

## Gendered Identity in Community and Crafts of Himalayan Weavers

Dhriti Dhaundiya

Assistant Professor, School of Design, Doon University, Kedarpur, Dehradun: 248001 (Uttarakhand), India.  
Mail Id: dhritidhaundiya@doonuniversity.ac.in | Orcid- [0000-0001-6929-1684](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6929-1684)

Surekha Dangwal

Vice Chancellor, Doon University, Kedarpur, Dehradun: 248001 (Uttarakhand), India.  
Mail Id: dangwalsurekha11@gmail.com

### Abstract

Historically, women have run the villages in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India, while men sought employment in the more industrialized nearby states, in the absence of local industry or commercial farming. Women have long been the backbone of the rural society and economy of Uttarakhand. They have also been the primary practitioners of crafts and builders of community in the hills. Although some research has documented the role of women in Uttarakhand in the creation and sustenance of livelihoods in difficult geographies, no such research has been undertaken in the craft sector specifically, leaving a lacuna in our understanding of traditional socioeconomic structures in the hills that have been sustained for many centuries. This paper is an exploratory study into the gendered identities of the women weavers in the villages of Uttarakhand and how the practice of this craft has created expressions of gender identity in craft work and the community, at a local, stakeholder and village network level. We document a case study in an organized craft cluster in the state of Uttarakhand in India using ethnographic methods. We used a narrative inquiry methodology to gather insights in this remote craft cluster. Narrative inquiry helped us explore the lived experiences of these crafts- women, exploring their subjectivity and processes of sense-making. We gained deep insights into the construction of beliefs, notions, and community perceptions among them that contribute to their sense of self and social identity.

**Keywords:** Gendered identity, Women weavers, Ethnography, Himalayan study.

### Introduction

The gendered identity of women in the difficult geographies of the Himalayan region of India has long been forged by traditional gender norms and expectations that have limited their agency and opportunities. More recently, practice of crafts and practice of crafts as livelihood has opened up pathways for women weavers to challenge these gendered identities and assert their agency in new ways. This study examines the experiences of women weavers in a Himalayan region who have gained financial independence through their craft work. This study seeks to understand how the practice of craft as livelihood has impacted these women's sense of self and their identity as gendered beings, and how they have gained voice and agency within the family and community.

Drawing on narrative inquiry as a methodology, the study uses ethnographic qualitative research methods to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of women weavers. In the absence of local industry or commercial farming, women have historically managed villages in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India, while males have pursued employment in more industrialized neighboring states. Women have long been the backbone of Uttarakhand's rural society and economy. In the highlands, they have also been the primary practitioners of crafts and community builders. This study examines the ways in which these female weavers challenge traditional gender norms and expectations.

In the next section, we present a background to the formation of identity, and the formation of gendered identity in crafts, followed by a reflection of crafts and community in the hills of Uttarakhand. We then describe our methodology, followed by a discussion of the findings and the analysis. We conclude with our insights into the exploratory study and the way ahead.

## **Background**

### **Formation of Identity**

Identity has been theorized academically across a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and gender studies. The social constructionist perspective views identity as a social construct that is created and maintained through social interactions and cultural norms, a product of socialization and cultural conditioning. Intersectionality highlights the interconnectedness of different social identities, such as gender, race, class etc. Intersectionality recognizes that gendered identity cannot be understood in isolation from other aspects of identity, and that individuals may experience discrimination and oppression based on multiple intersecting identities. Feminist theory challenges patriarchal norms and power structures, arguing that gendered identity is shaped by social and cultural factors, and perpetuated through gendered socialization and cultural practices. Psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the role of unconscious processes in shaping identity, developing through early experiences and relationships. These diverse theoretical frameworks have contributed to the understanding of how gendered identity is shaped (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).

## **Gendered Identity in Crafts**

The development of gendered identity is a complex process, influenced by various social, cultural, and individual factors. In the case of women working in crafts, their gender identity may be shaped by their experiences and interactions within a male-dominated community, as well as their personal values and beliefs.

Practice of crafts for livelihood, has historically been associated with men and often excluded women from participating. However, over time, as men in the family migrated to urban areas in search of livelihoods, the women have increasingly become involved in crafts and have been able to challenge the gender norms that have traditionally defined crafts (Portisch, 2010). The development of gendered identity among women in crafts, therefore, is an

ongoing process that involves navigating through the complexities of gender roles and stereotypes in domestic and professional situations (Appadurai, 1988). This process may involve confronting and challenging gender norms, finding support and solidarity among other women in the community, and developing a sense of pride and confidence in their craft and their identity as practitioners of the craft.

The development of gender identity among women in crafts is not a one-dimensional process and can be impacted by other factors such as community, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Women who belong to marginalized communities may face additional barriers and challenges in developing a sense of identity beyond family and community (Dilley, 2004; Escobar, 2011). Identity moulds an individual's perception of self and their role in society. In the case of women, identity can also significantly impact their social and economic status, and more so their ability to exercise agency and participate in decision-making processes, at home and in the workplace. Research has shown that women who have a strong sense of self and positive identity are more disposed to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, and strive for individual purpose and aspirations (Chowdhury, 2019). This is in variance to women who internalize negative stereotypes and beliefs about their gender, experience self-doubt, low self-esteem, and feel a limited sense of agency (Za-man, 2018).

Identity can also impact a woman's place in her community, as it alters how others perceive her and interact with her. Research has shown that women seen as strong, confident, and capable are more likely to be respected and valued by their community members, while those who are viewed as passive, dependent, or subordinate may face negative perceptions and marginalization (Markowitz, 2001; Erickson & Bohan, 2018). Changes in a woman's identity can lead to alterations in power dynamics within her community. Women who gain economic independence through their craft are seen as capable. This makes the community more receptive to seeing her challenge traditional gender roles and assert agency in new ways (Chowdhury, 2019).

### **Crafts & Community in Remote Himalayan Areas**

Remote geographies are known to create unique sociological environments and circumstances in the community. Community can be based on various factors, such as geography, ethnicity, religion, language, or shared experiences. Here we refer to community in the sense of a group of people who live in the same region, and thus share common characteristics, interests, or goals and who interact with one another in a meaningful way. In sociology, community is defined in terms of social relationships and networks. Sociologists underscore the importance of social dynamics and the ways in which they accord social cohesion and social capital. A community provides individuals with support, resources, and a sense of belonging.

Weaving as a craft has existed in Uttarakhand for many centuries, primarily working in coarse indigenous wool for clothes and quilts. It is one of the oldest crafts in the world, dating back to prehistoric times. Weaving involves interlacing yarn to create fabric. This primal application has meant that weaving has played a significant role in many cultures, and women

have been at the forefront of the craft when it was practiced for self-consumption. Weaving was traditionally a domestic activity, carried out by women in their homes or in small-scale workshops. In many cultures, weaving was considered women's work, and it has been seen as a way for women to contribute to their families and communities (Tolia, 2018). As weaving was commercialized and became a legitimate means of livelihood, men joined the ranks of weavers.

In India, women weavers have faced many challenges like low pay, lack of recognition for the craft, and limited access to markets. However, women led organizations and cooperatives have also been at the forefront of innovation in the field of weaving, developing new techniques and weaving patterns that have helped shape the craft and make it relevant in the present (Tolia, 2018). Taking it up as livelihood has provided women with a means of a steady income and achieving economic independence, which has helped to improve their social and economic status.

In many Himalayan communities, women weavers have formed cooperatives or associations to work together and share resources. Some of these groups have been incentivized by government schemes to promote cottage industry, self-help groups and micro business enterprises. The government has also organized skilling workshops and technical assistance in the form of more efficient and ergonomic infrastructure. These groups have provided women with a sense of community and support, and also organized access to markets and customers. The Government has also supported the development of markets and value chains for weaving products and fair-trade initiatives. Fair-trade promotes social and economic justice by ensuring that workers receive fair wages and good working conditions, and that their products are sold at a fair price without any exploitation by middlepersons. Fair trade communities have empowered women weavers who are often ill-equipped to deal with issues of wage and working conditions.

### **Narrative Inquiry & Visual Ethnography**

Narrative inquiry is a research method that concentrates on the stories people tell about their experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences in order to obtain insight into their experiences, perspectives, and narratives regarding their work. Narrative knowledge is produced through tales of lived experience and the meanings people accord to them. A reflexive approach to visual ethnography is known to transcend boundaries between the researcher and participants (Turk, 2011). The multimodality of language and pictures together can lead to greater insights into ethnographic fieldwork. Images captured during visits to the participants' workplaces and homes can both reveal as well as conceal the gendered identity of the women (Strathern, 1993; Lehmann, 2012). Images captured contribute to the narrative outputs from the interviews, providing a pause for reflection on embodiment and skilled practice (Gowlland, 2015). Photographs can be external validations of the narratives collected (Engelke, 2008). However, Cant (2015) suggests that photographs go beyond that, carrying other forms of knowledge and stories in them. Studies in visual ethnography have looked at verbal and visual methods of communication in tandem when looking at crafts and producers of crafts (Henrici, 2003; Gowlland, 2015). In photographs there is a distinct separation between the camera and the subject, one becoming the viewer and the other, the viewed. By means of the production of meaning, knowledge is also produced, which is connected to power. Turk (2011)



states the action of taking a photograph is not just the creation of a visual record, but also the creation of knowledge. An ethnographic photograph is one where the researcher can derive useful and meaningful visual information (Harper, 2022). A multimodal combination of various modes of knowledge including interview recordings and photographs provides multiple paths to gain insight into different participants' perspectives (Pink 2005). Photographs are inherently reflexive, a moment in time for the photographer at the time of the research encounter (Pink, 2005). The meaning is not fixed, but can be derived with the context provided by the interviews. Thus the use of narrative inquiry & ethnographic photographic methods can lead to detailed insights.

In the next section we detail our methodological framework and the methods we used to conduct this study.

## Methods

This research is an exploratory study into the gendered identities of the women weavers in the villages of Uttarakhand and how the practice of this craft has created expressions of gender identity in craft work and the community, at a local, stakeholder and village network level. We document a case study in an organized craft cluster in the state of Uttarakhand in India using ethnographic methods. We used a narrative inquiry methodology to gather insights in this remote craft cluster.

Narrative inquiry is a research methodology that focuses on the stories people tell about their experiences, and the meanings they attach to those experiences, to gain insights into their experiences, perspectives, and narratives about their work. Through this approach, we tried to identify a range of themes and patterns in the weavers' stories, which shed light on their lived experiences, challenges, and opportunities as women weavers in this region.

We selected the oldest and largest women weavers' cluster in the state for the case study. The society was founded by a very motivated woman entrepreneur and weaver who hailed from the area. Subsequently, it went through financial straits and was bailed out by a partnership between a charitable foundation and the state government. At one time the number of women weavers linked to this society exceeded five hundred. The number has reduced to several hundred now. The society has diversified its products and is trying to reach new markets to boost sales.

We obtained explicit consent from all participants who were observed and interviewed to use their names and photographs for academic research. All interviews were recorded for later transcription. The team of researchers observed the women weavers at work in the remotely situated workshop of the society without intruding on their space or work. The method of observation study was selected to familiarize the research team with the daily tasks and processes in the society, and also to break the ice between researchers and the women weavers.

This observation study was followed by interviews with some craftswomen to gain insights into their experiences and perspectives. The craftswomen were invited on voluntary basis, weavers were chosen from each skill level, the expert artisans with 25 years of experience and above, the skilled artisans with 15 years of experience and above, the semi-skilled artisans with 5-10 years of experience, and the trainee artisans with 5 years of weaving experience or lower. This helped ensure that they were representative of the broader population of craftswomen in the region. The interviews were conducted in a group so participants could supplement each other's responses. Some responses served as prompts for further discussion within the group. The interview was semi-structured with a set of prepared questions to elicit rich and nuanced data. The interviews were conducted during a break in a secluded space within the campus of the workshop so that the craftswomen felt comfortable and safe sharing their stories and experiences.

The interviews were transcribed and key insights were recorded by the researchers. These were further analyzed and discussed to produce exploratory themes that will be used to guide the future studies in the project. The photographs recorded during the observation study were used to support the insights from the interviews.

The researchers were careful to avoid researcher bias and maintain reflexivity throughout the data analysis process through joint sessions and discussion.

In the next section we discuss our findings and analyze them.

## Findings & Discussion

One of the main themes that emerged from our exploratory study was the importance of weaving as a source of livelihood and cultural identity for the women weavers. Weaving has been a part of their cultural traditions in the hills for generations, but they were the first generations in their communities who were making their livelihood through it. In the past, it had been a domestic activity for productive free time. However, women in difficult geographies do not have access to many other income-generating opportunities, so the monetization of this crafting activity was a natural progression. Having a regular source of income through the society has given these women weavers both social and economic confidence. They feel they have a higher say in the family's decisions now. They have also been instrumental in enrolling neighbours and extended family members to the fold.



FIGURE 1 - WOMEN CONVERSE WHILE SPINNING NATURAL WOOL INTO YARN FOR WEAVING

However, ironically, they hesitate in having their own offspring join the society. Further probing led to reflections on craft being seen as blue-collar labour in their community while jobs in municipal government or school teaching are seen as white-collar positions for the educated. Many of the women weavers use their incomes to supplement the family budget, where all of them mentioned children's education related expenses as their primary expense. Weaving has given these women social capital and social confidence but they think of it as an activity for those without education and few livelihood options. These reservations are perhaps derived from the perceptions of craft and service in these rural communities where education and migration to urban areas is still seen as aspirational.



FIGURE 2 - WEAVING REQUIRES PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CONCENTRATION, ESPECIALLY WHEN NAVIGATING COMPLEX PATTERNS

The second major theme which emerged from the conversations was that of the importance of flexibility of working hours for all of them. Most of these women were the primary caregivers to children and the elderly at their homes. The challenge of working office hours in the society has meant that often family members at home like older children, in-laws and sometimes, husbands, have had to step up in helping with domestic chores. The women seek flexibility in working hours, going as far as to set up their weaving looms at home because practicing a craft is in no way a guarantee of relief from other domestic duties. One of the participants mentioned how knitting can be practiced at home on your own terms but weaving needs a more concerted effort.



FIGURE 3 - WEAVERS GATHER AT A TRAINEE'S LOOM FOR GUIDING HER



Women are perhaps by nature gregarious and weaving can often be a solitary activity, even when their looms may be within close vicinity, due to the loud noise of running the loom. The weavers often take breaks in between to stretch out their limbs and also speak to neighbours and friends casually. In these short but regular breaks, they also help the new weavers with correcting error and difficult patterns. Often several of them converge on one loom and observe or talk while one woman weaves.



FIGURE 4 - FREQUENT BREAKS HELP THE WEAVERS STRETCH THEIR LIMBS AND ALSO AFFORD SOME TIME FOR SOCIAL EXCHANGES

One further theme which arose was how craft is perceived by these practitioners. Conversations with most participants revealed that they practice the craft only as a viable source of livelihood now, not for the sake of the craft. Even though many have been weaving at home for generations, born into a community in remote hilly villages, today they see it only as a means of generating livelihood. The products they weave out of expensive natural wool are too expensive for their own use. They use cheaper machine-made products bought from the market. But working on these expensive, exclusive products has given them a source of consistent income that has significantly contributed to household income. They appreciate the exclusivity of their handwoven products and are proud of the skill that goes into making them but during the interviews it came across that many of them do not feel a deeper bond of creation with their handiwork.



FIGURE 5 - THE PREVAILING MOOD IS GENERALLY UPBEAT WITH AFFABLE COLLEAGUES AND CO-WORKERS



Nonetheless, many weavers spoke about the joys and rewards of their work, especially the creative satisfaction. They also described the sense of community and solidarity that they feel with other weavers, and having a support group outside family. The 8-10 hours they spend together each day have helped create relationships with other weavers that have given them immense benefits of a community joined by skill rather than region or language. Overall, the insights from our observation study and interviews highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of women's weaving practices in the Himalayan region of India. Through the stories and narratives of these women weavers, we gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives, and the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts in which they operate.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this exploratory study on the gendered identity of women weavers in a Himalayan town has shed light on the transformative impact of financial independence and belonging to a skilled community on their agency and empowerment within the larger community, and their own family. The findings suggest that women weavers who have gained economic independence through their work are able to challenge traditional gender norms and expectations, and exercise greater control over their lives and decisions. Our study has revealed that weaving is not just a cultural tradition but a source of livelihood and identity for women in this community. Monetizing weaving has given these women both economic and social confidence, as they have a regular source of income and a say in family decisions. However, there is a perceived societal hierarchy that favors white-collar jobs over blue-collar crafting activities. Additionally, the women weavers desire flexibility in working hours, as they are often primary caregivers and responsible for domestic duties. Despite weaving being a solitary activity, the women enjoy the sense of community and support among fellow weavers. They appreciate the exclusivity of their handwoven products, but crafting is now primarily a means of generating income rather than a passion. Overall, the study highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of women's weaving practices in the Himalayan region, shedding light on the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts in which they operate.

### **Acknowledgements**

This study was carried out as part of larger project on the craftspersons of Uttarakhand, sponsored by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) vide Grant No. 8268/GN/2021- 22/ICSSR/RP/MJ.

We would like to acknowledge the women weavers of the Hans Himadri Foundation, Kasardevi (formerly known as Panchachuli Himalayan Weavers Society) of the Kumaun region of Uttarakhand, India for welcoming us into their workplace and homes, and for sparing time to talk to us.

This paper was presented orally at the European Social Science History Conference 2023, Gothenburg, 12-15 April, 2023.

## References

- Appadurai, Arjun, editor. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.
- Cant, Anna. "One Image, Two Stories: Ethnographic and Touristic Photography and the Practice of Craft in Mexico." *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2015, pp. 277-285. DOI: 10.1080/08949468.2015.1052308.
- Chowdhury, Nafisa. "Women's Identity, Empowerment and Development in Bangladesh: A Narrative Inquiry." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2019, pp. 139-151.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, 1990, pp. 1241-1299.
- Dilley, Roy. "The Visibility and Invisibility of Production Among Senegalese Craftsmen." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2004, pp. 797-813.
- Engelke, Matthew. "The Objects of Evidence." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 14, 2008, pp. S1-S21. Erickson, Rebecca J., and Janelle S. Bohan. "Power and Gender Identity." *The Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, edited by Seth J. Schwartz et al., Springer, 2018, pp. 563-584.
- Escobar, Arturo. *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Gowlland, Geoffrey. "Unpacking Craft Skills: What Can Images Reveal about the Embodied Experience of Craft?" *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2015, pp. 286-297. DOI: 10.1080/08949468.2015.1052324.
- Harper, Douglas. "Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation." *Visual Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2002, pp. 13-26. Henrici, Jasmin. "Non-Governmental Organizations and Craft Producers: Exchanges South and North." *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 16, no. 2-3, 2003, pp. 289-313. DOI: 10.1080/08949460310026.
- Lehmann, Ann-Sophie. "Showing Making: On Visual Documentation and Creative Practice." *The Journal of Modern Craft*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2012, pp. 9-23.
- Markowitz, Lilian B., and Karen W. Tice. "The Precarious Balance of 'Scaling Up': Women's Organizations in the Americas." *Women and International Development*, no. 271, Michigan State University, 2001.
- Pink, Sarah. *Doing Visual Ethnography*. 3rd ed., Sage, 2013.
- Portisch, Anna O. "The Craft of Skilful Learning: Kazakh Women's Everyday Craft Practices in Western Mongolia." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 16, 2010, pp. S62-S79.
- Turk Niskač, Branka. "Some Thoughts on Ethnographic Fieldwork and Photography." *Studia Ethnologica Croatica*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 125-148.
- Zaman, Madiha. "Negative Identity and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2018, pp. 132-143.

**Author Bio -**

**Dhriti Dhaundiyal** - Ms Dhriti Dhaundiyal completed her undergraduation in Design from National Institute of Design, India and her graduation in Sustainability Studies from King's College, UK as a Chevening scholar. She has previously worked as an automobile designer in India and Japan for Tata Motors, Maruti India and Suzuki Japan for over six years. She founded the School of Design in Doon University and set up the undergraduate program offering specialisations in Product Design & Graphic Design and has been teaching for the last decade. She is involved in field documentation and research in Uttarakhand at the grassroots level of the craft and development sectors.

**Surekha Dangwal** - Prof. Surekha Dangwal is the Vice Chancellor of Doon University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand. Earlier she has served as Head of the Department of English, Modern European & Other Foreign Languages, H.N.B. Garhwal University, Srinagar Garhwal, Uttarakhand. She has 34 years of teaching and research experience till date. She has been a recipient of the prestigious DAAD Fellowship (Germany). She has completed a three months program on women studies at the International Women University (IFU) in Kassel and Hannover, Germany from July 15- October 15, 2000. She has also been a visiting faculty at Tarleton State University, Stephenville, Texas, USA under a Faculty Exchange Program in 2008-09. Her research interests focus on South Asian Women Studies, Diaspora Literature and Literary Theory.