awareness Programs -- Continued education, digital literacy and awareness programs should be conducted to empower women with knowledge about their constitutional rights, health insurance, and preventive measures.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Chikankari sector, while being a source of cultural pride and economic opportunity for women, also presents a range of health issues. These issues span physical, mental, and social dimensions, impacting the overall well-being of women in this industry. The health issues faced by women in this sector cannot be overlooked. These issues encompass physical, mental, and social dimensions and require a multi-pronged approach, including improving working conditions.

Government initiatives and the efforts of NGOs have started to address some of these issues, but more needs to be done to ensure the well-being and empowerment of women working in this traditional art form. Ultimately, recognizing and mitigating the health issues faced by these women is not only an ethical imperative but also a step towards preserving India's rich cultural heritage and supporting its female artisans.

Efforts to improve working conditions, access to healthcare, and mental health support are crucial. Gender discrimination and the absence of legal protections must be addressed to ensure equality and economic security. Efforts from the government, NGOs, and the industry itself are necessary to ensure the health and well-being of women working in the Chikankari sector. By acknowledging and addressing these issues, we can preserve this beautiful tradition while safeguarding the health and dignity of the women who contribute to its legacy.

Chikankari is not merely a craft; it is a living testament to India's rich cultural heritage. The challenges it faces are emblematic of the struggles many women artisans encounter in a rapidly changing world. To preserve and revitalize the Chikankari sector, a concerted effort from the government, non-governmental organizations, artisans, and consumers is essential. By addressing the problems faced by the Chikankari sector and implementing the suggested solutions, we can ensure that this exquisite art form continues to thrive and contribute to the economic and cultural landscape of India.

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