

Review Article

Bangladeshi Handloom Industry: Existing Status and Upcoming Hindrances

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Abstract: The Bangladeshi handloom industry holds a significant position in the country's cultural heritage, economic landscape, and global artisanal market. It highlights the industry's rich tradition of craftsmanship, intricate designs, and role in providing livelihoods to numerous artisans across the nation. Despite its cultural significance and potential for economic growth, the handloom sector faces multifaceted challenges. Technological obsolescence and the lack of modernization hinder its ability to compete in a global market increasingly driven by mechanization and innovation. Moreover, the industry encounters obstacles in terms of access to finance, marketing, and inadequate governmental support, which limit its scalability and competitiveness. By amalgamating empirical data, industry insights, and expert opinions, this article offers a comprehensive understanding of the hurdles impeding the sustainable advancement of the Bangladeshi handloom industry. It emphasizes the need for strategic interventions and policy reforms to revitalize this sector. Proposals encompass a spectrum of initiatives, including technology infusion, skill development programs, market diversification, and enhanced government support through subsidies and infrastructure development. The significance of preserving this traditional craft is paramount not only for its cultural heritage but also for its potential to contribute substantially to the national economy. Addressing these impending challenges and implementing effective strategies will not only safeguard the livelihoods of artisans but also position Bangladeshi handloom products as globally competitive, eco-friendly, and sustainable choices in the international market. This article serves as a call to action for stakeholders, policymakers, and industry players to collaborate in fostering a conducive environment that nurtures and sustains the growth of the Bangladeshi handloom industry in the face of impending challenges.

Keywords: Handloom & Power Loom, Economy of Bangladesh, Socio-Economic Development, Sustainable Way outs for Weavers

1. Introduction

The handloom textile sector in Bangladesh plays a significant role in the country's workforce, particularly in rural areas, and serves as a major contributor to reducing poverty. According to Ahmed it is a substantial non-agricultural industry that employs a significant portion of both rural men and women [1]. This weaving industry encompasses a workforce of 1.5 million individuals, including weavers, dyers, hand spinners, embroiderers, and related artisans. Additionally, the BHB report reveals that there are 0.30 million operational looms responsible for producing 620 million meters of clothing annually, meeting 40 percent of the local demand in

Bangladesh. In the span of two months, the industry weaves approximately 173.7 million yards of fabric. Moreover, this sector contributes approximately BDT 10 billion to the national treasury on an annual basis [3].

The industry boasts a rich and illustrious heritage, with Dhakai muslin and Jamdani sarees achieving global renown due to their unique construction methods and exceptional fabric [4, 5]. As one of the nation's foremost weaving sectors, it plays a pivotal role in fulfilling domestic fabric requirements. Over the years, it has maintained its economic viability as a vital cottage industry in Bangladesh, significantly contributing to the livelihoods of rural inhabitants and bolstering the nation's economic development. It stands as the second-largest employer in rural areas, trailing

only agriculture. Notably, both men and women actively participate in the production process, allowing them to balance their domestic responsibilities without encountering challenges or bias. Furthermore, given the limited availability of non-agricultural employment opportunities in rural Bangladesh, the handloom sector provides jobs to a total of 0.85 million rural residents. This industry constitutes 48.04 percent of cottage industry employment and contributes to 49.50 percent of the total cottage industry output in Bangladesh [11].

Although the handloom industry holds promise, the handloom sector in the country has been experiencing a substantial decline. For example, as per the Handloom Census of 2018, the total count of handloom units in Bangladesh stands at 116,006. This represents a significant reduction of 36.79 percent compared to the number of handloom units reported in the 2003 census and a notable decrease of 45.39 percent when compared to the figures from the 1990 census. The chart below illustrates the total number of handloom units recorded in the last three handloom censuses conducted in Bangladesh [4].

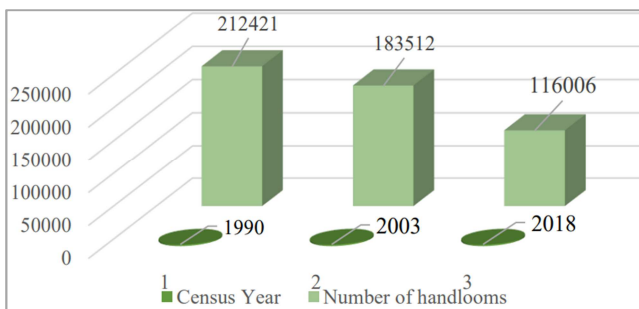


Figure 1. Handloom Units in the Last Three Handloom Census [4].

2. Literature Review

Handloom weaving dates back to the 17th century, when it played a crucial role in the economic activities of the Indian subcontinent. The products of this industry, known as 'Muslins,' gained international acclaim for their exceptional beauty and diverse quality. Dacca's muslin fabric, in particular, was highly favored by aristocrats, including kings, queens, and emperors. However, the export of Bengal cotton goods began to decline from 1793, leading to the industry's gradual deterioration. Several factors contributed to this decline, primarily stemming from British commercial policies and the Industrial Revolution in England. The British implemented protectionist measures against Bengal piece goods, imposing duties ranging from 44 to 85 percent on exports from Bengal to England by 1833. The most significant factor behind the industry's decline was the Industrial Revolution in England. Bengal's handicrafts couldn't compete with the foreign competition, which harnessed the power of extensive machinery, large-scale production, and intricate division of labor. The primary challenge arose from the impact of the Industrial Revolution. During the period of Pakistan, the government allowed the import of yarn without restrictions

and eliminated sales tax on handloom products, resulting in significant industry growth in the early 1950s. After gaining independence, the Bangladesh Government established a new Handloom Board in 1978, taking over the development of the handloom industry from the Small and Cottage Industries Corporation. Since its establishment, the Handloom Board has implemented various policy measures to foster the industry's growth. The handloom industry is considered a priority sector for development due to its characteristics, such as its labor-intensive nature, employment opportunities for women, product demand, and profitability [9].

Numerous comprehensive studies have delved into various facets and challenges within the handloom weaving industry. Numerous investigations have explored the handloom sector's role in generating employment. In his article, Ahmed aimed to highlight the socio-economic dimensions of employment generation within the handloom industry and its significance in Bangladesh's national economy. Sobhan, focused on the handloom industry's development within a societal context, emphasizing its pivotal role in fulfilling the clothing requirements of the nation's populace [15]. Raihan, demonstrated how the handloom industry could be a means to alleviate rural poverty in Bangladesh. He also observed that the industry is currently in decline due to various factors, including a lack of education and skills among weavers, the absence of effective organization, and the influx of cloth from India [14]. Latif undertook a statistical analysis to estimate cloth supplies in Bangladesh from 1955/56 to 1986/87, factoring in both domestic production and imports [12].



Figure 2. Handlooms on the decline [4].

Ghosh, identified the primary factors impeding the progress of the handloom industry. Their research pointed to issues like a shortage of working capital, the high costs associated with raw material procurement, deficiencies in organizational capacity, insufficient technology and efficiency, and a lack of policy support as the major forces that have adversely impacted the handloom sector [9].

However, in comparison to other nations, the overall progress of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Bangladesh has been relatively limited. According to the data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the SME sector contributes around 20 to 25 percent to Bangladesh's GDP. In contrast, SMEs contribute a substantial 55 percent to the GDP of member countries within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Even in neighboring India, their contribution stands at approximately 45 percent. Remarkably, the SME sector plays a pivotal role, contributing

60 to 70 percent to the GDP in countries like China, Japan, and South Korea, where a significant portion of the workforce is also employed in SMEs [6].

This highlights that the emphasis on the contributions of large industries or major trade enterprises may be misguided. Furthermore, a proclivity toward large-scale industries may be a contributing factor to the neglect of the SME sector. In Bangladesh, approximately 40 to 45 percent of the workforce

is engaged in SMEs, emphasizing that a thriving SME sector can significantly expand employment opportunities [7]. In recent years, there have been fluctuations in the size and growth of small and cottage industries. Their contribution to the GDP was 6.33 percent in FY 2013-14, but it decreased to 4.60 percent in FY 2020-21. Interestingly, the highest recorded contribution of the Small & Cottage Industry to the GDP was 11.20 percent in FY 2016-17.

Table 1. The Volume and Growth Rate of Small & Cottage Industries in GDP [7].

Type of Industry	2013-14	2014-15	2014-15	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Small & Cottage	26113.1	28342.6	30909.4	33945.8	37086.4	41148	42778.1	43519.1
GDP%	6.33	8.54	9.06	11.20	9.25	10.95	3.96	1.73

3. Problems of Handloom Industry

The handloom industry is widely recognized as a vital sector and often described as the cornerstone of our agricultural economy. It plays a central role in the textile industry, addressing a substantial portion of the nation's cloth demand. However, this industry grapples with various inherent challenges, which encompass issues like insufficient

yarn and dye supplies, elevated costs of raw materials, limited access to institutional credit, marketing difficulties, unfair competition, inadequate efforts for improvement, a restricted range of product varieties, and organizational deficiencies. These issues have led to the inactivity of many handloom units today. The Bangladesh Handloom Census-2003 has pinpointed the root causes for the idleness of these looms, as detailed in the following table.

Table 2. Reasons for Non-operation of Looms [16].

Reasons for Non-operation of Loom	Frequency 2003	Percentage 2003	Frequency 1990	Percentage 1990
Lack of Capital	75511	79	123597	80
Lack of Yarn	11566	12	12284	8
Labour Problem	1865	2	2334	2
Sale Problem	4931	5	5860	4
Others	1509	2	10220	6
Total Reporting Units	95382	100	154295	10

According to the table, it is apparent that roughly 80% of the surveyed establishments with idle looms cited a lack of capital as the reason for not being able to operate their looms, while

12% in 2003 reported that a shortage of yarn was responsible for their looms remaining inactive. An additional 5% mentioned marketing problems as a hindrance to utilizing their looms [16].

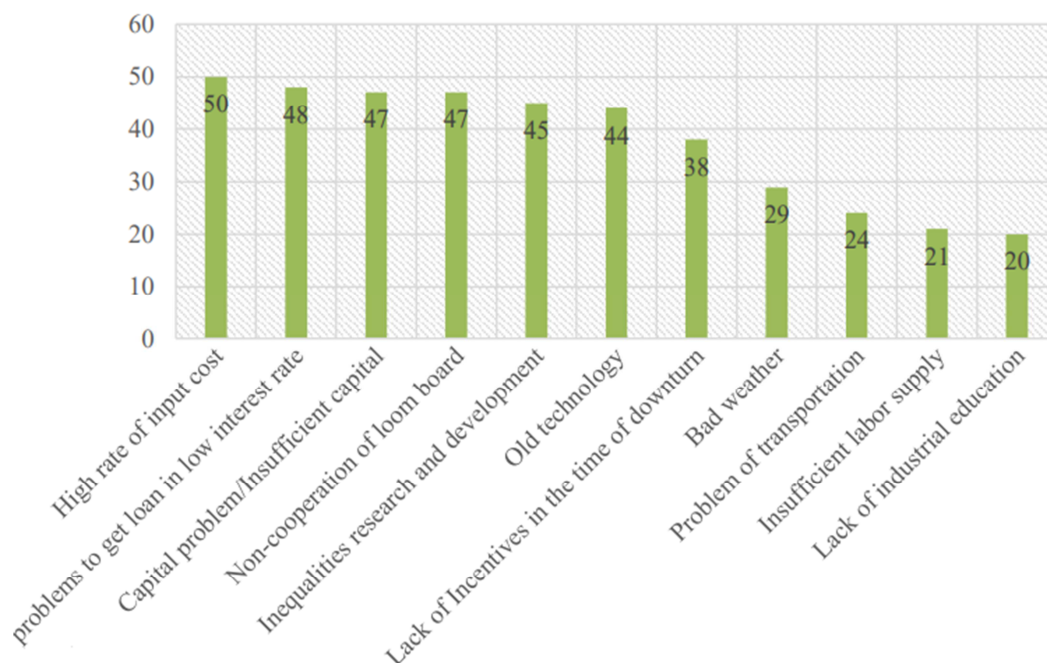


Figure 3. Problems that Existing in the Handloom Industry [13].

3.1. Scrutiny of Weaver's Challenges

Numerous issues plague the weavers and the handloom industry, encompassing weaver health concerns, subpar raw material quality, high production costs, and yarn supply inadequacies. These issues are scrutinized as follows. Health Challenges Among Weavers Owing to prolonged hours

dedicated to the handloom industry, weavers experience a range of health problems, including joint pain, backache, deteriorating eyesight, and knee discomfort, among others. The majority of surveyed weavers (46%) report suffering from back pain, 24% have encountered eyesight weakness, 16% grapple with knee pain, and 14% endure joint pain.

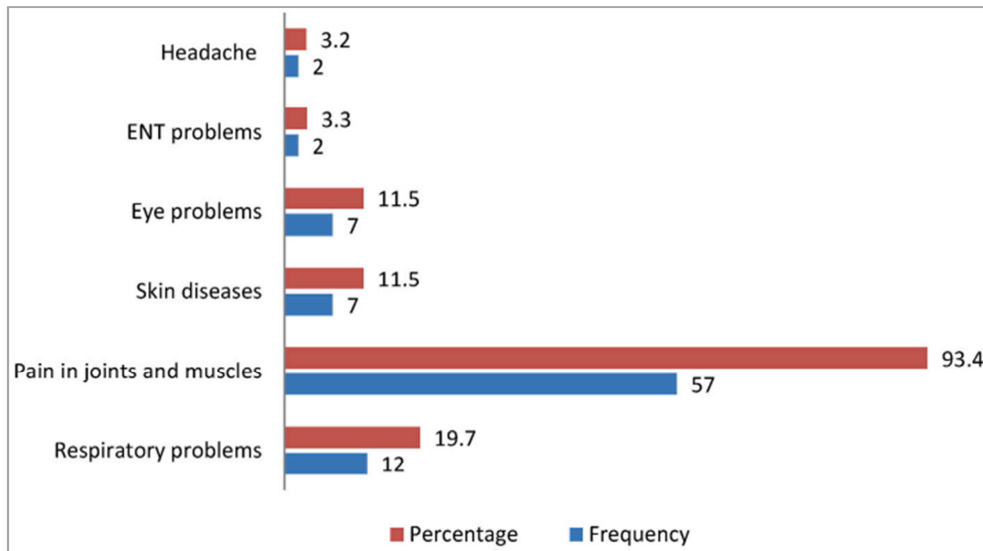


Figure 4. Frequency of Weaver's Occupational Morbidities [2].

3.2. Fundamental Findings

Based on the data gathered from the survey participants, several significant insights have emerged.

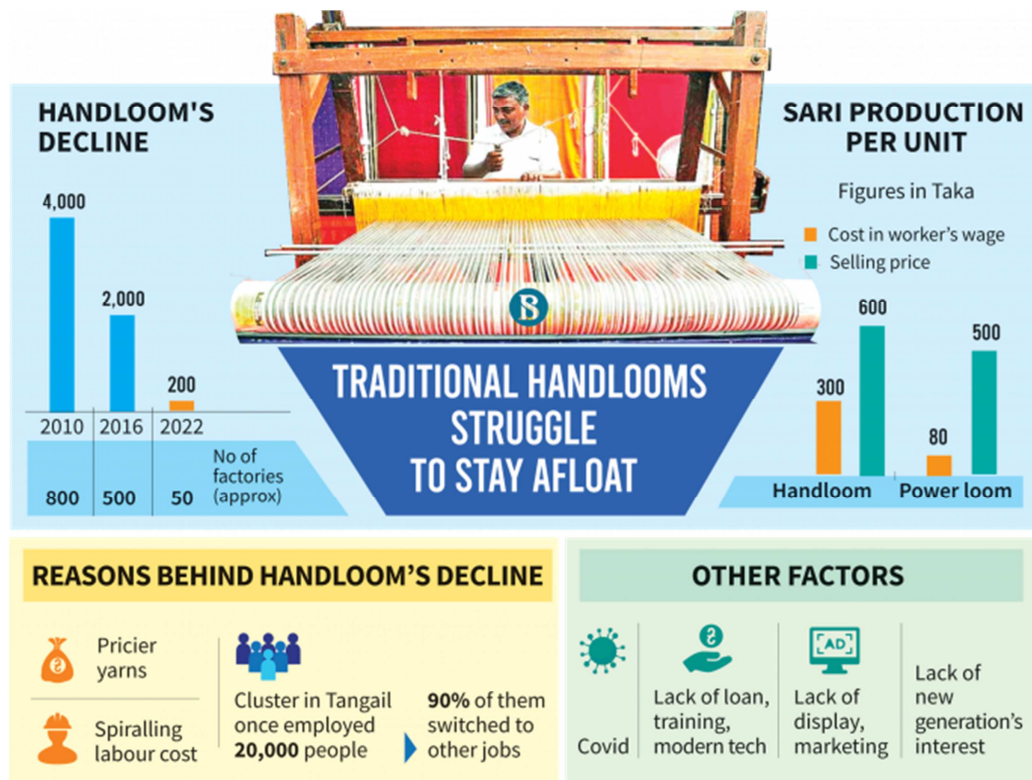


Figure 5. Weavers in trouble as Handlooms decline [17].

They are as follows: Given that the majority of weavers have affiliations with marginalized social groups, approximately 56% of them earn a monthly income ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 Bangladeshi Taka. The preeminent issue faced by weavers is back pain, affecting the majority at 46%. Educational attainment among most weavers is limited, with 36% having completed their education up to the 5th grade. A prominent challenge confronting the handloom industry is the notably high production costs.

4. Upcoming Challengers for Handloom Weavers

The handloom production has been decreasing significantly from 826.8 million meters to 590.0 million meters during the last 15 years. On the other hand, the mill production registered a subsequent increase in cloth production during the last 15 years.

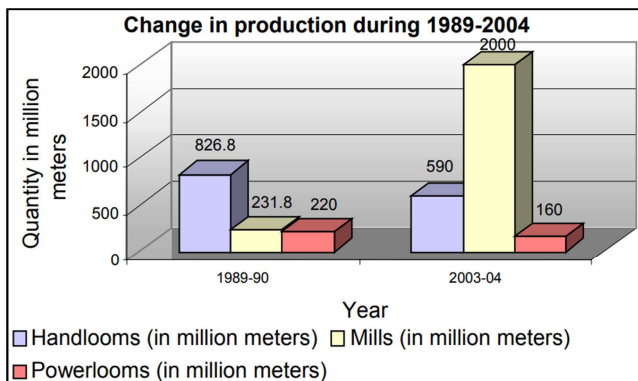


Figure 6. Change in Cloth Production [18].

The total cloth production in 1989-90 was 231.8 million meters that shot up to 2000 million meters in 2003-04.

Handloom weavers in Bangladesh face several upcoming challenges that need to be addressed for the ecological growth of the industry.

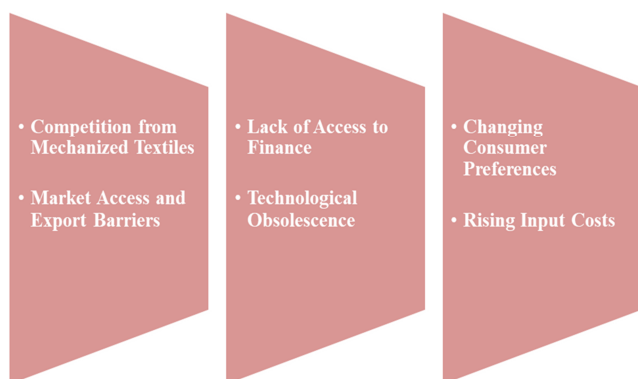


Figure 7. Upcoming Challengers for Handloom Weavers.

Addressing these challenges will require a collaborative effort involving government support, industry associations, and non-governmental organizations to provide training,

financial assistance, market access, and technological advancements for handloom weavers in Bangladesh. This support can help sustain and revitalize the handloom sector in the face of these upcoming challenges.

Sustainable Remedies

Certainly, here are a few key points for promoting sustainable development for handloom weavers in Bangladesh.

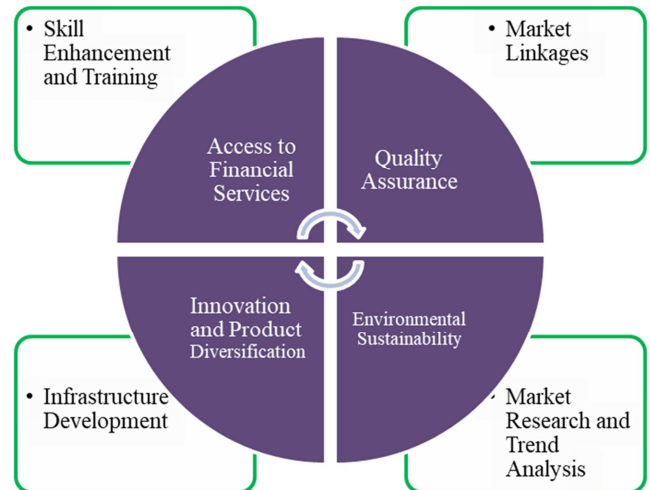


Figure 8. Sustainable Solutions for Handloom Weavers.

By focusing on these aspects, Bangladesh can work towards the sustainable development of its handloom weaving industry, benefiting both the weavers and the national economy.

Dissanayake and colleagues conducted research titled 'Sustainable and Ethical Manufacturing: A Case Study from the Handloom Industry.' Their study aims to investigate a manufacturing approach aligned with fair-trade principles and waste reduction strategies. The findings reveal a business model that has the potential to positively impact rural communities by creating employment opportunities and sustainable household income. The paper concludes by underscoring the role of fair trade and environmentally conscious manufacturing methods in addressing the three dimensions of sustainability: social, economic, and environmental [8]. Bhalerao and Humbe conducted a study titled 'Social Media - A Tool for Empowering Women in the Handloom Industry' to analyze the effects of social media on women engaged in the handloom industry. This research investigates how social media can help women reach a broader customer base, boost sales and revenue, and enhance brand awareness and image, thereby increasing the brand equity of handloom products. The use of social media offers various benefits to women handloom weavers and significantly impacts the sales of these products [10].

5. Discussions

In this scenario, the following proposals have been suggested to aid the recovery of the weaving sector from its vulnerable condition. It is recommended that novel

information technologies be developed alongside the handloom industry. The local board responsible for the handloom industry needs to assume a more proactive role in its sustenance. Improving the quality of handloom products is imperative for them to compete on a global scale, and this sector should expand internationally rather than remain confined domestically. There is a need to regulate the market for fabrics and colors, with government support being crucial. Implementing modern financial arrangements is essential to

provide handloom unit owners with low-interest loans and flexible repayment terms. To restore the industry's former glory, it is essential to replicate all the renowned handloom items from the past. Weavers should receive training to preserve the quality and design of their products, even though weaving is primarily a craft. Addressing the unique challenges of the handloom industry can have a significant impact on one of Bangladesh's most promising small-scale industries.

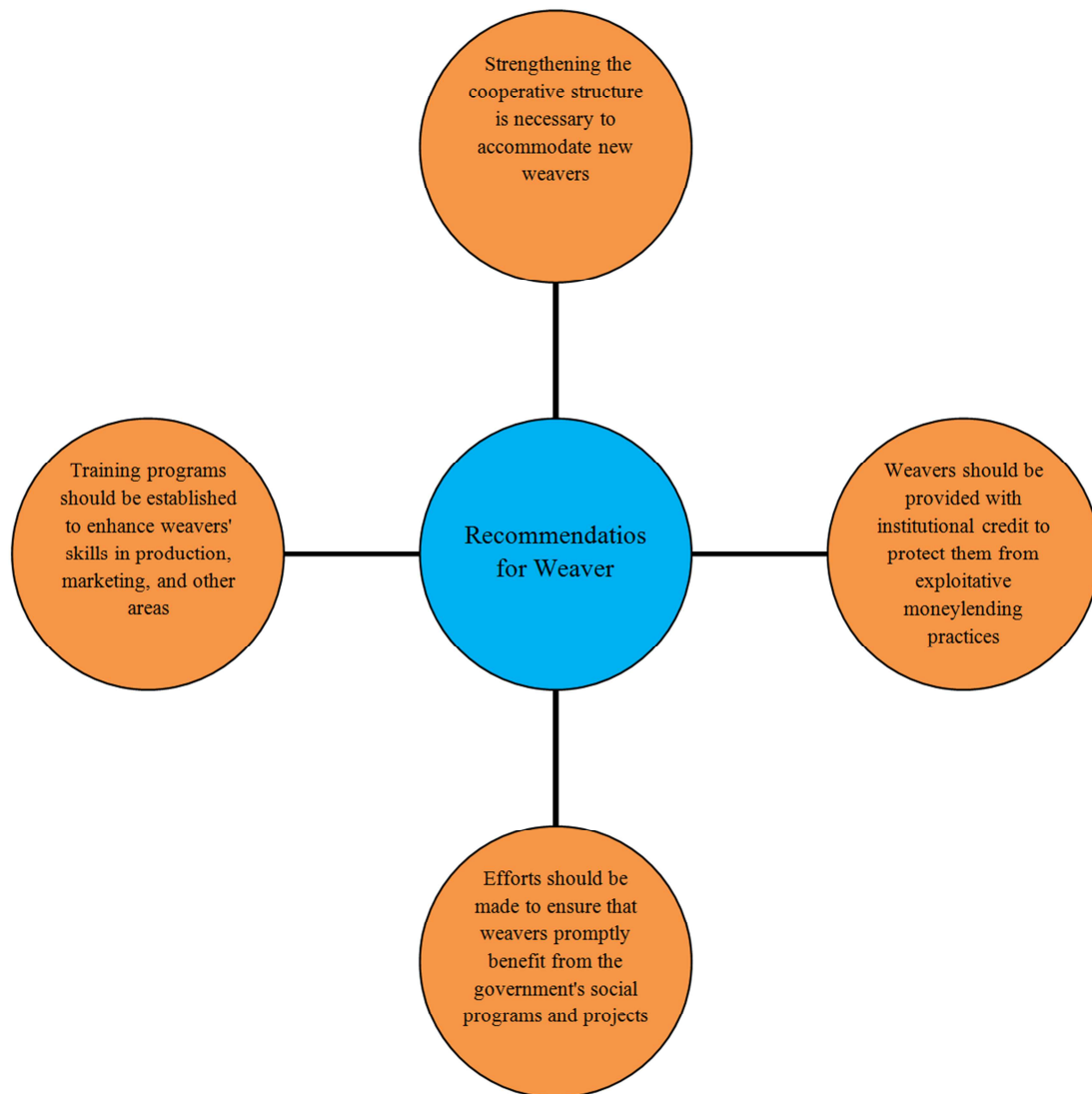


Figure 9. Recommendations with the aim of improving the living standards of Weavers.

6. Conclusions

This all-encompassing review-based study reveals that despite the employment of numerous skilled weavers; at the moment the handloom sector is grappling with various challenges, forcing it into the deteriorating point of its lifespan. These challenges encompass the weavers' precarious financial situation, elevated production costs, a lack of consistent market opportunities throughout the year, and the suboptimal performance of the cooperative sector. To counteract the

threats posed by intermediaries and rivalry from power looms, the industry can pivot towards crafting high-value, distinctive products that can be marketed both domestically and internationally. Thus, it is imperative to address the aforementioned issues effectively if the sector hopes to transition back to a growth-oriented stage.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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