

Women, Work, and Weaves: Gendered Narratives in Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani Traditions of Bihar

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ABSTRACT

In this proposed research, the role of women crafters in sustaining and developing the traditions of Sujni embroidery, Khatwa, and Madhubani painting in the state of Bihar will be examined through the application of feminist and material perspectives on craft traditions. Based on feminist approaches towards material culture and craft traditions, this proposed work seeks to shed light on the manner in which sociocultural identities are performed and encoded in crafts, and in what way empowerment is etched in the artifacts that represent such traditions. These art traditions are viewed as vital linkages of women in their social contexts in terms of performing social interactions, social memory, and autonomy.

There is evidence in this study that female craftspeople are agents of innovation in cultures in that they reconfigure ancestral forms of crafts through design alteration, joint creation, and exposure to markets, as a means of integrating cultural authenticity and viability. Several forms of qualitative methods were utilized in this work, including ethnographic fieldwork that combined participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Some of the aims of this work included the mapping of skill and innovation in craftsmanship.

Findings reveal that Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani are living traditions that provide women social interactions and also preserve their social memory in conditions of relative adaptability that continue to change in terms of socio-economic factors. In this context, women are recognized as agents of change who are transforming the traditions in innovative ways and at the same time responding to their socio-economic needs in finding means of earning their livelihoods.

The findings and conclusions of this study have the potential to contribute to the development of policies and joint designs towards improving women's role in the heritage sectors, taking into account the principles of ethical production. Together, the conclusions of this and other similar studies contribute to the development of joint designs and policies that have the potential to empower women, promote authenticity, and build the principles of social justice in the heritage sectors..

Keywords : Bihar; Design Innovation; Gendered Labour; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Khatwa Appliqué; Madhubani Painting; Sujni Embroidery; Women Artisans; Craft Heritage.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The craft traditions of Bihar, the Sujni embroidery and decorate series of Khatwa and Madhubani painting—provide insight into the fascinating ways in which cultures are protected and conserved and in which forces of markets push in as craft traditions evolve over time. They rest on very solid ground and are now caught in spaces influenced by the forces of globalization and contemporary social change. Of recent, craft traditions have begun to mark out the importance of object qualities: materials, temporalities, and the webs those materials weave instead of or in addition to the visual qualities that precede them. In the context of the state of Bihar and its sociocultural texture, Sujni quilts and Madhubani painting are texts that are necessarily imbricated in the daily work of women and the reproduction of this sociocultural practice itself. For instance, Sujni quilts of Muzaffarpur are about an enduring process of women-led crafts and art

that passes through stories and memory and patchwork crafts (Sharma and Gupta, 2024). Something similar can be seen in the case of Madhubani painting, entrenched in Mithila as mural and flooring for domestic rituals and now transformed into what can be taken as purely symbolic and performed only by women (Singh, 2025). Here comes the importance of material-cultural analysis that forces attention on making and webs of knowledge in which such making is embedded and in addition impelled and shaped in very important ways by women's labor.

Feminist researchers have asserted that the daily material practice of women, such as sewing, weaving, and painting, is more than just aesthetics and that it holds “dense” stories of women and their labor (Buckley, 2021; Parker, 2017). In feminist theory, the object itself is an active participant in meaning and power (Miller, 2023), focusing on the collaboration of hand and tool in marking the existence of women in the larger narrative of social history (Adamson & Kelan, 2023). Thus, Bihar crafts

become both record and act in this narrative, inscribing the past and past experiences of women while also empowering them to reconfigure their social world in this manner. Sujni, explained Rajan Sharma & Gupta (2024), has evolved from “simple quilt making to the woven expression of women and their experiences” that relate to domestic violence, the problem of dowry, and environmental factors. In much the same way, the visual language of the Madhubani school of painting, originally seen on married women’s wall hangings in the past, has expanded in meaning and medium from cloth to paper and included depictions of goddess figures in combination with contemporary social statements (Peter & Pathak, 2023). In applying the theory of feminist material cultures, it is possible to decipher the manner in which such cultural artifacts blur the lines of emotional labor, craftsmanship, and social negotiations. In this case, materialism is seen as the scenario within which it is only in collaboration that meaning can be constructed or created. Thus, the repetitive stitch, selection of designs, and fabrics are imbricated within corporeal epistemologies that allow craftspeople to inscribe their identities and agential lives. In this manner, crafts are archived within the social worlds that are maintained within such practices.

1.1 Gendered Labour, Agency, and Cultural Economies

“The feminization of crafts in India appears as a phenomenon that encompasses both empowerment and precariousness” (Das, 2025). Observations reveal that women are a large part of the country’s craft workforce, yet their work remains understated and unorganized. In the state of Bihar, women engage in kinship-based craft cooperatives or Self-Help Groups associated with Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), such as JEEViKA, in which joint productive systems promote negotiations between state and market systems (Sharma and Gupta, 2024). Networks in this way reposition craft within the context of a “gendered economy” that repositions craftsmanship in relation to notions of creativity, work, and value (Saraswat and Thakur, 2024). Concurring Griffiths et al., (2025) argues that current feminist theory must include within its purview the ensuing role of “cultural labor” in the creation of both “intangible and tangible capital.” Sujni and Khatwa artists operate in this situation of “design and market experiment” and attempt “to achieve equilibrium between tradition and innovation” (Oaklores, 2024). Ultimately, the use of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), designers, and fair trade businesses has led to “the development of new discourses and sources of income” and equally led to “the problem of the commodification of cultural difference” (Tiwari, 2021). Functioning in this manner, the role of women in such artisanry can be described as that of “cultural mediators” in reconciling indigenous designs for the world and retaining control in this process of translation (Srivastava, 2024). That of empowerment and eventual “exploitation” within this cycle can be described as “fashioning and funding” and remains consistent in this manner within current “feminist views of the current and possible future directions of craft in relation to capital” (Ghosh, 2020).

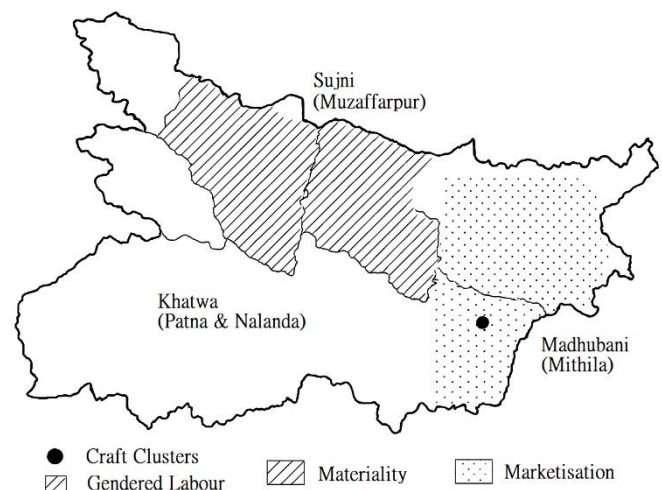


Figure 1: Comparative Visual Map of Bihar and its Major Craft Clusters

Figure 1 is a visual description of the cross-section of Bihar’s artisan traditions that superimposes three main areas of craftsmanship: Sujni in Muzaffarpur, Khatwa in the Patna and Nalanda areas, and the practice of Madhubani art in Mithila. By focusing on just the three areas of craftsmanship, the visual description of the map captures data on the geography of crafts in addition to figures that attempt to map the nature of the workforce, materials, and the level of connectivity in the markets. Sujni, in Muzaffarpur, has always had female-dominated leadership in terms of craftsmanship that is characterized by economy and the autonomy of women in the domestic economy. Conversely, in the Khatwa community of Patna and Nalanda, more diversity exists in terms of gender in employment patterns whereby women are seen to be engaging in less skilled stitching work compared to men, who are in more skilled and outward-facing sectors of the trade. Then, of course, the Madhubani school of Mithila art, which has gained international recognition, reflects an illustrative level of commodification whereby the process of shifting from natural materials to plastics indicates both adaptation and emerging tenets of aesthetics (Gupta and Gangwar, 2016). By incorporating such factors in one visual formula, it makes it possible for the map depiction of this scenario to serve as an analytical tool in understanding the crossings of geography, gender, employment, and fiscal change in Bihar artist economies.

1.2 Craft, Identity, and Collective Memory

Material culture also mediates collective identity and belonging. In Bihar’s Mithila region, women’s painting is simultaneously a devotional act and a mnemonic device that encodes social rituals, myths, and ecological ethics (Muhammed, 2025). Through symbolic representation, fish for fertility, peacocks for love, trees for continuity, women externalize lived experience into visual form (Puri, 2020). These motifs constitute a gendered cartography of social life, enabling women to narrate themselves in a cultural field historically dominated by patriarchal control (Chakrabarty, 2024).

Contemporary craft practice reflects not static preservation but transformative continuity, a feminist temporality in which innovation becomes tradition's mode of survival (Hada et al., 2024). In the aftermath of globalization and climate uncertainty, women artisans strategically hybridize motifs and materials to sustain livelihood while communicating socio-political concerns. Their agency is thus relational, emerging through networks of solidarity, markets, and media visibility.

Material culture is obviously very much a factor in determining the way in which communities are connected, how they feel their sense of belonging and what it means for them to be together. In Mithila, in the state of Bihar, this process of women and painting is essentially what bridges different spheres: devotion and memory converge in this process of women and painting. In this art of painting, birds symbolize reproduction, peacocks represent sex and trees represent continuance, allowing women to give pictorial expression to their experience (Puri, 2020). Together, it paints the social map of relationships that speaks much more loudly in what had hitherto been very much a patriarchy.

Does this mean that what we are witnessing is stagnation? It is change nonetheless. And this change in itself can be seen as a sign within the realm of feminism, the way in which tradition is sustained in the wake of changes caused by globalization and environmental changes (Hada et al., 2024). In light of such changes, female artisans are mixing visual and material in such a way in a manner that asserts social and political statements within their means.

1.3 Research Rationale and Methodological Orientation

It is grounded in the methodologies that are typical of the feminist social sciences, such as ethnographic and analytical interpretive methods of material culture. In order to achieve its aims, this study proposes a comprehensive multi-modal approach that combines field work, semi-structured interviews, and visual documentation. These intensive and extensive approaches were rigorously executed in designated areas within the territorial limits of the districts of Madhubuni, Darbhanga, and Bhagalpur. Further, the conceptual approach proposed argues and seeks to explore the intersections of three areas: skill and corporeal practice, innovation of designs, and the role of institutionally mediated practices in giving meaning and shape to the interventions of women in the cultural industries of the relevant sectors for the better empowerment of such sectors' authors and actors.

Enlarging the horizon of theory for feminist policy economists, the analysis defines craft as "a specific cultural economy of labor intricately implicated in the variegated worlds of life itself, including affective and aesthetic worlds. In addition, this analysis takes cognizance of the literature on heritage that emphasizes the need for community-based approaches "to maintain living traditions" in contrast to state-based models of preserving the past. Case insights are introduced to demonstrate that "from guardians of 'traditions,' women craftspeople have become cultural innovators, occupying

the nexus between past periods, local and global cultures, and meanings of survival and creativity."

The thesis argues that artists have a dual position in relation to culture: that of producers and that of narrators. In substantiation of this thesis, it proposes that a novel approach to an ethics of craft heritage informed by a feminist agenda is necessary and argues that such an approach is one that has immense potential for Bihar and can be a means to achieve sustainable and just growth for the creative economy of Bihar.

Research Objectives

1. To study and analyse the role of such art in the domain of creative expression and storytelling as an art medium to underline the social existence of the women artists.
2. To analyse the methods of manufacture, the adaptation of designs, and the sharing of competencies in such traditional crafts by stressing the linkage between conservation of heritage, the application of innovation, and viability in such crafts.
3. To assess the effects of institutional and marketplace factors and collaboration-based initiatives on the agency of women crafts persons, earning potential, and sustainability of traditional crafts in the modern-day scenario.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework

In this proposed investigation, the application of feminist material culture theory and the study of craft heritage would be combined to better comprehend the manner in which female crafters in the Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani traditions of Bihar use craft as a means of expression and empowerment. From the proposed framework, it can be seen that the relationship between Embodied Skill and Institutional Mediation affects empowerment.

2.2 Theoretical Background

Specific constructs that have special importance were developed to convert the findings of theory into the format that is required for analysis. In this case, the dual objectives were: first, to align the theoretical perspectives on feminism and craft realities; and finally, to develop a fusion of the two views, which provides an explanatory outline of the role of each factor in comprehending the process changeover from EI to empowerment and sustainable development.

Table 1: Theoretical Base and Application

Theory	Focus	Application
Feminist Material Culture Theory	Material practices reflect gendered experiences and agency.	Women's craftwork expresses social identity and empowerment.
Craft Heritage Studies	Crafts evolve through intergenerational learning and adaptation.	Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani act as living heritages adapting to change.

As shown in Table 1, both theoretical approaches converge to explain how women’s craft practices materialize agency and sustain adaptive heritage systems.

2.3 Constructs Used

Key constructs were developed to translate theoretical insights into analyzable components, aligning feminist and heritage perspectives with craft-based realities (see Table 2).

Table 2: Constructs and Indicators

Construct	Meaning	Indicators
Embodied Skill	Tacit knowledge and inherited manual expertise.	Learning lineage, sensory know-how, personal touch.
Design Innovation	Creative adaptation of traditional motifs and materials.	New motifs, hybrid aesthetics, experimentation.
Institutional Mediation	Support or control by NGOs, markets, and policy bodies.	Training, market access, decision-making influence.
Empowerment & Sustainability	Women’s economic and social agency with heritage continuity.	Income autonomy, cultural authorship, visibility.

Table 2 highlights how each construct contributes to understanding the continuum from embodied knowledge to Empowerment and Sustainability.

2.4 Embodied Skill and Gendered Labour

Such artifacts that are produced as a result of women’s skills serve as a channel through which the embodiment of cultural memory and knowledge is achieved. Emphasis on quotes and impressions provided in this text marks the complex intersection of traditional skill with narratives of gender. This interaction between skill as achieved through the body, with conventional roles of gender in terms of labor, is visually recorded through field observation.

2.5 Design Innovation and Continuity

Innovation is seen through the application of design motifs and materials within the contemporary realm, with the authenticity of their craftsmanship being retained. Innovation, in essence, occurs as a form of empowerment, showcasing the adaptability of the artisans within their field of creativity. Figure 2 shows the adaptability of design innovation within women’s crafts.

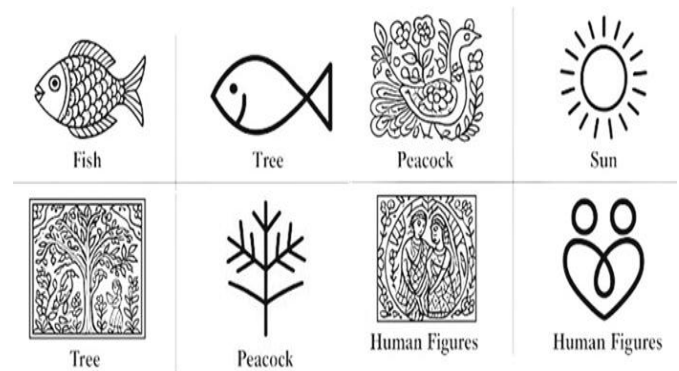


Figure 2. Evolution of Motifs in Traditional vs. Contemporary Designs

Figure 2 highlights how innovation functions as a means of continuity—enabling artisans to balance cultural integrity with market adaptability.

2.6 Institutional Mediation

It was found that non-governmental organizations, along with other cooperative bodies, play a positive role in vocational training as well as helping farmers enter the market. Also, the impact that such bodies play in determining agricultural development design shows their control dynamic. Literature review of this topic would focus on studying the impact, along with other aspects, as highlighted in this study (Table 3).

Table 3: NGO Interaction Data

NGO / Institution	Type of Support Provided	Design / Production Involvement	Impact on Artisans' Agency	Construct Linkage
Jivika – Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project	Skill upgradation workshops; financial literacy; group formation	Moderate – introduces new motifs and product lines	Increased income and visibility but limited creative control	<i>Institutional Mediation</i> → <i>Empowerment</i>
Mithila Art Institute	Training in design and natural pigment use; exhibitions	High – co-designing with artists and designers	Strengthened aesthetic experimentation and higher cultural authorship	<i>Design Innovation</i> → <i>Empowerment & Sustainability</i>

Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)	Cooperative formation and collective marketing	Medium – consultative product planning and leadership training	Enhanced negotiation capacity; improved profit sharing	<i>Institutional Mediation</i> → <i>Social Empowerment</i>
Upendra Maharaithi Shilp Anusandhan Sansthan (UMSA S)	Government-led design development and product diversification	High – formalized design interventions aligned with market trends	Expanded market access but partial creative dependency	<i>Institutional Mediation</i> ↔ <i>Design Innovation</i>
Local NGOs (Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur, Madhubani)	Local training, micro-credit, and linkage facilitation	Low to moderate – context-based support with minimal design influence	Fostered grassroots leadership and sustained traditional motifs	<i>Institutional Mediation</i> → <i>Empowerment & Sustainability</i>

As illustrated in Table 3, while NGO involvement enhances visibility and market access, it simultaneously introduces new power hierarchies affecting design independence.

2.7 Empowerment and Sustainability

Empowerment is marked by income autonomy, social recognition, and authorship. The emergence of the outcome associated with empowerment is reflected in a variety of constructs, as shown by a series of quantitative measures. Quantitative measures were linked with broader conceptual frameworks in evaluating the diversity of empowerment dimensions for female artisans (Table 4).

Table 4. Empowerment Indicators Across Constructs

Indicator (Linked to Construct)	% of Artisans	Construct	Indicator (Linked to Construct)
Income growth post NGO linkage	69%	Institutional Mediation → Empowerment	Income growth post NGO linkage
Experimenting with new motifs	84%	Design Innovation	Experimenting with new motifs

Participation in cooperative decisions	69%	Empowerment & Sustainability	Participation in cooperative decisions
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As evident in Table 4, empowerment manifests through measurable gains in income, creative authorship, and decision-making participation, validating the conceptual pathway.

2.8 Conceptual Flow

Based on a new conceptual framework, this research combines insights from Feminist Material Culture Studies with Craft Cultural Studies, with the purpose of analyzing the interaction of Embodied Skill, Design Innovation, and Institutional Mediation as a joint driver of Empowerment and Sustainability within the realm of women-led crafts (as illustrated in Figure 3).

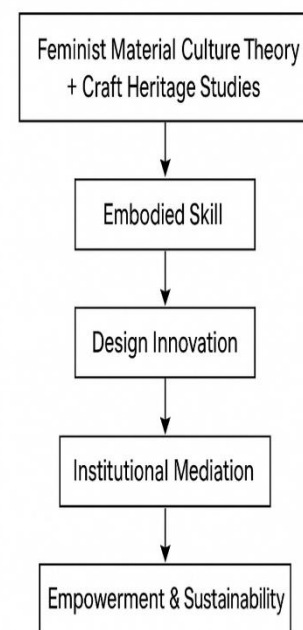


Figure 3. Conceptual Model of Women-Craft-Empowerment Dynamics

Thus, as shown in Figure 3, the model shows a progressive path, starting from hypothetical roots to real empowerment, through which the material practices of women translate into spaces of influence, creativity, and endurance.

3. Research Methodology

This current study relies on a mixed-methods approach, guided by key principles associated with feminism, material science, and cultural anthropology. In theoretical terms, this work is relevant to the premise that a synergy between bodily knowledge, design intelligence, and institutional brokerage plays a pivotal role in such processes.

3.1 Research Framework and Data Sources

The research design combines information from primary and secondary data sources in order to provide an empirical basis for the theoretical constructs. This is reflected in Table 5 below.

The study combines both primary and secondary data sources in order to map theoretical constructs onto field realities.

Table 5. Data sources and Construct Alignment

Data Source	Purpose (Construct Alignment)	Details / Example	Data Source
Primary Data	Capture lived experiences (Embodied Skill, Design Innovation)	Interviews, participant observation, field documentation across Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur.	Primary Data
Secondary Data	Contextualize institutional and theoretical background (Institutional Mediation, Sustainability)	Scholarly literature, Ministry of Textiles reports, UNESCO documentation.	Secondary Data

The survey results combined with information from documentaries, as indicated in Table 5, revealed a more complete and logical study.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

1. Thematic interviews explored the acquisition of skills, the development of creativity, and relations with institutions among artisans.
2. Participant observation documented mastered physical abilities and routine artistic techniques.
3. The visual approach documented motifs and evolutionary changes in design.
4. Interviews with key stakeholders explored the institutional mediation of NGOs and policymakers.

3.2.1 Participant Profile:

The main set of information included 32 female craftspeople working in traditional Bihari styles such as Sujni embroidery, Khatwa appliqué, and Madhubani art from the regions of Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, and Bhagalpur.

The study participants were carefully selected via two different sampling methods. These methods were purposive and snowball. This ensured that the study included people from different age groups between 25 and 60 years. It also encompassed a range of skill levels from various sources, including cooperative, nonprofit, and private institutions.

The interviews each lasted, on average, about 45–60 minutes, and the study also included ten one-on-one interviews with NGO organizers, union leaders, and officials from the government's planning department. This

distribution provided an unbiased view of the transmission of embodied capabilities, the innovation of design, and institutional mediation, underlining the deep interpretive importance and relevance of the study within its context.

3.3 Data Analysis

The information gathered in Table 6 was thematically analyzed using NVivo, a software that compares emergent groups to previously identified theoretical frameworks.

NVivo 14 was employed to carry out all qualitative data processing, adhering to Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework.

The relationship of the themes to the conceptual variables can be visualized as below:

Table 6. Thematic Coding and Construct Mapping

Thematic Category (NVivo)	Aligned Construct
Embodied Skill & Gendered Labour	Embodied Skill
Innovation & Continuity	Design Innovation
Institutional Mediation	Institutional Mediation
Agency & Empowerment	Empowerment & Sustainability

Table 6 confirms that each thematic cluster—skills, innovation, mediation, and empowerment—coherently maps onto the theoretically based model of the dynamics between women, craft, and empowerment.

Informed consent, confidentiality, and fairness were ensured by strictly adhering to the ethical standards set by the British Sociological Association in 2017.

4. Results & Analysis

4.1 Comparative Craft Analysis

A cross-comparison of Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani crafts would therefore show that while these art forms may appear different, they actually lead to similar outcomes that are equally empowering.

Table 7 summarizes the variations observed in the manifestation of these constructs across the three traditional art forms.

Table 7. Comparative Craft Analysis

Construct	Sujni Embroidery	Khatwa Appliqué	Madhubani Painting	Comparative Insight
Embodied Skill	Learned	Layered appliqué	Fine brushwork	All crafts

	matrilineally; narrative stitching of domestic and social themes	é using recycled textiles; community-based learning	k and symbolic motifs passed through familial apprenticeship	reflect gendered transmission of embodied knowledge and memory .
Design Innovation	Integrates story-based motifs with modern narratives	Incorporates geometric abstraction and textile reuse for sustainability	Adapts traditional iconography to new media (paper, cloth, digital)	Innovation sustains relevance without erasing heritage .
Institutional Mediation	Supported by local cooperatives; limited NGO presence	Backed by state and NGO exhibitions; design training initiatives	Highly institutionalized; government GI and global branding	Institutional intensity varies but shapes autonomy and exposure.
Empowerment & Sustainability	Economic uplift through embroidery groups; cultural storytelling preserved	Emerging leadership among rural women; environmental reuse practices	Global recognition enhances income but risks motif commercialization	Empowerment manifests across economic, social, and cultural dimensions; sustainability depends on participatory mediation.
Construct	Sujni Embroidery	Khatwa Appliqué	Madhubani Painting	Comparative Insight

As illustrated in Table 7, despite the fact that their contexts are very different, all these crafts share one common characteristic: they rely on people's ability to adapt creatively and to form solid relationships with institutions.

4.2. Swot Analysis

The framework integrates all four theoretical pillars, embodied skill, design innovation, institutional mediation, and empowerment & sustainability with real-world observations.

It highlights the considerable strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats present across various dimensions of the women-led craft ecosystem in Bihar. In order to analyze the SWOT factors in this ecosystem, a framework was developed as depicted in Table 8.

These link the real-life observations in the study to the theoretical framework. Theories on embodied skill, design innovation, institutional mediation, and empowerment and sustainability are bridged with real-life practices from Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani.

Table 8. SWOT Analysis of Bihar's Women-Led Craft Ecosystem showing interrelations between field findings and conceptual constructs.

SWOT Dimension	Field Findings / Evidence	Interpretation	Linked Construct
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deep <i>Embodied Skill</i> transmitted across generations. - Strong collective learning within women's networks.- Crafts serve as emotional and narrative expressions of gendered identity. 	Inherited craftsmanship and social cohesion sustain the authenticity and resilience of Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani traditions.	<i>Embodied Skill</i> → <i>Empowerment & Sustainability</i>
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unequal profit-sharing between artisans and intermediaries.- Overdependence on NGO-led design decisions.- Limited formal design 	Institutional dependency and lack of creative autonomy restrict full realization of empowerment.	<i>Institutional Mediation</i> ↔ <i>Design Innovation</i>

	education or digital literacy.		
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expanding fair-trade networks and digital marketplaces. - Increasing collaborations between designers, NGOs, and artisans. - Rising global demand for ethical, handcrafted products. 	Digital visibility and participatory design education can enhance creative authorship and economic agency.	<i>Design Innovation</i> → <i>Empowerment</i>
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural dilution due to market-driven standardization. - Youth migration away from craft sectors. - Exploitation through unregulated export intermediaries. 	Sustainability of craft heritage is at risk unless participatory frameworks preserve authorship and fair representation.	<i>Empowerment & Sustainability</i>
SWOT Dimension	Field Findings / Evidence	Interpretation	Linked Construct

As per Table 8, the SWOT framework reveals the coexistence of deep embodied skill and cultural identity as innate skills, with institutional dependency and limited design education as inherent weaknesses. Further, it highlights digital innovation and new ways of working together along with cultural change and lack of interest of youths.

These dynamics bring to the fore the need for policy decisions that are ethical in nature and collectively created to ensure that the craft heritage of Bihar continues to thrive.

Bringing all these findings together, the study developed a SWOT framework to map out the four SWOT factors in the craft ecosystem, as can be seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4. SWOT Matrix of Bihar's Women-Led Craft Ecosystem

As shown in Figure 4, this matrix identifies both innate potentials and systemic problems relevant to the empowerment and craft sustainability.

5. Discussion

This section contextualizes the results using concepts from both feminist and heritage theories. This text stresses that craft is both an expressive outlet for female artists and their methods of economic survival.

5.1 Embodied Skill and Feminist Agency

Embodied skill represents the transformation of women's lived experience into artisanship. Mastery over craftsmanship, achieved through ancestral and community practices, lends great emotional and social value to the process.

In Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani, women artisans effectively transmute the whole process of material production into a medium of self-expression and resilience, thus substantiating principles of feminist material culture.

Embodied skill refers to knowledge women artisans get from doing their crafts on a daily basis. Technical mastery is transformed to an act of self-expression and resistance through learning in both maternal and societal transmission, which indicates, the small acts of painting turn memories into creative works; this supports the idea that the power to act emanates from using our hands.

5.2 Design Innovation as Adaptive Strategy

Innovation is another form of continuity, and it is one process that is ever-growing and changing. Female artisans come up with new ways to interpret the motif, color, and material while maintaining the integrity of the original designs. Innovation in design, therefore, is an economically sensible plan and a visual progression. Design innovation is one way to continue the tradition by allowing women artisans to change the old designs and come up with new colors; this allows them to reach new customers with new stories.

The shift from traditional to modern art shows the adaptation and creation of new styles in artists, as it can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9. Traditional and Contemporary Motif Comparison

Theme	Traditional Motif Description	Contemporary Motif Description	Key Evolution
Fish Motif	Stylized fish with intricate line patterns, dense geometric borders, and bold black outlines filled with red, yellow, and green. Symbolizes fertility and prosperity.	Minimalist fish using clean outlines and limited color palette (black and grey), often used in abstract layouts.	Simplification of form and color while keeping symbolic essence.
Tree of Life Motif	Highly detailed tree with birds, animals, and human figures integrated symmetrically, surrounded by fine line borders.	Simplified tree rendered with geometric branches, negative space, and monochrome patterns.	Movement from storytelling composition to abstract expression.
Peacock Motif	Ornate peacock with detailed feather work	floral background	and multi-color infills. Represents grace and beauty.
Sun Motif	Circular sun with radiating lines, filled with miniature motifs of plants and animals; symbolizes energy and divinity.	Minimal sun design — concentric circles or radial lines only; sometimes merged with modern typography or patterns.	Reduction in decorative density while preserving symbolic meaning.
Human Figures	Intricately drawn bride and groom figures surrounded by floral and fertility symbols in	Simplified silhouettes or outlines depicting unity or love in abstract forms.	From narrative storytelling to symbolic representation.

	narrative scenes.		
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Innovation is not a sudden change but rather a slow process of evolution. Women preserve tradition by trying new things with regard to style, where creativity is important in maintaining cultural strength and being financially stable.

5.3 Institutional Mediation: Support and Constraint

The presence of institutions, such as NGOs, cooperatives, and state bodies, can increase the visibility of skills, thus providing access to markets, which has both positive and negative implications on skill development in that it limits the creative freedom of individuals. This duality of function indicates the presence of Institutional Mediation with regard to the framework. The influence of external interventions on artisans' autonomy was interpreted in terms of outcomes from institutional mediation (See Table 10).

Table 10. NGO Interventions vs. Artisan Autonomy

NGO / Institution	Mode of Intervention	Type of Support Provided	Impact on Artisan Autonomy	Interpretation (Construct Linkage)
Jivika – Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project	State-linked livelihood initiative	Skill training, micro-credit access, group formation	Enhances financial stability but limits design independence	<i>Institutional Mediation → Economic Empowerment</i>
Mithila Art Institute	NGO–design school collaboration	Technical workshops, pigment innovation, global exhibitions	Expands creative exposure yet partially dependent on institutional themes	<i>Design Innovation → Empowerment & Sustainability</i>
SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association)	Cooperative and advocacy model	Collective marketing, leadership training, peer learning	Strengthens decision-making and negotiation	<i>Institutional Mediation → Social Empowerment</i>

			capacit y	
Upendra Maharathi Shilp Anusandhan Sansthan (UMSA S)	Government research and training institute	Design develop ment, market linkage, product diversifi cation	Provide s visibilit y but formali zes aestheti cs to suit markets	<i>Institutio nal Mediatio n ↔ Design Innovati on</i>
Local NGOs (Muzaff arpur, Bhagalp ur, Madhub ani)	Grassro ots facilitat ion networ ks	Skill documen tation, digital training, microent erprise mentorin g	Encour ages autono my and localize d innovati on while retainin g traditio	<i>Design Innovati on → Empowe rment & Sustaina bility</i>

			nal motifs	
NGO / Instituti on	Mode of Interve ntion	Type of Support Provided	Impact on Artisan Autono my	Interpret ation (Constru ct Linkage)

Table 10 illustrates two sides to mediation. While providing artisans with more money, this intermediation process closes off freedom for artisans.

5.4 Empowerment and Sustainability Outcomes

Empowerment and Sustainability Outcomes Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani practices are all inter-related, and this interrelatedness is reflected across economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Field narratives and construct-based analytical findings illustrate these dimensions, bringing forth the ways in which women artisans translate creative participation into material forms of agency and sustainability (Refer Table 11).

Empowerment occurs in every aspect of life, whether it is economic, social, or cultural.

Table 11. Empowerment Dimensions and Manifestations among Women Artisans

Empowerment Dimension	Manifestation in Field Data	Resulting Impact	Construct Linkage
Economic Empowerment	Rise in income levels post NGO collaboration; engagement in local entrepreneurship and cooperative ventures.	Increased financial independence and decision-making authority within households.	<i>Institutional Mediation → Economic Empowerment</i>
Social Empowerment	Leadership roles in artisan collectives; participation in exhibitions and community events.	Enhanced visibility, confidence, and negotiation capacity.	<i>Institutional Mediation → Social Empowerment</i>
Cultural Empowerment	Reinterpretation of traditional motifs and assertion of creative authorship.	Strengthened cultural continuity and recognition of artisans as creators of heritage.	<i>Design Innovation → Cultural Empowerment</i>

As can be noted from Table 11, there is more to empowerment than just mere income increase. It includes the more significant roles of leadership, author, and

keeping the culture alive. Thus, this reflects how women in crafts leadership might be empowered in a sustainable manner when material competencies combine with social recognition and the ability to create in their own right.

5.5. Theoretical Integration and Practical Implications

The empirical observations tend to support this constituent model of the theory outlined here:

Embodied Skill → Design Innovation → Institutional Mediation → Empowerment and Sustainability.

This provides both academic and implementable insight. The results of this research contribute positively towards the Feminist Material Culture Theory in terms of the express empowerment through the females' actions in regard to craft, hence extending the boundaries towards Craft Heritage Studies. This has been done through the demonstrations of versatility towards more conventional social constructs. It must be noted that significant philosophies have arisen out of this research study from whence recommendations regarding craft and employment/policy are developed.

The first area towards institutionalized training based upon 'Participatory Design' needs the most attention in terms of the craft practitioners being enabled towards more pro-active conceptualizations towards those designed, rather than purely upon other peoples' conceptual ideas. The next would be regarding 'Fair-Trade' schemes or direct selling opportunities towards minimizing middle men involvement in terms of craft sale pay-outs. The next would involve more 'Digital-Design' schemes regarding youth engagement in terms of craft-related educational needs towards 'Prospective' resistance towards craft preservation. The next would involve more 'Systematic' record-keeping in terms of craft 'Design' and 'Motifs' in terms of more 'Cultural Safeguards' towards 'Misappropriation'. All of this would tend towards this research hypothesis in terms of the constituent action plans regarding 'System-Mediated' craft empowerment towards craft sustainability.

6. Limitations and Future Scope

Despite the outcomes of this research study, there are key limitations inherent in this research that also hold opportunities for future research. First, in this research study, the geographical focus of this analysis remained in particular artisanal centers in Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani in Bihar. This may have resulted in underrepresenting the overall craft diversity faced by women in other areas as well. Consequently, the relevant narratives here are regional in nature and not representative of the overall craft models of gendered economic engagement in India. The use of the regional comparison tool in future research may prove quite helpful in studying the dynamics in this research. This would make possible the analysis of the overall extent of follower processes in terms of incorporation, innovation, and empowerment in other traditional craft regions in India like Pattachitra in Odisha or weaving in Nagaland.

Secondly, this research utilized essentially qualitative analysis tools like interviews, observations, and analysis of artifacts. Even though this methodology provides in-depth analysis, there are constraints in terms of generalizability. The use of mixed methodology in future research could increase the rigor and depth of analysis. This could be done by bringing together the methodology

of ethnographic research and other analysis tools like social network analysis, community mapping, or livelihood analysis. This would increase the validity of the research outcomes and would be able to provide an overall assessment regarding the socio-economic viability of craft empowerment strategies.

Thirdly, the temporal scale of research enabled the capture of individual artisan practices in a particular point in time that falls under a particular socio-economic context. With the current rate of progress in digital revolutions, climatic factors, and global markets, there is an urgent need for research approaches that are more longitudinal in scale. This would allow the unraveling of the complex interplay between digital infrastructure networks, electronic commerce systems, and approaches in the evolution of women's craft income and cultural production. The research conceptualized personal empowerment using the theoretical perspectives of Feminist Material Culture Theory and Craft Heritage Interpretation. Although both of these theoretical ideas constitute a strong body of understanding regarding the interrelationship between these ideas, future research perspectives in this area may be further enhanced through the addition of other ideas like intersectional approaches, among other ideas not discussed here. This may widen this body of understanding through the realization that the interplay between other ideas like class and supply chains may be significant in understanding empowerment opportunities among crafters.

7. Conclusion

The research project, "Women, Work, and Weaves: Gendered Narratives in Sujni, Khatwa, and Madhubani Traditions of Bihar," analyses the ways in which women express identity, creativity, and empowerment in terms of traditional craft systems that are both aesthetic and socio-economic in nature. Based on the Feminist Material Culture Theory and Craft Heritage Studies approaches, this project proposes that craft production can be seen as interactive and ever-changing platforms in terms of cultural and gender-related constructs.

The results reveal that the embodied skill of the women craftspersons, developed through intergenerational transmission and lived experiences, forms the base level of cultural resilience. The embodied skill or the experiential knowledge of the craftspersons defines how tradition can be sustained while personal and collective identity can be asserted through material forms like embroidery, appliqué, and painting. Innovation in design defines the strategy of adaptation and survival in this context; instead of challenging tradition, innovation expresses the capability of the women in recreating motifs, working with different material possibilities, and adapting to the social realities of the times. Innovation functions therefore as the tool of both economic empowerment and cultural transformation.

The role of institutional mediation, including NGOs, governmental projects, and design partnerships, remains double-edged and essential. On one hand, there are opportunities for visibility and capacity-building; however, there are also threats of market-oriented typologies that may standardize creativity. The key

takeaways from the research are the significance of partnership approaches rooted in ethics that position the artisan not only as producers but also as co-producers or cultural intellectuals.

The result of this engagement culminates in empowerment and sustainability in three interwoven areas:

- (1) Economic empowerment through earning and decision-making capacity
- (2) Social empowerment through acknowledgment, leadership, and solidarity
- (3) Cultural empowerment through ownership of motifs, storytelling capacity, and transfer of legacy. These areas support the conceptual process of Embodied Skill → Design Innovation → Institutional Mediation → Empowerment & Sustainability in affirming the process and result of empowerment in craft livelihoods.

Theoretically, this research engages the discourse of feminist material culture studies in revealing how the process of agency materializes through touch and creative production in transforming everyday work into the act of symbolic authorship. This research also engages the literature of craft heritage in redesigning traditional forms of creative expression not only as inert cultural artifacts but also as vibrant and living systems of adaptive innovation developed through collective creative power of women. From a practical perspective, this research argues that in empowering craft creators or makers, support in terms of economics alone is not sufficient but must be supplemented through cultural and intellectual property protection. To conclude, ‘Sujni,’ ‘Khatwa,’ and ‘Madhubani’ are not only rural craft techniques but are more so the dynamic manifestation of the power of ‘women’s agency.’ With every stitch of ‘Sujni,’ ‘appliqué,’ or ‘brush stroke’ in ‘Madhubani’ painting, ‘women’ express ‘narratives of empowerment.’ This piece amply demonstrates that in eras of cultural evolution in ‘India,’ ‘artisans’ cannot be treated only as ‘recipients’ of ‘development’ but are more so ‘guardians’ or ‘creators’ of ‘living’ ‘heritage,’ and this ‘heritage’ carries in ‘its’ ‘hands’ ‘history’ and ‘hope’ in ‘women.’

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