

Demographic Contours Of Expertise: A Study Of Master Weavers In The Handloom Sector Of Aizawl.

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Abstract

The Indian handloom industry has its distinction in the world of fabric. It is just not a cloth or traditional wear, but it symbolizes the Indian civilization and is historically one of the oldest. Handloom represents an age-old tradition of the rich cultural heritage of India. Indian handloom industry is the second-largest employment generator next to agriculture. The All India 4th Handloom Census showed that more than 35.22 lakhs people are engaged in weaving and its allied activities (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2019). In the handloom terminology of India, a master weaver is an entrepreneur who produces cloth by employing wage labor who either directly sells it to the traders or in the market. Master weavers play a crucial role in maintaining the quality and authenticity of handloom products. Their expertise ensures that each piece is unique, reflecting the cultural heritage of the region. More than 70 per cent of the weavers are working under master weavers (Government of India, 1996), and little is known about their existence. Master weavers do dominate so much that weaver cooperatives are more or less existent, with different forms of operation by master weavers in this area alone. According to employment statistics (2001), 80 per cent of weavers are supported financially by the master weaves. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the complex demographics of master weavers, who preserve indigenous weaving customs, in Aizawl, Mizoram, handloom industry. Recognizing the pivotal role of these highly skilled artisans in preserving cultural heritage and contributing to the local economy, the study employs a primary data-driven approach to construct a comprehensive demographic profile. A self-designed structured questionnaire was adopted to a representative sample of master weavers from important weaving clusters of Aizawl. The insights generated will be crucial for stakeholders seeking to empower these artisans, enhance their economic viability, and ensure the enduring legacy of this significant craft. Moreover, demographic mapping of master weavers will assist policymakers, development organizations, and other stakeholders involved in the sustainable growth and cultural preservation of handloom industry in Mizoram, a crucial information that will contribute for targeted interventions and successfully assist the custodian of textile heritage.

Keyword: Handloom, Master Weavers, Sustainable growth, Entrepreneur, Cultural preservation

Date of Submission: 05-08-2025

Date of Acceptance: 15-08-2025

I. Introduction

Any textile produced through manual intervention or utilizing human energy for production is called handloom, (Varghese, 2015). The Handloom textiles, or the indigenous hand-woven fabric and garment industry, is one of the most labour intensive industries of the world, and a prime vehicle for preservation of the heritage of a people (Goswami and Jain, 2014). Handloom is also fast emerging as one of the key choices for the fashion industry across the world, offering variety to the mainstream market in terms of fabric, design, colours, and themes. Handloom sector occupies a distinctive unique place in Indian economy besides being generator of largest non-farm rural employment. Moreover, India is the second largest supplier of Handlooms (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2023).

Mizoram has 10705 looms with 17298 weavers and 10240 allied workers. Thenzawl is a handloom cluster located in Serchhip district, Mizoram where many households depend on weaving for a livelihood (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2019). With the absence of large industries, handloom sector played an important role in Mizoram economy it may be noted that weavers and allied households in towns and cities have greater access to a captured market provided by the master weavers who engage individual families as contractual job workers. In the urban context, 39.8 percent of the sales happen in local markets, followed by 35.3 percent to master weavers. However, in the rural areas, 67.5 percent is sold in the local market, followed by only 15.1 percent to master weavers (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2022). In essence, selling back produce to master weavers is not a sale but a fulfillment of an order (NCEUS, 2007). Government policies play a

crucial role in supporting the handloom industry. Initiatives such as subsidies, training programs, and the establishment of handloom clusters can help revitalize the sector (Roy, 2018). There is a growing demand for sustainable and ethically produced textiles. By positioning handloom products as eco-friendly and fair-trade, the industry can tap into this market (Singh & Kumar, 2020).

Master Weavers

A master weaver may be understood as a collective name for those who size the yarn, provide beams to lesser owners, weave the fabric, and process the cloth (Chakrabarti, 2002). Over the years, master weaver system has changed. Previously, master weavers would advance yarn to weaver families doing their labor (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 1996). Many master weavers have established communal weaving sheds in recent years where hired weavers can perform production tasks (Syamasundari, 2006).

According to the Government of India, master weavers are responsible for providing the raw materials, patterns, and wages to the grass root weavers and then supplying them to stores or wholesalers. As part of the Handloom Census, 31,44,839 weaver and allied worker households have been identified. Out of which 5,53,49,166 (17.6 percent) sell their products to the master weavers with whom they collaborate and who supply orders and raw materials (Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 2019). It may be rightly projected that master weavers are critical to promoting handmade textiles and handlooms and their revival (Master Weavers Organisation, 2016).

The master weaver gives the weaver the pattern and frequently yarn that is ready (after finishing all pre-loom activities). They are in-charge of dyeing, warping, and sizing the yarn, leaving the weaver with nothing to do but weave on the loom. Along with raw materials and patterns, the master weaver also provides looms for the weavers. The master weaver collects the finished goods, sells them and frequently makes funds available to weavers in need. Because of this option for quick financing, weavers may decide to work with the master weaver for lower pay (Anumala and Samala, 2017).

Significance of the study

According to employment statistics (2001), 70 per cent and 80 per cent of weavers are supported financially by the master weavers. If the master weavers are criticized for exploiting the weavers or for paying them low wages, they should be commended for providing the weavers with ongoing employment (Bhagavatula, 2010). The handloom sector is the second largest employment provider in India next to agriculture and has shown remarkable resilience in surviving and sustaining over the ages¹. Moreover, it is brought to light that there is a dearth of research in relation to master weavers in handloom industry despite their resilience and contribution in the economy.

Review of Literature

Syamasundari and Niranjana (2006) conducted a study on the functioning of master weavers in the Malgiri district handloom cluster in Andhra Pradesh. This research emphasized the significant role of master weavers in both the economic and organizational aspects of the handloom industry. The findings indicate that master weavers not only handle the technical elements of production but also manage the business operations within the handloom sector.

Bagavatula (2010) highlighted in his study on the Working of Entrepreneurs in a Competitive Low Technology Industry: The Case of Master weavers in the Handloom Industry in Andhra Pradesh that textile entrepreneurs (also known as master weavers) have played an essential role in making handloom extremely competitive. It is challenging for master weavers to get money back from the textile merchants. To get their money back, they must make multiple visits to the stores and endless phone calls. They must also proceed cautiously throughout this recovery process because if a master weaver is too assertive, the store owner can reverse course and decline to buy more goods. Every master weaver has a tale to share about how store owners avoid payments for extended periods of time while citing weak economic cycles, thus locking up thousands of rupees in capital as bad debt. The store owners may even file an insolvency petition in extreme circumstances, in which the master weaver loses the majority of his capital. Fourth, many weavers demand that their master weavers switch to more expensive looms, necessitating the initial infusion of capital that cannot be employed in the production cycle and the where profits will appear only later.

Ramswamy and Kumar (2011) studied various entrepreneurial aspects of the traditionally run micro handloom enterprises in the Thenzawl cluster, a remote tribal cluster predominantly run by women entrepreneurs located in Mizoram. They suggested that development activities be undertaken in the cluster to enable the enterprises to sustain and grow. They also examined the relationship between cluster processes and entrepreneurship and concluded that clusters played a significant role in entrepreneurial growth in Thenzawl.

Anumala and Samala (2017) study shows the persistent challenges faced in the Indian handloom industry with a particular emphasis on Telangana. The study highlights various aspects including limited access of raw

material, inadequate institutional support with the a significant decrease in demand of handloom products and the absence of strategic marketing approach. It also highlights the improper implementation of government intervention and lack of awareness among weavers on financial and policy support available .

Jain (2019) notes that demographic profiling is key to understanding sectoral strengths and vulnerabilities. Existing data from the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handlooms) provide macro-level statistics but lack depth in human capital assessment

Bradwaj et.al (2024) in their study highlights the vital role of the handloom sector in Himachal Pradesh, primarily located in rural areas due to 89.97 per cent of the population residing there. A majority of weavers are women (45.09 per cent) and 18.87 per cent are men, with significant caste-wise participation 41.75 per cent from the general category, 32.08 per cent SCs, 15.94 per cent STs, and 10.21 per cent OBCs. Awareness of government schemes is low, with only 3.63 per cent of workers having higher education. Most weavers earn less than ₹5,000 annually, with no one earning above ₹25,000. Key promoters include state-run corporations and cooperatives. The government is the primary loan provider, and average working days are similar across rural and urban areas.

Statement of the Problem

Master weavers have two characteristics that make them an intriguing research topic. First, they can initially sell in the same markets where individuals are unable to do so without assistance which makes it intriguing to study their business operations. Secondly, the government of India estimates that of the 21,765 registered Primary Weavers Cooperative Societies which cover only around 15 percent of the weavers in the country, only 50 percent are serviceable, and that too partially. About 85 percent of weavers in the country work outside the cooperative fold, either under Master Weavers/traders or independently (Bankers Institute of Rural Development, Lucknow, “Study Report on Problems and Prospects of Handloom Sector in Employment Generation in the Globally Competitive Environment” 2016), which again contribute the necessity to find the reason behind the weavers wanting to work under master weavers.

Little is known about the functioning of master weavers. The proposed study will address the limited knowledge about these master weavers, throw light on their entrepreneurial functioning, and understand the operation of business with the type of organisation structure that they followed. Therefore, the broad topic of how master weavers operate and how they can sell in the same markets where the individual weavers cannot do so is one crucial question that seeks answers. Hence, it is imperative to examine master weavers of Mizoram on their business operation and their impact on the economy of the state as well as their contribution to the socio-economy. The present study will examine master weavers in handloom sector within Aizawl, Mizoram.

Objective

To examine the demographic characteristics that sustain the expertise of master weavers in Aizawl.

II. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a structured questionnaire was developed to align with the research objective. Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized. A total of 172 master weavers were selected as the sample using the snowball sampling method. The demographic variables considered in the study included age, gender, marital status, educational qualification, and monthly income of the respondents. The collected data were analyzed using appropriate analytical tools to derive meaningful insights.

III. Results And Discussion

Age of Master Weavers

Age distribution plays a pivotal role in shaping the entrepreneurial capacity and sustainability of traditional industries such as handloom weaving. According to Jain (2019), artisan industries are often dominated by middle-aged individuals, as this age bracket tends to possess a combination of experience, community recognition, and economic responsibility. In handloom clusters across India, a majority of master weavers fall between the ages of 26 and 45, which aligns with the optimal period for entrepreneurial risk-taking and skill deployment (Mathsjournal, 2023). This age group also exhibits a higher capacity for adapting traditional skills to contemporary demands.

Table 1.1 Age distribution of master weavers

| Sl no. | Group | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------|--------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. | Below 25 | 4 | 2.3 |
| 2. | 26-35 | 57 | 33.1 |
| 3. | 36-45 | 68 | 39.5 |
| 4. | 46-55 | 26 | 15.1 |
| 5. | 55+ | 17 | 9.9 |
| | No. of cases | 172 | 100 |

(Source: Primary Source)

As shown in Table 1.1, the majority of master weavers (39.5 per cent) fall within the age group of 36–45 years, followed by 33.1 per cent in the 26–35 age group. Additionally, 15.1 per cent of the respondents are between 46–55 years of age, while 9.9 per cent are above 55 years. Notably, only 2.3 per cent of master weavers are below the age of 25. The mean age of the sample respondents is 37.5 years ± 2.97 and the mode age is 3 i.e 36–45 years of age. These findings reveal the importance of engaging younger generations in the handloom sector to ensure the preservation and continuity of traditional weaving knowledge, while also valuing the experience and expertise of the current cohort of master weavers.

The figure below is the visual presentation of the distribution of age of the respondent entrepreneurs

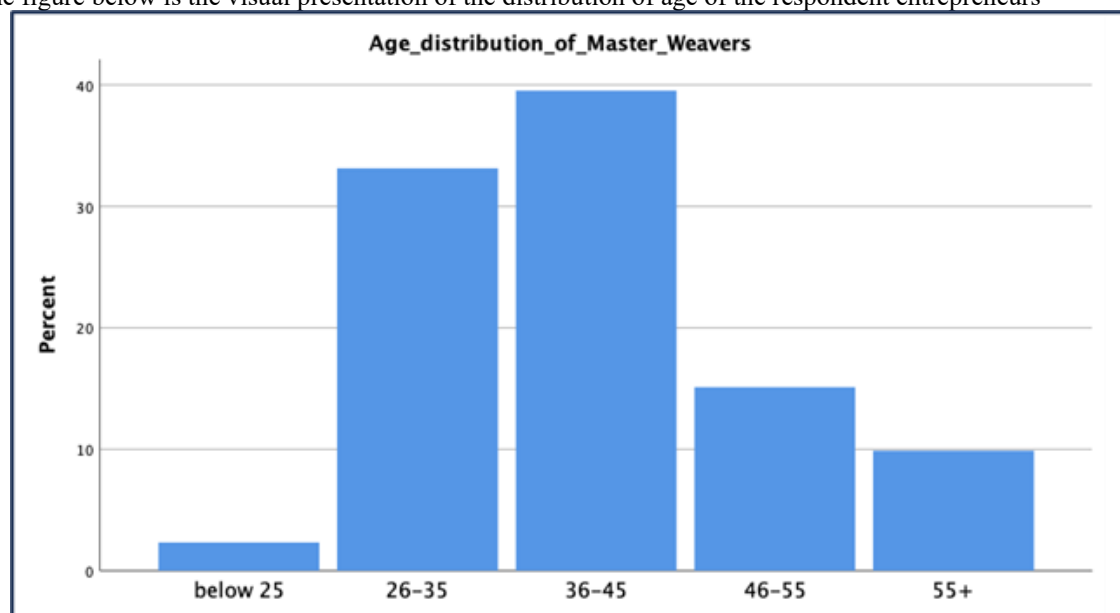


Figure 1.1 Age distribution of Master Weaver

Gender

Age and gender are foundational demographic variables that significantly influence entrepreneurial engagement in traditional sectors like handloom weaving. Age is often linked with skill maturity, decision-making ability, and community influence. Jain (2019) emphasized that middle-aged individuals (typically 36–55 years) dominate artisanal industries due to their accumulated expertise and financial responsibilities. Younger generations tend to migrate toward modern employment, contributing to a skill transmission gap within traditional crafts.

In parallel, gender plays a critical role in shaping entrepreneurial pathways. The Fourth All India Handloom Census (2019–2020) highlighted that 72 per cent of handloom weavers in India are women, often combining domestic responsibilities with income-generating activities. Studies by Sharma and Bhuyan (2020) and Das and Saikia (2021) confirm that in Northeast India, women not only form the majority of the weaving workforce but also act as micro-entrepreneurs managing home-based production units. Despite their centrality, systemic barriers such as restricted access to credit and market linkages.

Table 1.2 Gender Distribution of Master Weavers

| Sl no. | Gender | Frequency | Per Cent |
|--------|--------|-----------|----------|
| 1. | Male | 10 | 5.8 |
| 2. | Female | 162 | 94.2 |
| | Total | 172 | 100 |

(Source: Primary Source)

The study revealed that the majority of textile entrepreneurs or master weavers were women, accounting for 94.2 per cent of the sample respondents. In contrast, only a small portion approximately 5.8 per cent were male master weavers in the handloom industry of Aizawl, Mizoram. In conclusion, the findings highlight the strong connection between the handloom sector and female entrepreneurship and craftsmanship in the studied area.

The figure below is the visual presentation of Gender distribution of master weavers

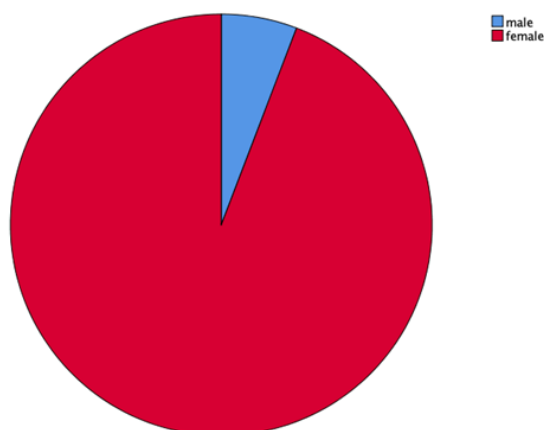


Figure 1.2 Gender distribution of master weavers

Marital status

Marital status also emerges as a significant socio-demographic factor influencing entrepreneurship. Kumar and Devi (2018) argued that married individuals tend to show higher levels of economic stability and long-term commitment to traditional occupations like handloom weaving. Marriage often brings added responsibilities, prompting individuals—especially women to seek stable home-based income-generating activities such as weaving. In Mizoram’s matrilineal social structure, married women play a central role in sustaining and managing family weaving practices, often transforming their inherited skills into entrepreneurial ventures (Vanlalhriati, 2022).

Furthermore, the Handloom Census (2019-20) indicates that married weavers are more likely to access government support schemes and microfinance, enhancing their capacity for entrepreneurship.

Table 1.3 Marital status of master weavers

| Sl no. | Marital Status | Frequency | Per Cent |
|--------|----------------|-----------|----------|
| 1. | Married | 127 | 73.8 |
| 2. | Single | 45 | 26.2 |
| | Total | 172 | 100.0 |

(Source: Primary Source)

Marital status refers to whether the sample respondents are married or single. Among the 172 respondents, the majority of master weavers 73.8 per cent are married and have established their own families. The remaining 26.2 per cent are single. Overall, the findings indicate that the handloom sector in Mizoram is predominantly supported by married individuals, who likely depend on weaving as a primary source of family income.

The figure below is the visual presentation of Marital Status of Master Weavers

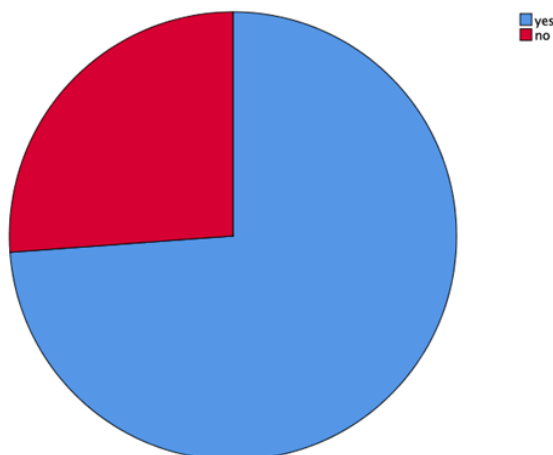


Figure 1.3 Marital Status of Master Weavers

Educational qualification of Master weavers

Educational qualification also plays a crucial role in influencing success. According to Patel and Thomas (2021), weavers with at least secondary-level education are more likely to pursue entrepreneurial paths engaging in product innovation, applying for government schemes, and expanding into new markets. Higher education enhances communication skills, financial literacy, and exposure to business management principles, all of which are vital for entrepreneurial success in the handloom sector.

In a study on northeastern India, Sharma and Bhuyan (2020) observed that while most skilled weavers acquire weaving techniques through familial or community-based transmission, those with formal education tend to excel in organizing production, record-keeping, and networking with buyers and institutions. However, the Fourth All India Handloom Census (2019-20) reported that a majority of handloom weavers still have low levels of education, with only a small percentage (around 3.6 per cent) having attained graduation or higher. This educational gap restricts their ability to benefit from formal entrepreneurial support systems.

Table 1.4 Educational Qualification of Master Weavers

| Sl no. | Educational Qualification | Frequency | Per Cent |
|--------|---------------------------|-----------|----------|
| 1. | HSLC Or Below | 96 | 55.8 |
| 2. | HSSLC | 40 | 23.3 |
| 3. | Graduate | 24 | 14 |
| 4. | Post Graduate | 12 | 7 |
| | Total | 172 | 100 |

(Source: Primary Source)

The table above presents the educational qualification levels of master weavers among the sample respondents. It indicates that the majority 55.8 per cent have not completed HSLC (Class X). This is followed by 23.3 per cent who have completed HSSLC (Class XII). Only 14 per cent of the respondents are graduates from various colleges and institutions. Through interactions with the master weavers, the researcher also discovered that a few had studied at renowned fashion technology institutes across India. Additionally, 7 per cent of the respondents are postgraduates from various universities and represent different age groups. Mode of the current study reveals 1 i.e HSLC or below in regards to qualification of master weavers from sample respondents. These findings reflect a traditionally rooted industry that is gradually incorporating formal education and technical skills, potentially driving innovation, modernization, and greater recognition of the handloom sector in the future.

The figure below is the visual presentation of Educational qualification of master weavers

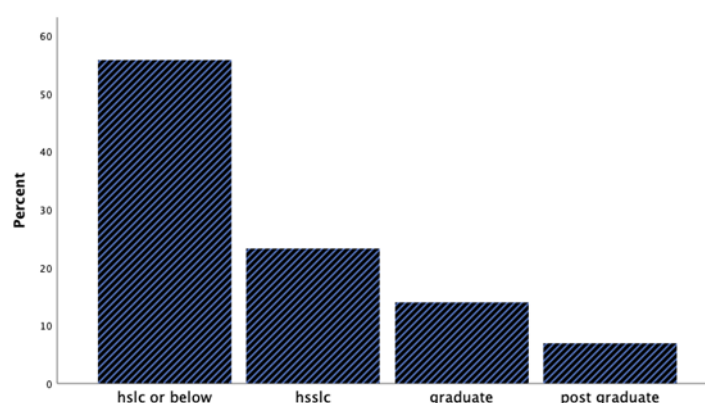


Figure 1.4 Educational Qualification of Master Weavers

Average Income Class Per Month of Master Weavers

The income level of master weavers are divided into 6 categories with the lowest per month income is less than ₹ 20,000 and the highest income was set to more than ₹ 1 lakh

Banerjee and Roy (2016) emphasizes that master weavers who adopt entrepreneurial practices such as direct market linkage, product diversification, and innovation tend to achieve better financial outcomes. The ability to leverage digital platforms and e-commerce has further improved income potential by reducing reliance on intermediaries (Patel & Shah, 2020).

Table 1.5 Average Income Class Per Month Of Master Weavers

| Sl no. | Average Income Class Per Month | Frequency | Per Cent |
|--------|--------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| 1. | Less than ₹20,000 | 9 | 5.2 |
| 2. | ₹20,000-₹40,000 | 48 | 27.9 |
| 3. | ₹40,000-₹60,000 | 45 | 26.2 |
| 4. | ₹60,000-₹80,000 | 13 | 7.6 |
| 5. | ₹80,000-₹1,00,000 | 14 | 8.1 |
| 6. | More than ₹1,00,000 | 43 | 25 |
| | Total | 172 | 100 |

(Source: Primary Source)

Table 1.5 shown the monthly income distribution of master weavers in the handloom industry of Aizawl. According to the data, the mode in terms of income class per month is 2 i.e ₹20,000 and ₹40,000 .The largest proportion of master weavers (27.9 per cent) earn between ₹20,000 and ₹40,000 per month. This is followed by 26.2 per cent who earn between ₹40,000 and ₹60,000, and 25 per cent who report monthly earnings of over ₹1,00,000. These figures indicate that a significant portion of master weavers achieve substantial income levels, highlighting the sustainability and resilience of the handloom industry in Mizoram.

Additionally, 8.1 per cent of master weavers earn between ₹80,000 and ₹1,00,000 per month, while 7.6 per cent fall within the ₹60,000 to ₹80,000 range. Only a small segment 5.2 per cent earn less than ₹20,000 per month, suggesting that very few operate at subsistence levels. In conclusion, these findings demonstrate that handloom weaving, particularly at the master weaver level, continues to be a viable and sustainable livelihood option. The presence of a strong middle to high income group underscores the economic potential of the sector. This highlights the importance of continued investment and policy support to further strengthen and expand this traditional yet economically significant craft.

The figure below is the visual presentation Average Income Class Per Month of Master Weavers

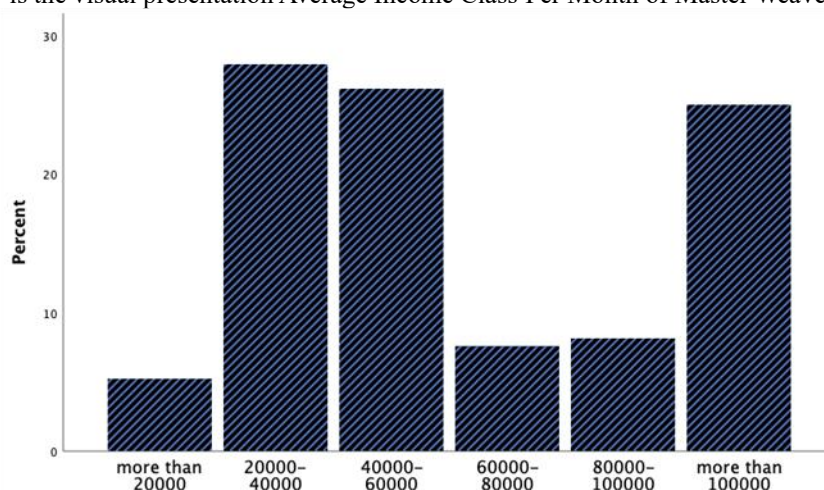


Figure 1.5 Average Income Class Per Month of Master Weavers

IV. Conclusion

The present study on the demographic characteristics of master weavers in Aizawl highlights the predominance of women in the handloom industry within the region. However, the presence of a few male respondents is noteworthy, as it may indicate a growing male participation in what has traditionally been a female dominated sector. This shift suggests a gradual transformation in gender roles within the handloom industry of Mizoram.

The industry is largely composed of middle aged individuals with different levels of education. Significantly, the involvement of qualified professionals, including fashion designers, reflects a positive trend towards innovation and modernization while also contributing to the preservation of traditional skills. Furthermore, the presence of high-income earners among master weavers points to a resilient and economically viable future for the sector. To ensure the long-term sustainability and continued growth of culturally rich industry like handloom, it is crucial to provide ongoing support in various areas such as education, skill development, and market access particularly targeting younger generations and those with limited formal education.

Suggestions

The following recommendations are proposed in alignment with the demographic findings on master weavers, with the objective of fostering sustainable and inclusive development within the handloom sector:

- It is recommended that government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) initiate structured training programs emphasizing the significance of the handloom sector in cultural preservation. These programs should also incorporate market-oriented modules, including digital upskilling, specifically targeting youth below the age of 25 and individuals in the 35–46 age bracket. The objective is to equip these cohorts with both cultural awareness and practical competencies to sustain and innovate within the sector.
- Strategic partnerships should be facilitated with microfinance institutions and government-backed financial schemes such as MUDRA and PMEGP. These partnerships would enhance access to working capital for female entrepreneurs, thereby enabling business expansion. Concurrently, targeted training and sensitization initiatives should be developed to encourage greater participation of men in the handloom sector. Such efforts would not only diversify the workforce but also contribute meaningfully to employment generation and economic development in Mizoram.
- Special educational programs must be designed for master weavers with limited formal education. These should include expert-led training on financial management, marketing strategies, and business development. Collaborations with leading fashion technology institutions such as the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and relevant universities are strongly encouraged to provide certification, thereby formalizing and enhancing the credibility of traditional expertise.
- High-income master weavers should be provided with opportunities to collaborate with prominent e-commerce and ethical fashion platforms such as GoCoop and Amazon Karigar. Additionally, support should be extended for the development of personal branding strategies to help them establish a stronger digital presence and broaden their consumer base.

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