

Weaving as a Means of Constructing Women's Status and Community's Identity in Khoma Village

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to understand how weaving, as an activity, contributes to constructing women's status and community identity in Khoma village. To collect data, weavers' experiences and communities' perceptions were explored through semi-structured interviews and participants' observations. Thematic analysis revealed five themes representing the value that the Khoma community's women attached to various aspects of their weaving tradition, which in turn, supported their cultural identities. Weaving serves as a significant source of economic independence, with women earning substantial income through local and tourist markets. Socially, weaving provides women with a platform for creativity, recognition, and status within the community, while also reinforcing a shared sense of belonging. Unique patterns and motifs, such as the famed *Kishuthara* silk designs, distinguish the Khoma community, shaping its identity and attracting tourism. The craft's spiritual associations with figures like Guru Rinpoche further elevate its cultural importance, integrating weaving into the community's spiritual practices. Despite its benefits, weaving presents challenges, including limited market access, material shortages, time constraints, and health issues. The study underscores the community's reliance on external support, including training programs and government initiatives, to sustain and enhance weaving practices. Ultimately, weaving in Khoma is more than a

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livelihood; it is a symbol of cultural preservation, economic empowerment, and communal identity, deeply embedded in the lives of its women and the fabric of its society.

Keywords: women's status, community's identity, weaving, Khoma village, *kishuthara*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Weaving in Bhutan has gradually evolved over several centuries and has reached its present state. Fabrics made from *zocha* (nettle grass) are regarded to be the earliest form of material used for weaving in Bhutan. Historically the biography of Phajo Drugom (1208-76) mentions the back strapped loom and the first depiction of clothing can still be seen in the wall paintings at the Changangkha Lhakhang which dates back to 1270 A.D. Although textiles are woven throughout Bhutan, Khoma village in the Lhuntse district is regarded as one of the most famous villages that produce unique fabrics (Yangdon, 2019). Traditionally it is linked with a mythical merchant Tshongpoen Norbu Zangpo.¹ It is said that during the trade fair in Tibet, Tshongpoen Norbu Zangpo gave his intricate patterned cloth to Yoesel Dema to wear; she was a woman from Khoma village staying at his home as a guest. When she reached back to her village, she first started to weave similar patterned cloth from the fibre extracted from the nettle plant. She named the cloth *Kishuthara* derived from the local term *ki-shu* (fibre extract of nettle plant) and *tha-ra* (weave) (Amedewa Tours and Treks, 2022). As a result, the women of Khoma learnt how to weave and began to pass it down through the generations. Girls as young as eight years old started weaving, and it becomes an integral part of the culture and customs of the community.

Over the years, new patterns and fibres emerged with development and exposure. For instance, weavers create their

¹ Famous merchant in 7th Century.

own designs and patterns, and weaving has become a competitive trend in Khoma village due to a rise in the demand for handmade textiles. Therefore, weaving is believed to be a vital skill for women in Khoma village. Subsequently, the use of fibres and imported silk from neighbouring countries became more evident due to the accessibility and convenience of weaving; this eventually helped in the development and expansion of weaving in Bhutan over the years.

Additionally, weaving plays a crucial role in Bhutanese society, acting as the country's identity, and is regarded as a vital component of culture and tradition. Similarly, weaving textiles is one of the regional identities, which signifies and characterises the community. According to Ratanakosol et al. (2016) community identities are important as the driving forces in creating pride, self-respect, unity, a sense of belonging, and social responsibility for people, groups, and organisations. Moreover, weaving reveals much about the lives and skills of the individuals who wove and wore the items (Irayanti, 2022). According to Madusise (2021) and Ramanathan et al. (2016), weaving has given women the ability to influence society by advancing their rights and enabling them to control their lives. Further, Breckenridge's (2018) research on weaving as a 'guardian of identity' on Timor society reveals that women were credited for weaving and for shaping the identity of the Timorese. Identically, a study by Chakma et al. (2022) claims that the culture and sustainable development of East Timor Women Australia (ETWA) is centered on traditional textiles and weaving as a medium for both cultural preservation and poverty reduction.

In contrast, there are numerous societal conventions and superstitious notions that women are subordinate to males and that men should be the head of the home in the Bhutanese context. However, in modern times, the majority of Khoma women are engaged in producing expensive textiles, where they often earn more money than males. Simultaneously, there is an increase in the number of visitors to the Khoma community,

mainly to witness the live tradition of weaving. In this way, the Khoma community gains external recognition.

This study explored weaving as a means of constructing women's status and community identity in the Khoma community. By shedding light on the experiences and perspectives of the weavers, this research intends to provide valuable insights into the impact of weaving on the practitioners. Furthermore, the study seeks to promote the art of textiles, especially weaving, as a means of establishing the community and cultural identity.

Through this study, we seek to deepen our understanding of weaving as a significant contributor to the growth of women's status and reveal its vital role in shaping the identity of the Khoma community. By doing this, we hope to stimulate more research into weaving and its influence on the weavers and the community in different cultures.

1.2. Problem Statement

The culture of weaving has existed since ancient times in Khoma village, where women weave while their husbands work outside. In the past, men were the main supporter of families, working in the field and as labourers, while women wove for themselves and their families. But as time have changed, there is a growing demand for handloom products, which encourages women to weave and create creative and attractive patterns. Consequently, due to the gaining popularity of weaving, many scholars have studied the art of weaving in Khoma. However, limited existing documents have focused only on the origin, its popularity, and the market difficulties faced by the community. For instance, Amedewa Tours and Treks (2022) links weaving *Kishuthara* with Tshongpoen Norbu Zangpo and Yoesel Dema. In a similar line, Zangmo (2012) and Yangdon (2019) in their study mentioned the popularity of the textile that is woven by the women of Khoma. Despite this popularity, Tashi (2022) emphasises the struggle and difficulty faced by weavers in selling products. Though researchers examined the origin, its popularity, and the market difficulties faced by the community,

the impact on the lives of the weavers and the social influence on the community's identity have been neglected over time in the Bhutanese context. To address this research gap, the current study aims to study the impacts of weaving on weavers and its effect on community identification. By analysing participants' feelings, scholarly literature, and observation, this research aims to unravel the influence of weaving. It offers insights into the impact on women weavers and the community.

Through this exploration, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the influence of weaving, shedding light on its contributions. It also aims to provide a foundation for further scholarly discourse, cross-cultural understanding, and the preservation of ancient tradition.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

According to the Constitution of Bhutan, Article 4 mentions that to conserve culture, the state shall encourage research on local arts. Similarly, Article 7 emphasises ensuring equal status and opportunities for the citizens of the country. Moreover, Bhutan's development guideline is enriched with the preservation and promotion of the country's unique culture and tradition and the protection of human rights. According to Pommaret, a French anthropologist and specialist in Bhutan, there might not be any country in the world where weaving has so much relevance to the understanding of society (RAOnline Bhutan: Bhutan - the Land of Weaving and Textiles, 2022). But a significant gap in knowledge remains regarding how the arts of small communities afford status to weavers and identity to their communities in the Bhutanese context. Through this study, understanding the changes in the lives of women through the skill of weaving might motivate women from other regions to take an interest in the craft. In this way, women will play a significant role in the country's economic, social, and cultural development.

According to a press release by the General Assembly of the United Nations (1996) the progress of women was seen as one

of the key components of social development because it played a vital role in the growth of the economy, society, and culture. On the other hand, if the women's status is not uplifted, they may be left behind, which is contradictory to Bhutan's constitution of equal rights and opportunities. Furthermore, the development will be slow due to the Buddhist idea that women are endowed with wisdom and men are endowed with talent, and that these two gifts should be used in harmony to live prosperously and to expand growth.

Additionally, if the small communities in the country are left unexplored, there is a chance of losing the culture and unique skills of these communities. Community identities are essential for individuals, groups, and organisations to feel pride, self-respect, unity, and a sense of belonging (Ratanakosol et al., 2016). On this note, Khoma - a community where the skill of women in weaving intricate textiles has become a draw for tourists and domestic visitors – serves as a primary example. Therefore, studying the formation of community identity is very important.

This research hopes to foster an understanding of how rich cultures and traditions uphold identity and status. It may also help people to identify new skills and talents within the community to create a unique identity for their own villages. Further, it aims to guide policymakers in allocating the necessary resources to support the weavers in producing their rich textiles; such culture in the villages makes the country rich in the tradition of textiles, allowing them to serve as a unique identity for the nation as a whole.

1.4. Significance of the study

The comprehensive exploration of the impacts of weaving on a weaver's life and in shaping the identity of the community provided by this study would offer insights into the benefits of weaving skills, specifically for women. This research could further encourage the community to promote the art of textiles, especially weaving, as a means of gaining recognition. Moreover, the analysis of this study would convey valuable

information to future researchers and can serve as a reference for researchers on the field of textiles. Further, the findings will have implications for policy and the government's strategies regarding cultural preservation efforts.

1.5. Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to identify how weaving in Khoma village has contributed to the community's identity and shapes the weaver's life. The objectives of the study are:

- 1) To study the contributions of weaving to women and its impact and influence on the community.
- 2) To examine the perspectives of women who work as weavers.

1.6 Research Question

How does weaving give status to women and shape the identity of the community in Khoma village?

The sub-questions are:

- 1) What benefits do female weavers gain from weaving?
- 2) How does weaving influence the community?
- 3) How do communities, and women, in particular, perceive weaving?

2. Literature Review

To understand the general phenomenon of construction of identity through certain activities such as weaving, this section delves into the existing literature. It presents the concept of textiles and their contribution to shaping the identity of the weavers, as well as weaving practices and its influence on women in the various societies.

2.1. Concept of Textile

The word 'textile' is derived from the Latin word *texere* meaning 'to weave'. The term originally referred to woven fabric, but it is now used to describe any product made of natural or synthetic

fibres, filaments, or yarns that have been interwoven ('Introduction', 2011). Globally, textiles have been a significant part of daily life; the culture of textile weaving contributes to the formation of the national identity and expresses the status of women (Breckenridge, 2018). According to Temesgen (2022), weaving is the most common method of making fabrics and it is primarily done by interlacing two orthogonal sets (warp and weft) of yarns in a regular and recurring pattern.

According to *Types of Weaving Looms* (2022) there are many types of weaving that are plain weave, basketweave, twill weave, even-sided, warp-faced, satin weave, figured weave, pile weave, and leno weave. Similarly, weaving includes different types of looms, such as the blackstrap loom, tapestry loom, inkle loom, rigid-heddle loom, table looms, and floor looms. Textile weaving is a culture practiced throughout the world for centuries but with diverse designs and patterns with significance that portray the culture of the source of origin.

2.2. Concepts of Identity

According to Yilmaz (2022), 'identity' is a person's sense of who they are, formed by their distinctive character. Identity has been developed over time; it is not something that is self-created or that forms naturally within people or things. According to the theory of social identity, Brown et al. (1980), self-concept can be understood by how they describe themselves and behave in diverse contexts to uphold self-respect and dignity.

Moreover, community identities are crucial to cultivating pride, self-respect, unity, a sense of belonging, and social responsibility in individuals, groups, and organisations within a community. Therefore, the promotion of community identity creation requires citizen participation based on social capital (Ratanakosol et al., 2016). According to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, women play a vital role in the advancement of the country and community's identity. These phrases are frequently used since it is generally believed that the respect

and status enjoyed by women within a nation determine its greatness (Ramanathan et al., 2016).

2.3. Impact of Weaving

On the other side, the National Institute of Open Schooling takes identity and status together in which status is defined as the social honour or prestige that a particular group is accorded by other members of society (*Profile: The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS)*, 2022). Consequently, numerous studies have examined the weaving of various textiles in different parts of countries as a cultural means to express their status and community's identity. Indeed, the art of weaving is the basic work of women that makes their lives and gives them status in society.

In the past, indigenous peoples often used gender to identify a person's place in society; the most common situation was where males became hunters and women were in charge of textile weaving (Wen-Jing, 2020). Likewise, weaving reveals so much about the lives and skills of the individuals who wove and wore the fabric (Irayanti, 2022). Further, researchers discovered that weaving is an essential component of the culture and has a significant impact on weaver's lives to maintain their status and identity in the community (Chakma et al., 2022; Dias et al., 2020; Yangdon, 2019; Breckenridge, 2018; Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan, 2016; Ramanathan et al., 2016). For instance, young women are more likely to be noticed by their families if they can produce impressive woven clothing.

Moreover, Madusise, (2021) and Ramanathan et al. (2016) study reported that weaving has given women the ability to influence society by enabling them to control their lives and advancing their rights. Women were recognized for their skills in weaving; if women do not weave there is a chance that they will lose respect in society. Negative consequences might include a further imbalance and disparity in the status of women worldwide (Sharma, 2022). Moreover, the identity of a community may be weakened in the modern world because

many places were historically recognised through unique cultural skills, such as women's talent in creating textiles. Hence, textiles are considered capable of conveying cultural traditions across cultures (Deepshikha et al., 2018).

2.4. Research Findings on Status and Identity in Different Cultures

Breckenridge's (2018) research reveals that women were attributed for weaving and for shaping the identity of Timorese. On the other hand, women in Timor culture are viewed as juveniles unsuited for marriage if they are unable to weave. In addition, a study by Chakma et al. (2022) claims that the culture and sustainable development of East Timor Women Australia (ETWA) is centered on traditional textiles and weaving as a medium for both cultural preservation and poverty reduction.

A similar study on the Identity and Status of weaving has been done in Ri-Bhoi village in Meghalaya state of India, where Dias et al. (2020) assert that weaving helped people to develop a sense of responsibility since they helped to shape society by producing textiles and clothing that represented their culture. As a result, the Ri-Bhoi weaver was granted the title of a 'guardian of their culture'. Another study in Maruthamunai, Sri Lanka by Fathima Safna and Nufie (2016) has noticed that women who weave can support themselves financially, live independently, and have self-confidence. A study by Urgel (2015) found that while women might simply be weaving lovely fabrics physically, at the core, they are incorporating their cultural and emotional traditions into the lovely items they make. Research by Dias et al. (2020) and Avanza (2021) also revealed that women developing a closer connection with weaving helped to shape and mould their cultural identities. Thus, women weavers were recognised and appreciated for their profession due to their work towards the preservation of their culture and their contribution to social identity.

2.5. Current States of Study

According to World Bank (2016), there are an estimated 476 million indigenous and tribal peoples in the world, each having their unique culture, tradition, way of life, and food habits. Similarly, Bhutan has a diverse culture, tradition, and lifestyle. Particularly, the culture of weaving a variety of textiles is found in different parts of Bhutan: for instance, *yathra* weaving in Bumthang, *bura* weaving in Trashigang, and *kishuthara* weaving in Khoma. The people of Bumthang believe that having more women who weave within a family brings a greater source of pride (Ping, 2022). Similarly, *RAOnline Bhutan: Bhutan - the Land of Weaving and Textiles* (2022) mentioned that the women of Radhi gewog (subdistrict) could earn more income from *burrey* weaving. Consequently, women need the necessary skills to weave which can enable them to succeed and control their lives (Madusise, 2021). Furthermore, women's mastery in weaving enables them to maintain their identity and status, earning them highly respect in society ('Thagzo - the Art of weaving in Bhutan', 2022).

Bhutanese weaving can be divided into two types: Tsongtham, which is cloth woven for commerce, and *hingtham*, cloth that is woven for family and friends. In addition, the Bhutanese concept of *hingtham*, or 'heart-woven', illustrates the social and religious significance of weaving. As a result, weaving is closely related to one's commitment to religious and social activities. The weaving in Bhutan was first mentioned in Phajo Drugom Shigpo's biography (1208–76), and the earliest representation of clothing is contained in Changangkha Lhakhang's wall paintings from 1270 A.D ('Thagzo - the Art of weaving in Bhutan', 2022). Further, it is believed that weaving is developed in the eastern part of Bhutan due to the mountainous terrain and minimal arable land. For instance, Khoma in the eastern part of Bhutan is popular for weaving, and the origins of weaving are traced back to the time of the most well-known businessman in the Himalayan region called

Tshongpoen Norbu Zangpo². Weaving, also known as *kan*³ in Khoma culture is a very authentic and ancient method of weaving into a vibrant and unique textiles.

Weaving by local women has been the main source of income for the family and takes great satisfaction in creating these wonderful and distinctive textiles. Income from weaving finances the building of new homes, the purchase of farming machinery, household items, and other products. It is also an important source of funding for children's education. Moreover, Zangmo's (2012) article mentions that some students can support themselves entirely through weaving. Therefore, in a small community of Khoma weaving is an important part of women's lives, with skills and knowledge passed from mother to daughter (Dema, 2017). Similarly, girls as young as eight are introduced to weaving. Young girls can be seen learning complex and vibrant patterns on handlooms while staying close to their mothers, demonstrating that women are exposed to weaving from early age (Dema, 2017). Hence, weaving is an important factor in women's lives as well as in their own communities. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no concrete effort has been made to focus on how weaving shapes weavers' lives, and the identities of the community in Bhutan. As a result, this study will research how weaving in Khoma village expresses the identity of the village and the status of women.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

According to Patton (1987), data collection in qualitative procedures is not restricted by categories but allows for in-depth and detailed information. The study aims to understand the women's status and identity in the community among the weavers in Khoma. As such, a qualitative research approach is employed to decode the perception and relationship between

² Famous merchant in 7th century

³ Referred to textile/ weaving in dza la kha

weaving and community through the actions and experiences of the Khoma weavers. The phenomenological approach is used to gain deeper insights into how weaving impacts the community and its people through lived experiences (Alase, 2017). To frame this phenomenological study, the interpretivism paradigm is employed to narrate explicitly and interpretively how the phenomenon has impacted the lived experiences of the research participants (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

3.2. Data Collection Methods

As suggested by Guion (2022), to understand the true situations that lead to the phenomena, and ensure the collection of valid and verifiable data, interviews and participant observation methods are used for data collection. In order to comprehend the status, identities, challenges, benefits, and community development among female weavers, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually over a period of two weeks with 10 female weavers from the target group of 20 at their workplace in Khoma. Similarly, to gauge the opinions and perceptions of the male community, similar semi-structured interviews were conducted with two male local leaders.

To understand the actual experiences, challenges, and time management, participant observation was conducted over a period of one month with the weavers at their workplace, which includes video recording, photography, and in-depth field notes.

3.3. Setting and Participants

Khoma village is renowned for the art of weaving across Bhutan. For this reason, this study is conducted in Khoma village, which serves as a primary source of information. The research was carried out during the winter vacation to ensure access to authentic information since many women gather to weave during the winter.

3.4. Sample and Sampling Technique

As the study aims to explore the experiences, feelings, and opinions of a specific community that requires credibility rather than representativeness, non-probability or purposive sampling is used for data collection. Purposive sampling is heterogeneous or maximum variation sampling and relies on the researcher's judgment to select participants with diverse characteristics (Dudovskiy, 2011). The study's participants include all age groups of female weavers and local males. As a result, two local men and 10 female weavers from the target group were chosen for interviews to obtain relevant and useful data. Further, data was collected from reliable experts on the research topic identified by primary participants, thus snowball sampling technique was used. According to Acharya et al. (2013), snowballing sampling technique is useful for locating rare populations on the study's topic to yield relevant data.

3.5. Ethical Consideration

All necessary requirements, including the informed consent forms, are provided to the participants. This is mainly to progress smoothly by ensuring that participants are willing, aware, and safe for research subjects. Permission was sought before using any devices for recorders and cameras during the interviews and participant observation. The researcher relied on hand-written notes when participants felt uncomfortable with the electronic gadgets. Participants are given the privilege when they chose not to respond to certain questions and if they wanted to withdraw from the interview session at any time. The responses collected from the participants are kept confidential and used in accordance with the research objectives. The study has not directly used any personal information provided by the participants if they choose not to disclose it. Moreover, all references to other sources are acknowledged per academic protocol.

3.6. Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, all interviews were transcribed using denaturalized transcription method. These results cannot be measured exactly but must be interpreted and organised into themes or categories. For this reason, thematic analysis under open and axial coding is employed to analyse data from in-depth semi-structured interviews and observation, following Cresswell's (2005) six steps. First all large transcripts and data collected were consolidated into more specific codes and themes. Second, data were analysed while the collection process was still ongoing. Third, the researcher moved iteratively between collecting and analysing data. Fourth, data were analysed by reading it over several times. Fifth, the validity of the data was verified and made personal assessments in a descriptive format. Then themes were developed that captured the major categories of information, thus bringing a personal perspective to the interpretations. Conclusions have subsequently been drawn from these emerging themes.

4. Findings

This section reports the findings of the semi-structured interview and participant observation to answer the research question regarding how weaving act as a means of constructing women's status and community's identity. The findings are categorized into five themes through participants' views, perceptions, and beliefs: i) women's association with weaving, ii) economic independence, iii) social independence, iv) community identity, and v) challenges faced by weavers. The themes are described using direct excerpts from the participants.

4.1. Women's Association with Weaving

The findings of the study show that weaving has a long association with the women of Khoma. As women must associate themselves with household chores and spend most of their time at home, they weave in their spare time. As a result, women began weaving, which eventually became a

tradition. Today, many women in Khoma continue to weave as a way of preserving their cultural heritage and passing on their skills to future generations. The participants shared that they learn weaving from their mothers and elder weavers; that is how they acquire the craft. Nowadays, it has been observed that all the weavers (4-10 weavers) gather in one place and learn and weave together. Moreover, the process of weaving is seen as a way of connecting with their ancestors and preserving the traditions of their community. As some of the participants claim that they learned to weave not because they are interested but because they are expected to weave either by their mother or the community. On the other hand, approximately 80% of women between the ages of 8 to 80 were engaged in weaving, either as a hobby or a passion. The female participants expressed that weaving is beneficial and preferable to other forms of livelihood. Women of Khoma are attached to weaving. The majority of participants strongly believe weaving is their way of life and belongs to them. "I want to spend my entire life weaving on many looms. My passion for weaving naturally arises because my parents depend on weaving for their income" stated one participant. Another remarked: "I am old, but still, I am interested in weaving more looms and will continue to weave more *tugula*⁴ looms to meet my daily needs without depending on others", indicating a continued desire and enthusiasm for the craft.

4.2. Economic Independence

The study reveals that women are gaining economic independence from weaving, with weavers selling their textiles to the local market and to tourists. The women weavers in Khoma earn a modest income from their weaving, which may range from a few thousand to a hundred thousand ngultrums per year. One participant remarked: "When tourists visit our village, I would sell my *kan*⁵ (textile) and get one or two lakhs. Till now all profits are made from weaving and everyone is building a big house from that profit to live a decent life."

⁴ It is the type of yarn used by women mostly to weave table cloth.

⁵ Referred to textile in *dza la kha* tongue.

However, it is noted that the average income varies widely depending on a variety of factors such as the quality and complexity of the textiles produced.

Nevertheless, this income generation has made a significant difference to the lives of the weavers and their families, providing essential financial support. This was affirmed by the two local leaders, who observed that 70 percent of Khoma people depend on weaving for their livelihood. One of the participants remarked: "I can financially sustain my family while I weave. For instance, if I have younger siblings, I can take care of them and assist my parents in purchasing food." In this line, the majority of participants believe that weaving is a means to maintain self-sufficiency and self-esteem by maintaining equality with others. One participant noted: "I am able to meet the expense to go on pilgrimage and wherever others go." Moreover, the community perceives that weavers are more economically stable than non-weavers. Supporting this, a participant remarked: "The distinction between weavers and non-weavers, in my opinion, is that while weavers are regarded as wealthy and independent, a woman who is not weaving cannot enhance her household if she continues to roam." Hence, the responses suggest that the majority of participants believe weaving skills have helped women shape their lives and live independently.

4.3. Social Independence

Economic independence is crucial for upholding the identification and well-being of one's group. For women in Khoma, weaving assists in assuming social independence by providing them with a means of status and a platform to express their creativity while gaining recognition and respect for their skills. The role of women as weavers in Khoma is seen as an expression of their identities and belonging among community members. The participants believe that by acquiring and sharing the skill of weaving among weavers, they can strengthen their bond with the other community members and reinforce a shared sense of belonging. Further, weaving work is recognised and appreciated by community members.

As one participant remarked: “Everyone applauds weavers...” This affirmation and appreciation that women receive for their weaving skills within their community plays a crucial role in shaping their identity. This recognition strengthens their sense of competence and mastery in weaving, contributing to a positive self-image. One of the participants shared that it encourages her to further develop her weaving skills, which can be a source of pride and personal fulfilment. It was also observed that weaving became a platform to display their creativity by creating designs that reflect their personal taste, and style as weaving is a highly skilled craft that requires creativity and passion.

In addition, the community and the weavers themselves held weaving in high regard. It was valued as a source of pride, not just a duty assigned to women. Weavers also found a sense of fulfilment and pride in their ability and knowledge to weave traditional textiles. For instance, one of the participants proudly proclaimed: “Being a weaver makes me feel proud of who I am because I can support my family”. In addition to personal pride, they derived satisfaction from providing their family members with handmade textiles to wear on special occasions. One of the elder participants shared proudly that she can weave cloth for her granddaughters to wear in celebrations and occasions. Through participant observation, it is known that women mostly discussed weaving in gatherings and often praised one another’s weaving abilities. Creativeness and fastness are words used to compliment other weavers. By acknowledging one another’s skills, women in Khoma foster a culture of encouragement and recognition. This recognition not only boosts individual confidence but also instils a sense of pride and value in their weaving traditions. On the other side, the community recognised their skill, considering them skilled and creative for their ability to weave various textiles. This affirmation brought a sense of joy and contentment, especially when community members and tourists appreciate their work or purchased their handmade textiles.

Women who choose not to weave or who do not possess weaving skills face pressure from their communities. For example, the participants shared that non-weavers are regarded as unskilled and receive little assistance from their communities. It has been observed that gender roles are rigidly defined in Khoma, where girls as young as twelve years old are expected to weave by their mothers and communities.

4.4. Community Identity

Weaving plays a significant role in shaping the identity of the community. Khoma community specialises in weaving unique fabrics and has developed a reputation for producing high-quality textiles, which can be sold beyond their local area. One participant remarked: "Weaving unique textiles has helped it become renowned outside of its borders." Furthermore, weaving often involves creating unique patterns and designs using different colours. For instance, the practice of weaving exquisite silk pattern dresses known as *Kishuthara* is a symbolic feature of textiles from Khoma. Similarly, it is observed that weavers of Khoma used symbols and motifs that are specific to their cultures, such as animals, plants, and religious symbols in patterns. For instance, patterns of palaces, flowers, animals, and fruits were created by the weavers. Consequently, it was observed that they named specific terms to newly created patterns such as *tey*⁶, *gugey-sheng*, *zhampo zhewa*, and *fen-fen ma*. These specific patterns and designs of a particular community helped to distinguish the Khoma community from others.

In addition, it is observed that weaving requires members of a community to work together to produce textiles. This has helped strengthen community social ties and create a sense of unity and shared purpose. When these textiles are sold or exported beyond the community, they serve as a reminder of the community's collective efforts and the importance of working together. The social cohesion and vitality of people in the community form the community's overall identity. Due to

⁶ Horse, betel nut tree, owl, flying bird in local dialect

the longstanding weaving history of Khoma, the majority of participants expressed how proud they are to be from that area. This motivates the community to keep weaving and maintaining its own identity.

In addition to shaping community identity, weaving culture played a vital role in community development, particularly in tourism. Although there are many factors that can attract tourists to Khoma, such as its sacred sites that draw numerous pilgrims, it is the vibrant tradition of weaving rather than pilgrimage sites that tend to bring visitors from beyond Bhutan to Khoma. For instance, all the participants firmly believe that tourists primarily come to Khoma to witness the living tradition of weaving. The inflow of tourists was seen as a good sign by the participants as it helped in the development of the community. All the participants believed that due to the visits of tourists and high-ranking officials to witness weaving culture, the government and the Department of Tourism bring development initiatives to the community. Correspondingly, homestays were a popular option for tourists, providing them with an authentic experience and allowing the locals to escape the monotony of everyday life through exposure to Western culture. It was observed that many houses in Khoma served as homestays, welcoming visitors and creating opportunities for cultural exchange.

Weaving has been an important part of their cultural heritage for generations and has high meaning and historical value. The weaving in the Khoma community has a great association with spiritual practices and beliefs. The community believes that the origin of weaving in Khoma has a connection to the great saint Guru Rinpoche and Princess Wencheng. For example, one participant shared: “It is an old village tradition that was started during the time of Azhi Jaza⁷, and Yoeser Dema⁸ where Azhi Jaza has passed the knowledge of weaving to Yoeser Dema, in accordance with the prophecies of Guru

⁷ Princess Wencheng

⁸ Women from Khoma and community regarded her as the one who brought weaving tradition in Khoma

Padmasambhava”⁹. This auspicious origin of weaving in Khoma inspires them to adopt weaving as a daily activity. Weavers by weaving daily feel connected to spiritual leaders as their origin can trace back to the time of Guru Rinpoche. Moreover, they consider weaving daily as associated with spiritual practices as weavers are just conscious of weaving and did not accommodate sin compared to agriculture work in the field. Khoma residents express their cultural identity by creating and wearing these unique textiles on special occasions, such as weddings and festivals. The designs and patterns used in the textiles often reflect the community's history, beliefs, and values. These unique patterns include pictures of various animals, flowers, trees, and objects, such as the thunderbolt, which depict significant beliefs. These distinctive elements cannot be found in textile products from other regions of Bhutan. Thus, weaving is not just a source of income but a habit that passes cultural identity through generations.

Weavers also receive significant support from their communities and friends. The weavers receive knowledge from the elder weavers and mothers during the learning process. One of the participants remarked: “My mother taught me how to weave...” Furthermore, the government, the Department of Tourism, and other organizations provided support in the form of training programs¹⁰ that helps in knowledge enhancement. For example, it was observed that weavers were recently trained in tailoring as part of an initiative led by the district planning officer with assistance from the office of Her Majesty the Queen Jetsun Pema Wangchuck. This varied support system empowered the women to enhance their social function as weavers.

4.5. Challenges

Despite the benefits of weaving, there are also challenges associated with the craft. The results indicated that the

⁹ Great Saint in 8th century.

¹⁰ Chef and dyeing opportunities and culture exchange trip

weavers of the Khoma community mostly rely on local markets for selling their products. Although women can earn money from their products by selling them door-to-door in the capital city and to tourists, it seems that having market access, particularly for selling their textiles in Khoma, would significantly increase their profits. Subsequently, participants (6, 11) describe the difficulties they face in sourcing the right materials for their products, such as high-quality yarn or dye in Khoma. They shared that they cannot always find exact colour of silk and thread from shops in Khoma, leading to the production of textiles that are less aesthetically pleasing to them. Additionally, the participants were concerned about the customer in the near future as everyone has taken up the craft.

Time seems to be another barrier, as some women are busy with household chores. One participant remarked: “I had to send my kids to school and weave after completing my household tasks, so I hardly get time to weave.” Moreover, weaving is physically demanding work, as it requires long periods of sitting in the same position, repetitive hand and arm movements, and eye strain. For example, the female participants shared about health issues such as back pain and eye strain, which they experience when weaving. Similarly, weaving intricate designs is challenging and time-consuming, as each thread must be carefully placed in the right position to create the desired pattern.

Overall, limited market access, time constraint, lack of raw materials, complexity of design, and health concerns were identified as some of the challenges for the weavers of Khoma.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to explore how weaving promotes women’s status and community identity in the Khoma community. The data analysis indicates the association of women with weaving, economic independence, social independence, community identity, and challenges as some of the study’s major findings. Existing literature claims that weaving is intertwined with feminism, particularly the womanhood of the weavers

themselves (Breckenridge, 2018). The expression of the female participants towards weaving as preferable means of work for livelihood and the engagement in weaving at an early age for most women population into weaving strongly indicates that weaving has a long association with the women of Khoma, who engage in it as a traditional practice. The findings show the participants believe that weaving has been passed down through generations, serving as an integral part of the traditional way of life in consonance with the Dias et al. (2020). Further, the female participants in this study strongly believe weaving is their way of life and belongs to them.

Economically, the study revealed that participants view weaving as a source of economic independence for women, which is similar to the study conducted by Adiatmono & Rivai (2019), Madusise (2021), and Chakma et al. (2022). These studies claim that weaving is capable of improving the local economy and bringing much-needed foreign currency to the country and families. However, Safna and Nufile's (2016) literature sees the challenges associated with weaving such as labourer shortage and financial problems as a barrier to the economic empowerment of weavers. The present study found that despite challenges, Khoma weavers managed to generate income through weaving. In contrast to previous literature discussing machine weaving, Khoma weavers use blackstrap looms. Therefore, the modest income generated and its provision of self-sufficiency and self-esteem among women weavers in Khoma undoubtedly express the economic independence in the community.

Weaving for the women of Khoma is viewed as an expression of their identities in the community. Similarly, the weaving and weavers are appreciated by the community, which helps to improve an individual's status. Women's identity in society through weaving seems to be similar in many countries. For example, a women's skill to weave fabrics is an expression or proof to others that she is now ready to marry (Breckenridge, 2018). Burke and Reitze as cited in Dias et al. (2020) defined social engagement and affirmation from the community

members as a means to improve a sense of self-meaning and self-definition, strengthening an identity based on a specific role in which one is involved. Moreover, the findings revealed that women weavers are regarded as skilled and creative by the communities which brings greater pride to themselves and to families in agreement with the Safna and Nufile (2016) and Ping (2022) study where weavers received a good position in the community and brought a source of pride. This study also found that weavers derived satisfaction from providing handloom textiles to their family members to wear on special occasions. Although female participants revealed the tough time they had to undergo due to weaving's requirement of long periods of sitting in one position and continuous movement of the hand, body, and eye, which is physically exhausting, they are happy with their work because it enables them to provide for their families and relatives. Hence, the weavers in Khoma, besides establishing identities, gain satisfaction from their work for being able to provide for their loved ones. The related literature also states that Timorese weavers not only weave only to produce fabric but also to blanket their family members, which satisfies Timorese weavers (Breckenridge, 2018).

Additionally, the findings of this study highlight the participants' view that weavers receive significant support from their communities and friends. Social support is conceptualized as an individual's perception of general support or specific supportive behaviour (available or acted on) from people in one's social network, which enhances one's functioning (Malecki & Demaray 2003, p. 232 as cited in Dias et al. 2020). This is further supported by the finding that the weavers receive support in the form of knowledge from the elder weavers and mothers during the learning process which helps in developing and improving the social bond among themselves. Moreover, this study obtained evidence that the weavers received assistance from the government, the Department of Tourism, and other organizations in the form of both knowledge and skill enhancement.

Although Khoma weavers receive support from various authorities, there is a lack of showrooms and marketing houses to promote weaving in Khoma. For instance, the participants revealed that they have long wished for the establishment of a showroom and marketing house in Khoma. According to Bhutan Broadcasting Service, in 2017 Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary built a two-storied structure in Khoma to be used as a showroom. However, since the structure is more than half a kilometre from the village, residents did not make use of it. Later, the district administration planned to build the showroom in the village, with a conference hall and a tailoring center; however, the project was not included in the 12th Five-Year Plan (Gyeltshen, 2022). In the study of Safna and Nufile (2016), little assistance from government or non-governmental organizations in weaving has affected women's empowerment. Similarly, if the government and other relevant authorities do not provide adequate support, the women of Khoma who depend on weaving will have a lower chance of achieving social independence.

Furthermore, the findings from this study show that weaving helps in shaping Khoma Community's identity through the use of symbols and motifs specific to their cultures. For example, the practice of weaving exquisite silk pattern dresses known as *Kishuthara* is a symbolic feature of textiles from Khoma. Moreover, this study obtained evidence that the unique patterns that were created by the women of Khoma were often recognized by the Royal Textile Academy during the annual arts and textile competition. These specific patterns and designs of a particular community helped to distinguish the Khoma community from others. The literature on different cultures concurs that textile weaving represents local wisdom that forms national identity and the colours and motifs incorporated into their traditional woven clothes represent the region and tribe they belonged to (Dias et al., 2020; (Breckenridge, 2018). Similarly, Irayanti (2022) points out the variety of gorgeous and distinctive patterns of Masalili culture used in weaving.

Participants additionally highlighted how Khoma's vibrant weaving tradition tends to draw tourists from outside of Bhutan, which contributes to community development. Khoma Gup also noted that weaving had enhanced the quality of life for the residents of Khoma in comparison to that of the other blocks in the district (Yangdon, 2019). Similar literature on other cultures also found that the cultural house at the Great Zimbabwe Monuments is a charming tourist attraction for having the weaving culture (Madusise, 2021). Further, weavers spend their weekdays at the cultural house, which was even used as their training venue and found that weavers acquired a satisfactory level of skills through a successful weaving training program. The results of this study, however, showed that weavers used to weave in various groups and lacked a training facility as described in earlier literature. Therefore, girls have little time to weave and faced difficulty in learning design and patterns because there are no training facilities or instructors; instead, they learn to weave only from their mothers.

The findings from this study indicate that weaving involves historical beliefs and sacred values that contribute to the formation of their cultural identity. The participants believe that weaving has an association with the great saint Guru Rinpoche and Azhi Gyasa¹¹, which significantly contributes to the community's culture. Moreover, through the creation of traditional textiles with spiritual motifs, weavers can effectively communicate their culture to others, thereby establishing a cultural identity. Traditional textiles are used as a form of cultural expression and identity in international contexts and as symbolic communicators of spiritual beliefs (Avanza, 2021). Identically, women developing a closer connection with weaving helped to shape and mould their cultural identities (Irayanti 2022; Dias et al., 2020; Adiatmono & Rivai, 2019; Chakma et al., 2022). The most compelling explanation for the present set of findings is its great association with spiritual roots and beliefs in alignment with the existing literature, which has previously mentioned the sacred value and profound meaning

¹¹ Princess Wencheng (King Songtsen Gampo's Chinese consort)

attributed to weaving. Hence, for the women of Khoma, weaving is not just a craft, but an integral part of their cultural identity.

Overall, this study found that weaving is advantageous in promoting women's status and community identity in the Khoma community. The participants revealed the benefit of weaving on aspects such as economic and social independence, community and cultural identity formation, and the development of the community. Besides this, the participants also acknowledged the opportunity and support they receive through weaving which helps in knowledge and skill enhancement. On the other hand, female participants also revealed the challenges they faced, particularly in terms of market access, lack of materials, and physical strains.

6. Limitations of Study and Recommendation

Although the present results clearly indicate the association of weaving culture among women weavers at Khoma and their socio-cultural aspects and challenges, it is also appropriate to acknowledge some of the limitations associated with the current study.

Weaving is a craft that is practiced by women in various regions of Bhutan. However, the current study solely presents the findings regarding the status of women and the identity of the Khoma village community. Therefore, conducting a comparative study among weavers from different locations would facilitate a comprehensive overview of defining women's status and the community identity across diverse places and among different groups of women.

Despite the method, the study recommends that authorities and Civil Society Organization such as the Cultural Department and Royal Textile Academy to assist in promoting textiles by forming online platform for marketing the product internationally. Additionally, the study suggests weavers form a group initiated by experts to facilitate collaborations between weavers and designers to create modern designs that incorporate traditional weaving techniques. This will not only

help to keep the tradition alive but also create new markets for weavers. By implementing these recommendations, the government can help ensure that the weaving tradition continues to thrive and that younger generations are inspired to continue this valuable cultural practice.

Despite the limitations, these results provide theoretical evidence in the current body of literature regarding weaving as a method of establishing the status of women and the identity of the community in the Bhutanese context.

7. Conclusion

Weaving is one of the oldest crafts in the world and has played an essential role in the development of humans, culture, and society. The study sheds light on weaving as a means of constructing women's status and community identity in Khoma village. Semi-structured interviews and participants' observation were employed in the study, emphasising the significance of addressing the problem of the knowledge gap related to weaving as a source of women's status and community's identity, thereby contributing to the limited existing documents on weaving in Bhutan.

Research findings indicate weaving is a deeply rooted practice in Khoma and holds significant cultural and social importance to the community. It has been passed down through generations and plays a vital role in their way of life. It is regarded to be the source of income and economic livelihood for the community and women of all age engage in weaving as a means of sustenance and income generation as the hand-woven textiles of the community is highly sought after both domestically and internationally, thus fostering social independence among the community. The weaving culture in Khoma also reflects its rich cultural identity. Its distinct weaving techniques, patterns, and motifs inspired by nature, myth, mythology, and local traditions undoubtedly reflect the community's rich cultural identity. Furthermore, weaving is also a communal activity in the community bringing people together for informal gatherings. It offers social connection,

knowledge sharing, and the preservation of weaving techniques passed down through generations. It provides an opportunity for intergenerational bonding and the transmission of cultural values.

Despite the significance and social benefits of weaving, it has its own drawbacks, such as time constraints, health issues, limited market access, sourcing right materials and learning new designs and patterns.

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