

A Study on Marginalized Women Working in the Carpet Factories in Kathmandu

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ABSTRACT

Several marginalized women work in carpet factories in Nepal. These women are mostly unemployed and illiterate. The study aims to understand their working conditions, life situations, and the challenges that they face both at work and at home. The researcher interviewed nine such female workers in local dialects after obtaining their verbal consent in the Boudha area of Kathmandu, Nepal. These women had experienced physical, psychological, and economic stress. They came to the city for a better life, education for their children, and employment opportunities. The study shows that the workers are unsatisfied with their pay and the working environment, and struggle to live in the city. The study also found that they are vulnerable and often paid less than what is needed to meet their needs.

Keywords: Carpet factory, physical, psychological, economic, education, employment

Introduction

Nepal is one of the least developed countries in the world. The principal economic activity of Nepal is agriculture, employing about 65% (Wikipedia) of the country's population. Nepal's carpet industry is one of its most popular sectors, producing carpets of different designs and colors made from pure Himalayan wool. Nepalese carpet is famous all over the world because of its cold-resistant nature and attractive design. It has gained worldwide acceptance and is exported to Asian, European, and American markets.

Most of the carpet factories in Nepal are located in the Kathmandu Valley and offer employment opportunities and economic support to many families located there. The history of carpet weaving in Nepal is long, and the industry has significantly contributed to reducing unemployment and promoting economic growth. This research focuses on the working conditions in the carpet weaving centres, the problems faced by workers, and how they face them.

Aim of the study

To understand the socio-economic conditions of women employed in the small-scale carpet industry and identify the issues. The study focuses on challenges such as wages, job opportunities, and environment, and finds out if there is any exploitation in the workplace. The study aims to explore their

life situations when balancing family life and carpet weaving.

Objectives

To examine the challenges faced by women working in the Carpet industry and assess the socio-economic status of women workers. To examine the working conditions in the carpet factories and to analyze the socio-economic conditions of marginalized women working in the Carpet factories in Kathmandu.

Methodology

The study area selected is the Boudha–Kumarigal area, an urbanized location of Kathmandu Valley with many carpet factories. The nature of the research is descriptive as well as explorative, focused on finding out the socio-economic problems of carpet-weaving women in the factories.

The study is mainly based on primary sources of information, i.e., conducting interviews with nine women participants working in two factories from the study area. A structured questionnaire was prepared by the researcher after individual consultation. The findings were recorded and analyzed. Based on the pilot study, the researcher interviewed the subjects with a newly prepared questionnaire in English with 15 questions. The questionnaires were translated into their local dialect for the interviewees to facilitate effective communication. Additional questions included the worker's age, education,



total working hours, total days they work, monthly income, the number of family members at home, and the total number of labourers working in the factory. Secondary information has also been taken from various published works in Nepal and other countries. The study employs a qualitative methodology, with data collected through a questionnaire following interview guidelines.

Literature Review

This study aims to explore the socio-economic conditions, challenges, and opportunities of women working in the carpet industry in Kathmandu. The purpose of this research is to understand their working conditions in the factory as well as at home and the impact of their employment on their personal and family life.

Few articles have been published on a similar topic of marginalized women working in the small-scale carpet industry at Boudha, Kathmandu. The industry engages mostly women who are unemployed and illiterate and serves as a relief for most people looking for a job, especially unskilled ones who lack special skills or talents to do any other job.

Nepali carpet factory workers are not happy with their labour-intensive, low-paying jobs. The salary they earn is not sufficient to fulfil basic needs and have a quality of life. In a study by Gurung et al (2021), hard-working women workers have always been paid less, and they are in vulnerable situations. The workers are not satisfied with their earnings. The average daily wage for the weavers is less than many other jobs available in Kathmandu (O'Neill, 2004). Women workers have a low tendency to save after spending on their immediate needs. In a study by Archana (2023), the marginal propensity to save women workers in the carpet industry, concerning their income and saving behaviour, is observed to be low. This indicates that a relatively small proportion of their income is allocated towards savings compared to their overall earnings. Despite earning income from their work in the carpet industry, these women tend to prioritize immediate consumption needs, such as food, housing, education, and medical expenses, over saving for the future. Hence, the workers are not very financially secure for any unforeseen events in the future. In a study conducted

by Rasheed (2016), Workers are paid as per square yard of work. The workers shared that the sheet used for manufacturing the tufted carpet is called the white tufted sheet.

In a study by Kamaşak (2010), work conditions in the carpet industry contribute to emotional and psychological distress. Employees report feelings of loneliness, demotivation, boredom, and low job satisfaction due to the lack of social interaction and support from peers and supervisors.

Additionally, workplace harassment is prevalent, with women workers suffering physical, mental, and social distress. In a study by Dhakal (2009), the women suffered physically, mentally, and socially, but the majority suffered mentally. The study by Chalise (2009) shows that 61% of respondents were affected by the psychological effects of harassment. The women and the workers in the carpet industry also experience an emotional strain. Carpet hand-weaving is a common practice in countries such as India, China, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, and they are then transported to other countries for sale. Hand-woven carpets are produced in home-based workshops categorized as informal small-scale industry. The work is often organized around families and carried out in homes. As most of the set-ups are installed in homes, womenfolk and children also contribute to the work.

Inevitable health issues like asthma and tuberculosis, problems in the home, and problems in daily expenditure make up the challenges faced by these workers. Not to mention, there are no clear government health policies for them, which some believe may have exacerbated their situation. A study done by O'Neill (2004) the dust and tiny spare particles of wool cause problems for health. Another study, by Avais et al. (2014), shows that the handmade carpet industry weavers are prone to skeletal deformities, eyesight, and health issues from toxic chemicals. Those who engage in extra work during the night throughout the month are later found sick for at least a week. On a brighter note, harm created by the carpet industry to the workers is lessening. The latex chemical used in carpets is not completely harmful now, as it does not contain sulphur, which is poisonous in nature. However,



the tufted carpets have a shorter life and are usually thrown away in water resources, which causes harm to the environment instead.

In a study done by Shrestha (1993), Carpet is a major export item of Nepal. It uses unskilled manpower heavily in its production. This gave Nepal a refill to solve the unemployment problem for its abundant low-skilled manpower. However, in recent years, because the carpet industry is losing its ground as a major export item, it poses a serious concern to the policymakers of Nepal.

To remain competitive in the export market, the carpet industry in Nepal needs to produce higher-quality products. However, achieving better quality requires offering higher wages, which in turn motivates workers to improve their craftsmanship and remain in their jobs. Unfortunately, many carpet factories in Nepal struggle to provide better wages, making it difficult to retain skilled and stable workers.

Most workers are migrants, they do not have their own residence and rent one or two rooms for their cooking, eating, sleeping, resting, and all other needs of their family life. Sometimes, the factory owner provides them with accommodation if he has one. In a study by O'Neill (2004), weavers in Kathmandu are fortunate to get free accommodation from most of the factories, though the rooms are often crowded and vary in quality. Sometimes the subcontractors offer rent subsidies if they cannot provide rooms. The owner provides only the room and minimum use of furniture, while employees purchase everything else from their salary. Usually, the meals are cooked on a kerosene stove in the room, and female weavers often cook and care for the preschool children while they work at the loom. Furthermore, the cost of living in Kathmandu is much higher than in rural Nepal. The price of basic needs has shot up these days, especially for food products. Therefore, the earnings of migrant workers are often inadequate to meet basic needs, leading to taking loans from their owners. This informal credit system makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, and the dissatisfied weavers are cheated by their employers. The weavers' frustration arises from rising living costs that reduce their ability to earn a living from carpet weaving.

Thematic Analysis

Status of carpet weavers

The carpet weavers are employed full-time throughout the week except for the weekends. Since most of them have migrated from rural Nepal to cities desperately for work, they have very little interaction with relatives, family members, and neighbours. They also do not have meals on time and spend less time caring for their children. The stress they face from work, along with skipped meals and poorly balanced diets, greatly exacerbates the health issues faced by the workers.

Personal struggles of marginalized women workers

These women face numerous problems at home and at work. They are often not paid on time, which complicates their ability to manage household finances. Due to their weaving work, they develop body aches, eye irritation, prolonged headaches, and chest pain, making their life difficult and stressful. To make ends meet, they even work overtime. At the factory, they get scolded and harassed if their work is not completed on time. Favouritism enhances their discomfort, and shortages of raw materials further complicate their work environment. The women also need to prepare meals for their families before going to work, contributing to their overall stress.

A significant number of these women are illiterate, get married at a very young age, and start working during the early stages of their lives with minimum remuneration to meet their needs. Most of them have no option because they do not know any other skills. They try to manage household work and professional work. Except for holidays, these women workers do not get to spend sufficient time for themselves or with their families. Sadly, they spend the majority of their lives working in the factory.

Role of Government

The workers mentioned that the lack of a clear government policy makes their lives difficult. They believe that stricter policies could ensure stable income, permanency in jobs, retirement benefits, and social security. Most workers especially condemn the prevailing child labor in the carpet weaving industry. Hence, addressing issues like low wages, health policy, timely payments, life insurance,



regular bonus, child labor, and unfair treatment is crucial by the government.

Working Environment

The carpet industry workers need to work speedily and authentically, even in adverse situations that arise in the factory. The work environment is characterized by dirt, disorder and inadequate lighting. It can be frustrating to the employees as it prolongs the time needed to complete a single carpet. The workday typically begins at nine in the morning and extends until five in the evening, though hours can sometimes stretch to an exhausting 13 to 15. Gossip, criticism, and negative talk in the factory serve as a significant distraction, diminishing overall productivity. Moreover, while workers need good rest, they are often overworked throughout the day and even in their accommodations.

Health problems and medical support

Workers in the carpet industry often experience health complications that include gastric issues, asthma, tuberculosis, certain maternal conditions, along with heart and lung conditions. Some of these conditions become severe and even untreatable. While a few senior female workers recall receiving some medical assistance when they first joined the factory, such support has steadily declined over the years and is now virtually nonexistent. Consequently, the factory does not provide medical aid, compelling many workers to continue working even while suffering from debilitating pain caused by some serious medical conditions.

Sympathy and Empathy from Family

Women employed in the carpet sector often get help from their families. Their husbands and children assist with household chores and bring them food at work. When they are sick or stressed, their families offer care and help. Family members provide encouragement and motivation, ensuring that when the women return home exhausted and hungry, they are urged to rest and recharge. In some cases, where the husbands assume the homemaker role, finding employment can be challenging.

Reason for choosing the work

Employment opportunities are limited in Nepal, and securing a good job often requires education, skills,

talent, and adaptability. The low cost of transportation lures many workers to carpet weaving, given its proximity to their rented homes. Some even look for affordable homestays close to their workplaces. For many, illiteracy and a lack of qualifications limit better job opportunities. Though some workers are excited by the more creative side of carpet weaving, like the design, the numbering, and the choosing of colours, others do it because they don't have any other means of sustaining themselves.

Carpet weaving is specifically beneficial for illiterate women as it provides accommodation and lodging to them. It is also flexible and a way to socialize, helping them become part of the community.

Financial and Employment Issues

Although the employees have certain working conditions, these are often not explicitly written in formal agreements. A delayed timeline, salary, and low wages are the problems for the workers in the industry. The employer frequently keeps the workers occupied and demands continued output in the factory. Additionally, ageing is another concern, as older workers fear losing their jobs due to employers' preference for younger and more agile workers.

Workers also experience issues such as unclear government policies, insubstantial wages, limited opportunities for growth, and inadequate local resources. Employee gets few benefits, and gender discrimination remains a significant problem. Although workers are allowed to take leave, they face a penalty of five hundred rupees per day. Additionally, they experience wage disputes, workplace discrimination, and harassment. Other challenges include financial exploitation, social isolation, lack of support for skill development and education, and insufficient legal protections.

Satisfaction and Happiness in the Industry

Despite these adversities, some workers find satisfaction in learning new skills and completing tasks in their jobs. They master various skills such as numbering, designing, choosing, colouring, and mapping, allowing them to finish weaving assignments within designated timeframes.

During emergencies, the weavers can take loans from the owner, which gives them temporary relief

from their financial struggle to meet their needs. This arrangement brings joy to the workers, as they get the money to provide for their families, and in the meantime, the owner benefits from the profit generated through these loans. Notably, he dwells in his own house and earns millions of rupees from exports.

The Carpet Industry's Role in Development

Nepali carpets have a lot of demand in foreign countries. This has allowed the carpet sector to generate substantial revenue by capitalizing on that

demand, providing employment opportunities and helping to mitigate poverty. By exporting Nepali carpets, the industry not only generates foreign currency but also plays a vital role in the nation's development processes, serving as an important source of income and a catalyst of economic growth.

Table 1. Demographic framework

Number of Participants	Age	Educational Qualification	Daily Working Hours	Number of a Working in a Week	Monthly Income	Number of Family Member	Place
Participant one	48	Nil	8	6	15,600.00	3	KTM
Participant Two	47	Nil	13	5	8,000.00	5	KTM
Participant Three	53	Nil	18	6	7,000.00	4	KTM
Participant Four	40	Nil	18	6	7,000.00	4	KTM
Participant Five	40	Nil	14	6	11,000.00	4	KTM
Participant Six	36	Class 5	15	6	11,000.00	5	KTM
Participant Seven	48	Nil	8	6	16,600.00	4	KTM
Participant Eight	46	Class 4	12	6	15,000.00	4	KTM
Participant Nine	52	Nil	10	6	11,000.00	4	KTM

Findings

The following aspects of women working in carpet factories were reviewed in this study.

Health-related issues

All respondents shared that health issues are a major problem. They reported ailments such as joint pain, backaches, knee pain, eye irritation, and

headaches. Respondents 1, 4 and 5 had asthma as a result of exposure to dust and unsanitary conditions. Respondents 2 and 3 noted that the factory lacked proper ventilation and air circulation. Respondent 4 shared that she developed heart-related and respiratory problems after starting work in the industry. All respondents emphasized the absence of medical or healthcare support in the workplace.

Additionally, five out of nine respondents reported the onset of gastritis due to their work conditions, while Respondent 7 stated that she contracted tuberculosis after working in the factory.

Dissatisfied with wages

All nine respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their salaries, stating that their earnings were insufficient to cover basic necessities, children's education, or medical expenses. Two respondents (Res. 4 and 5) specifically mentioned difficulties in affording their rent. Furthermore, all participants agreed that the company provided no financial support. While four respondents reported receiving their salaries on time, the remaining five experienced delays in payment.

Work-life balance

All respondents stated that they spent most of their daytime working in the factory and only returned home at night. Some expressed appreciation for their families' support, as illustrated by Respondent 1's remark, "My family prepares and gives food when I reach home, and my husband gives motivational words and looks after me well". Similarly, Respondent 4 mentioned that her husband is supportive and prepares dinner in the evenings. However, all respondents agreed that they had very little time for family and relatives, minimal interaction with neighbors, and barely any time to attend to their children.

Work contract and terms and conditions

All nine respondents said that there were no formal working conditions or written agreement for the employees. The respondents are unclear about government policies. Five out of the nine participants reported that child labor is prevalent in the factories.

Economic benefits

All respondents believed that their labor contributed economic benefits to the country and profits for the carpet factory owner. The export of carpets plays a crucial role in the nation's development, generating substantial production and foreign currency. The owner earns a lot of money from the carpet industry. However, respondents also shared concerns regarding economic exploitation occurring in their respective work areas.

Choice of job option

All of them said that they chose this occupation due to a lack of skills and knowledge. "I do not know any other job and have no other option," remarked Respondent 5. "I am not an educated person" was echoed by Respondent 4. All respondents stated that, despite being unskilled and illiterate, they learned their tasks after joining the factory. When asked about positive experiences at work, they all acknowledged gaining valuable skills, including numbering, designing, colouring, mapping, weaving, and colour selection. However, the findings revealed that most respondents were dissatisfied with the industry, with the exception of Respondents 8 and 9, who were somewhat content.

Respondent 6 shared that she often faced scolding and struggled to eat on time. Respondent 5 mentioned that discrimination, favoritism, and harassment were present in the workplace, which discouraged employees. Respondents 7 and 8 stated that the pressure from the owners to complete work caused stress and tension. Additionally, respondents 6 and 7 expressed concerns regarding excessively long working hours.

Discussion

The current study shows that carpet weavers' working conditions are substandard and that the majority of the participants were dissatisfied with their working environment and remuneration. They are unhappy with a lack of security and limited space in the weaving area, both of which adversely affect their health and work efficiency. It is worth noticing the findings of Khan (2024), which indicate that weaving generates cotton particles and dust, which create respiratory problems for the employees. The study by Subedi and Banamala (2015) revealed that the majority (84%) of the workers had experienced at least one health problem while working in the factory. 63.1% backache/joint ache, eye irritations 40.48%, prolonged headache 40.48%, and chest pain 38.1%, similar to the findings of Nepali carpet workers.

Findings from the nationwide survey (2020) by World Vision International found that workers work at a lower wage rate and beyond the regular work schedule, and in an unhealthy and unsafe work

environment. The study also reported that 6.66% of the workforce in the carpet industry, both boys and girls, were found under 18 years old, similar to the finding of the current study. The present study discovered that weavers are paid low despite long hours of work and find it difficult to meet their basic needs. In the same way study by Majeed et al. (2021) shows that the average daily earnings of the weavers are very low. With low earnings, they cannot meet the basic needs of the family. Their working hours are long, which results in harmful consequences.

According to Sharma (2021), the weavers and workers were frustrated that women were not provided with bonuses or insurance, and there was no insurance policy for any worker in case of an accident or death. Such phenomena are also present in Nepal's carpet industry, which highlights the need for government immediate action in dealing with issues such as providing health insurance, paying wages on time, giving regular bonuses, stopping child labor, and treating all employees with dignity.

The women in carpet factories face difficulties with long hours of work, poor ventilation, lack of lighting and air circulation in the workplace, etc., similar to the situation faced by the weavers, as described by Khan et al. (2024), who also dealt with limited physical space, lighting, thermal conditions, and lack of cleanliness.

The findings underscore the call for policymakers to consider the hardships faced by the weavers, improve their working conditions, and enhance social welfare policies designed to assist them. These workers deserve recognition for their contributions and require special support. The research also reveals the pathetic situation of a large number of weavers in Nepal who suffer from poor health due to inadequate rest and insufficient governmental support in terms of effective policies. Additionally, these individuals have a lot of financial issues, like struggling to meet basic needs, funding their children's education, and even securing daily meals. At home, the lack of time for rest or leisure only adds to their distress.

Recommendations

- The government must supervise the carpet industry and implement labour laws, policies,

and workers' rights, including fair wages for the employees, and improve working conditions and accommodation that offer enough space and access to essential amenities.

- Healthcare services, medical insurance, stress management programs, and awareness initiatives should be provided.
- Setting up a daycare centre for the workers will help weavers balance work and childcare responsibilities.
- Organizing community events, skill development initiatives, and networking programs can help reduce isolation and strengthen social connections.

Conclusion

The carpet industry is one of the oldest industries in Nepal. Even in present times, it has given a lot of opportunities, particularly for women seeking employment and financial support. Carpet weaving is a suitable job for women from rural areas since it does not require formal educational qualifications or intense physical labor. Though many women work in the industry, they are paid less and continue their struggles in the workplace and at home. Numerous workers migrated to Kathmandu in pursuit of a better life, however, they find their dissatisfaction with the industry, society, and governmental frameworks. As a result, their struggles persist. The industry lacks health facilities, leaving workers vulnerable to various illnesses. This is especially concerning for experienced and senior women weavers, whose health continues to decline.

Limitations

The study's sample size is limited. It was conducted in a single urban district of the country and may fail to capture the experiences of carpet factory workers across other urban and rural areas in Nepal. Therefore, further research can be conducted with a larger sample, representing extensive regions of Nepal, in the future.

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