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Health Concerns of Chikankari Woman Artisans

Prof. Dr. Pooja Verma

Amity School of Fashion Technology, Amity School of Fine Arts

Amity University Lucknow Campus, Malhaur, Lucknow (India)

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Abstract

Chikankari, the ethnic Embroidery is a traditional craft of Lucknow for decorating fabric or garments with needles and colorful thread, often enhanced with elements like beads, pearls, sequins, zardozi work and metal strips. Interestingly, the core stitches of Chikankari such as chain stitch, running stitch, satin stitch, buttonhole stitch, and cross stitch have remained fundamental for centuries and have been appreciated in global arena. In fact, it's a wearer's delight when it comes to dressing for an occasion. In India, Chikan work, fondly called, Lucknow Chikan is a prominent embroidery tradition with over 400 years of history. Although "Chikan" means embroidery, the craft includes about 36 different basic stitches. Traditionally, chikankari is done with white thread on white muslin. Now it has evolved to include various types of fabrics, colors, and decorative elements like pearls, mirrors, and mukaish work.

Chikankari is mainly practiced by women in Lucknow and is deeply rooted in local household culture. The process is highly labor-intensive and can take months or even years to complete a single piece. Historically, Muslim women adopted this craft as a source of income, passing the skill down through generations. Many women artisans work from home or small workshops, and the craft often supports their families. The problems of the female artisans in this unorganized sector are extremely pathetic, as they work at low wages with no guarantee and lack job security. The artisans have no social benefits, long working hours, and poor working / living conditions and exploitation by middlemen. Unfortunately, in addition to the regular concerns brought on by poverty, women artisans also cope with serious health concerns for which they have insufficient means for treatment. These issues were highlighted by filmmaker Muzaffar Ali in his 1986 film "Anjuman", which portrays the socio-economic struggles of female Chikankari workers in Lucknow.

This research paper aims to delve into the health issues that chikankari women artisans encounter on daily basis. The research paper will also discuss the physical, social & mental health concerns due to the demanding nature of this ethnic handicraft and the social, personal and economic factors affecting women artisans involve in this industry.

Keywords: Artisans, Chikankari Embroidery, Exploitation, Garments, Health, Income

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1. Introduction

Lucknow, city of Nawabs takes pride in being the exclusive city for Chikankari and received the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) status in December 2008 (<https://www.gitagged.com/>). Renowned for its delicate craftsmanship and intricate motifs, Chikankari embroidery reflects the richness and elegance of Indian cultural aesthetics. Beyond preserving India's colorful textile heritage, chikankari craft has emerged as a main source of livelihood for numerous female chikankari artisans. Over the years, Chikankari has become deeply rooted in Indian fashion industry and has also carved a niche for itself in the global fashion arena.

Apart from illuminating fabric decoration techniques, Chikankari embroidery has majorly contributed to the economic empowerment of rural women artisans by creating various employment opportunities. However, despite their exceptional contribution to the handicraft, women artisans associated with the Chikankari often face multiple health-related issues arising from lengthy manual work, inadequate working scenario, and various social stigmas.



The Making Process & Exclusive Chikan Apparel (source - www.wacachikankariartisans.com)

Presently, Chikankari embroidery is known all over the globe, so much so that chikankari is hailed as a mandatory garment in the wardrobe of almost entire female population. The variety of chikankari apparels attracts female customers in all age groups. And most surprisingly, no two garments of Chikankari embroidery are similar. This is the X factor and uniqueness of this beautiful ethnic embroidery of Lucknow.

2. The Ethnic Craft of Chikankari

Chikankari embroidery is known for its use of multiple stitches to create beautiful designs on fabrics like silk, muslin and cotton. The chikankari embroidery process requires a high level of precision, skill, and an in-depth knowledge of the different types of stitches used to give an enriching look to the garment. The Chikankari embroidery has several types of stitches, such as 'Tepchi,' 'Bakhia,' 'Keel Kangan,' and 'Murri,' etc. Each chikankari stitch requires skills and techniques, trickled down through generations. The whole process of Chikankari is very lengthy, taking place over months or sometimes even years.

Chikan embroidery is primarily practiced by village women and remains deeply rooted in the traditional households in and around Lucknow. In addition to working in workshops and factories, many women artisans also carry embroidery work home, dedicating much of their spare time to this traditional craft. For many of these women, chikankari serves as an important source of livelihood and helps them contribute to their family responsibilities. In fact, this craft is highly labor-intensive, requiring long hours of meticulous handwork to create elegant, embroidered garments such as sarees, kurtas, and dupattas.

3. Women's Participation in The Chikankari Industry

Today approx. 6000 women in which 90% women are Muslim, they earn their livelihood by doing Chikankari in and around Lucknow. Majorly, the Chikankari's embroidery is done by women artisans. The women artisans earn a regular income through chikankari

embroidery, and this beautiful heritage have been passed down through generations.

The thousands of women artisans play a critical role in this unorganized industry. This employment has led to increased financial independence for these women artisans and has also considerably improved their socio-economic status. However, this financial independence also comes with a lot of other challenges, particularly related to their hygiene and health. Most of these women artisans live in dingy houses with no toilets and bathrooms, and few have no electricity. Hence, the women artisans live in penury and unhealthy environments.

Women embroiderers in the chikankari sector often suffer from numerous health problems due to prolonged working hours in poorly lit and congested environments. Continuous embroidery work puts significant strain on their eyes, leading to weak eyesight at an early age. Most of the middle-aged female artisans experience cervical pain, spinal disorders, and other musculoskeletal problems because of the repetitive posture and physical strain involved in chikankari embroidery. Since the industry operates largely within the unorganized sector, most female artisans do not have access to medical schemes or adequate healthcare support freely provided by the government.

4. Health Issues of Women Artisans in The Chikankari Sector

Women engaged in the chikankari industry face numerous health-related challenges due to the

demanding and insecure nature of their work. These health issues are influenced by poor working conditions, low socio-economic status, and limited knowledge of healthcare facilities. Although the chikankari industry offers rural women opportunities for livelihood, economic power, and skill development but women artisans continue to experience a wide range of health concerns. These challenges can be broadly categorized into physical, psychological, and social issues, focusing the urgent need for improved working conditions, greater healthcare awareness, and stronger support systems from all the stakeholders for female artisans of chikankari sector.

4.1. Physical Health Issues

4.1.1. Eye Strain -- The intricate and detailed embroidery work demands intense focus on their needlework for long hours in poorly lit rooms of dingy houses and workshops. This problem often leads to heavy eye strain and contributes to long-term vision problems, such as myopia etc.

4.1.2. Musculoskeletal Problems--The Chikankari process involves hours of fine hand embroidery. Chikankari embroidery requires women to sit for extended periods while maintaining a fixed posture, the continuous hours of static work with bending body posture and repetitive hand movement result in musculoskeletal problems, including carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, stiff neck problem and severe back pain



Women artisans of Chikankari (Source - <https://amounee.com>)

During the embroidery sessions, when the chikankari women artisan bends forward to do the embroidery work, it leads to lots of problems because most of the time, women artisans crane their neck to do embroidery stitches. Hence, poor neck posture leads to difficult head positions, which aggravates the posture problems like stiff neck

4.1.3. Infectious Diseases: Women working in unorganized sectors such as chikankari often have absolutely no access to clean water and proper sanitation facilities. These unhygienic situations increases their vulnerability to water borne illnesses. Moreover, congested living and working conditions contribute to the rapid spread of infectious diseases.

4.1.4. Respiratory Issues: Many small-scale chikankari production units' function in poorly ventilated spaces, exposing women artisans to dust, chemical fumes, and fabric dye substances. Regular exposure to these hazardous materials causes respiratory problems, skin rashes and allergies along with other health complications. The lengthy processes of dyeing and bleaching fabrics further enhance these risks factors due to the use of harmful liquids and chemicals.

4.1.5. Reproductive Health: Many women artisans employed in the chikankari industry are of childbearing age. Excess working hours, insufficient rest hours, and the absence of maternity benefits negatively affect their health. Poor financial resources and little awareness regarding healthcare facilities provided by the government often restrict access to proper medical treatment, worsening existing health conditions. Furthermore, irregular and low wages frequently lead to poor food and nutrition, resulting in many health problems.

4.2. Mental Health Issues

4.2.1. Lack of Work–Life Balance: Managing household chores alongside the demanding nature of the Chikankari sector is difficult for rural women artisans. This improper imbalance often leads to mental fatigue and feelings of frustration due to constant work pressure. Limited access for social, family, and community interaction further enhances mental health concerns.

4.2.2. Isolation and Repetitive Work Patterns: Due to poverty, many Chikankari women artisans work from their homes or small workshops, resulting in absolute social isolation. Minimal interaction with fellow artisans and inadequate social support

mechanism lead to loneliness and depression. Additionally, the repetitive and monotonous nature of embroidery work often causes mental exhaustion and boredom among the women workers.

4.2.3. Stress and Anxiety: During the summer season, in anticipation of huge sales, put pressure to meet strict deadlines while maintaining high standards of Chikankari embroidery. It creates major stress for women artisans. Many uneducated rural women working in this unorganized chikankari industry experience persistent mental strain, anxiety, and emotional stress, which poorly affect their overall mental well-being, and quality of life.

4.3. Social Health Issues

4.3.1. Huge Gender Disparities & Inequality in wages: Although Chikankari industry provides economic opportunities for rural women, but gender disparities prevail. Undoubtedly, male middlemen favour male artisans, hence women artisans earn less than men artisans in this embroidery sector. Income disparity creates financial and mental strain for women artisans and limits their access to essential benefits. In many instances, woman artisans are exploited by middlemen and compelled to work extra hours for very low wages, this negatively affects their well-being. Additionally, insufficient income often results in poverty and poor nutrition, further deteriorating their health. Gender discrimination persists in this industry, as women artisans are frequently paid less and provided with fewer opportunities for growth and advancement than their male counterparts.

4.3.2. Child Labor: In most of the cases, female chikankari artisans involve their daughters in this profession due to financial issues. As a result, young girls are unable to study and continue a cycle of poverty. Chikankari industry exposes young girls to similar health issues which their artisan mothers usually face.

4.3.3. Absence of Social Security: Female chikankari artisans working in this unorganised industry often lack access to social security and medical benefits provided by the government. Lack of awareness leads to nil access to financial assistance and puts them under lot of pressure in case of sickness or unfortunate accidents. Also, in Indian rural society, women artisans face societal stigmatization, as embroidery sector is often seen as inferior to other better professions.

5. Initiatives and Interventions

To eliminate these health concerns of female artisans, the implementation and awareness of government schemes are extremely important. The chikankari sector needs to implement upgraded and improved working conditions, easy access to healthcare, workplace safety, and ensure fair wages and job security. Ministry of Industries, Non-Government Organizations, and other associations can play a significant role in improving the health and well-being of female chikankari artisans. Employers and organizations should provide accessible mental health services, including counselling and stress-management programs, to support women artisans in managing the psychological pressures associated with their work.

5.1. Advocacy for Workers’ Rights – The main drawback of the Chikankari industry is the absence of social security norms such as pension, healthcare benefits, and minimum 6 months of maternity leave for women artisans. It is desired that governments should introduce schemes that provide these benefits to women artisans. This security provides a safety net for women artisans. Advocacy initiatives promoting fair wages, better medical conditions, maternity leaves and group insurance schemes for Chikankari women artisans have gained momentum in addressing both physical and economic concerns. The need for an hour is to expand

and implement these improvements across all Chikankari clusters.

5.2. Existing Labour Laws, Rules and Regulations – Enforcement of labour laws, industry rules and regulations are important to bridge the gap between the unorganized Chikankari industry and other organized industries. The government and NGOs should aim to create a balance between safeguarding the rights of women artisans and creating an enabling environment for entrepreneurs to employ skilled women workers. Effective implementation of labour laws in the chikankari sector will ensure fair wages, job security, and better working conditions for women artisans.

5.3. Health Camps and Awareness Programs- Non-Government Organizations along with other government medical agencies should organize regular health camps to provide health support and general awareness programs to educate women artisans. Easy access to cheap healthcare services should be available for Chikankari women workers, with a focus on maternity health benefits. Various non- government organizations like Warsi Seva Sadan and Tissar Artisan Trust regularly organize these health camps for women workers. A famous NGO “Women Artisan Chikankari Alliance”, organizes free medical camps for Chikankari artisans in Old Lucknow



Health Checkups (Source - <https://wacachikankariartisans.com>)

5.4. Elimination of Gender Discrimination— Calculated efforts must be implemented to eliminate gender disparity within the Chikankari industry. Ensuring equal pay for equal work and providing equal opportunities for women to progress professionally as their male counter parts are some of the critical steps toward achieving gender equity. Additionally, women artisans should be aware of getting legal protections,

maternity benefits, and access to social security schemes. These measures would surely strengthen their economic stability and improve the welfare of their families.

5.6 Improved Working Conditions -- Chikankari employers and entrepreneurs must improve the working conditions for women artisans. Providing spacious and well-organized factories or workspaces,

comfortable seating arrangements, adequate lighting, and proper ventilation will significantly reduce physical strain and work-related health problems. These steps to improve the working condition would enhance the productivity and well-being of women workers.

5.7. Elementary Education, Digital Literacy and Awareness Programs -- To empower chikankari women artisans, elementary education, basic digital literacy initiatives, and social awareness programs should be implemented by government, NGOs and related agencies. These initiatives can enhance their knowledge and give exposure to constitutional rights, health insurance schemes, financial inclusion, and preventive healthcare measures. Increasing awareness will enable female chikankari artisans to make right decisions regarding their overall health, life-work balance, and other viable economic opportunities.

5. Conclusion

Chikankari embroidery is hailed as a historical symbol of India's rich cultural heritage and artistic legacy. Chikankari sector is a source of significant livelihood opportunity for many women artisans in and around Lucknow. Preserving this ethnic handicraft needs recognizing the various challenges woman artisans faced. By addressing the problems like socio-economic, gender equality and health-related issues within this unorganized handicraft industry and implementing policy measures, it is possible to maintain the well-being of woman artisans. As discussed in this paper, these concentrated efforts from all the stakeholders will ensure that Chikankari embroidery continues to flourish globally while honoring the skill, resilience, and dignity of the women who keep this legacy alive.

Declaration

The author hereby declares that the manuscript submitted for consideration is an original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere for publication. The author take full responsibility for the integrity, accuracy, and ethical compliance of the work presented in the manuscript, including all revisions made in response to reviewer comments.

AI Usage Statement: Author declares that AI tools, if used, were solely employed to improve the clarity, grammar, and language of the manuscript (as indicated

in the reviewer's comments). No data, results, or scientific content were generated or altered using AI.

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- i. Any potential conflicts of interest, whether financial or non-financial, have been fully disclosed. – Yes / **Not Applicable**.
- ii. All sources of funding and financial support received for the conduct of the study have been appropriately acknowledged, including any updates made during revision. – Yes / **Not Applicable**
- iii. Necessary ethical approvals have been obtained from the relevant institutional or regulatory bodies for studies involving human participants, animals, or sensitive data, wherever applicable, and are clearly stated in the manuscript. – Yes / **Not Applicable**

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