

## Phulkari Art:A Tool for Women Empowerment in Punjab

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### Abstract

Phulkari, the traditional embroidery of Punjab, is an integral part of its rich culture and heritage. Initially, Phulkari started as a leisure time activity, embroidered with passion, for personal use or to gift it to one's kith and kin, without any commercial motive. However, gradually, with growing marketization and commodification of Phulkari, the embroidery transformed into a commercial activity. With the changing tastes and preferences of customers, innovative items in Phulkari are being made to cater to the contemporary market. The womenfolk are mostly involved in embroidery, while the men are engaged in their trading. As such, Phulkari embroidery has been the source of livelihood to women, thereby empowering them. When women become financially emancipated, they become empowered by increasing their role in spiritual, political, social, and educational, gender or economic spheres as individuals in families and communities. Thus, the present study attempts to examine the impact of adoption of Phulkari craft in the social and economic empowerment of the female Phulkari artisans in Tripuri region of Patiala District.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Innovation, Victimization, Satisfaction, Awareness, Decision-making.

### Introduction

In India, embroidery has been practiced on textiles in various forms to adorn and embellish clothing with myriad forms. Embroidery is the subtle expression of the emotions and creativity of the maker. Phulkari, the traditional embroidery of Punjab, is an integral part of its rich culture and heritage.

The word Phulkari is a combination of two Sanskrit words Phul (Flowers) and Karya (activity) which means to do flower work. The first guru of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev Ji wrote 'Kad Kasidha Paihren choli tan tu jane vari' means one is accepted as a woman if one can do embroidery on one's dress. Though Phulkari was associated with a few places in

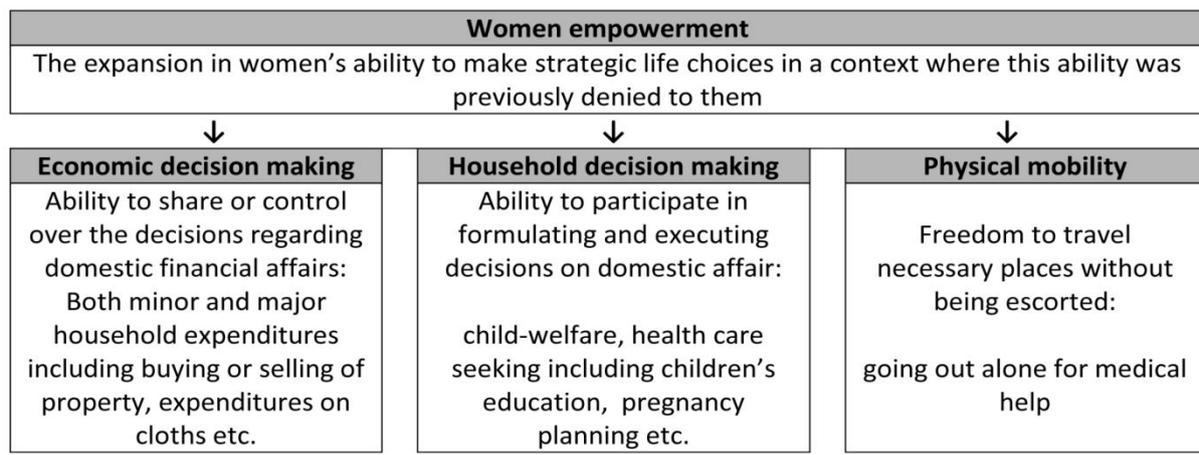
India, but Punjab came out to be the epicenter of Phulkari craft and even Patiala, the princely city of gardens and palaces engaged in this handicraft for generations.

Initially, Phulkari started as a leisure time activity, embroidered with passion for personal use or to gift it to one’s kith and kin, without any commercial motive. However, gradually, with growing marketization and commodification of Phulkari, the embroidery transformed into a commercial activity. The womenfolk are mostly involved in embroidery, while the men are engaged in their trading. As such, Phulkari embroidery has been the source of livelihood to women, thereby empowering them.

Women Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to a greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control and to transformative action. (Rehman, 2013). Women empowerment implies that women have the power and the ability to do activities like their male counterparts. According to the Department for International Development (DFID), empowerment is “a process of transforming gender relations through groups or individuals developing awareness of women’s subordination and building their capacity to challenge it”.

Malhotra et al. have proposed the most comprehensive frameworks for measuring women’s empowerment, measuring the general development of empowerment at different levels, and in six categories or dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, psychological, legal, and political .

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework for women empowerment**



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When women become financially emancipated, they become empowered by increasing their role in spiritual, political, social, and educational, gender or economic spheres as individuals in families and communities. Figure 1 explains that through economic and household decision-making, along with freedom to travel to workplace and other necessary places, women can be significantly empowered.

## Review of Existing Literature

Gupta and Mehta (2014) explored the patterns of embroidered textile craft of Punjab which was being embroidered by the women of Punjab, which constitutes important part of the Punjab culture. Kaur et. al (2014) conducted study with an attempt to document the motifs, fabrics, stitches and colours used in Phulkari traditionally and in the last five years (2009-2013). Kaur, Kallan (2018) have traced the transition of Phulkari embroidery, from its traditional style to the present form developed with the help of digital softwares like CAD/CAM, Photopaint softwares.

From the review of literature, it is evident that the popular cultural handicraft of this region, "Phulkari" has undergone transformation in its styles, motifs and patterns in the recent years due to globalisation and other market-driven factors.

## Current Scenario

Various socioeconomic factors led to decline of traditional Phulkari embroidery but regained popularity in commercial market by transforming the technique and designs. However, due to the high popularity of the traditional handmade Phulkari, in both domestic and overseas markets, there was a huge surge in demand, and therefore, merchants deemed it necessary to produce machine made Phulkari items to meet this rising demand. This has adversely affected the financial independence of women artisans, as machine made Phulkari items continue to flood the market, overshadowing handmade handicrafts.

A focussed approach to revive the traditional handmade Phulkari will foster economic empowerment of women in the Malwa region of Punjab by providing them self employment opportunities, along with preserving the cultural heritage of Punjab. The handicrafts of Punjab, such as Phulkari embroidered dresses, bedsheets, scarf, potli purse, file folder and hand fans, as well as traditional Phulkari items have created its own identity in the handicrafts sector. The women artisans of Punjab contribute significantly to the production of these handicrafts.

Patiala, which has generations engaged in this handicraft, consists of mainly two locations, Adalat Bazar and Tripuri. Now, the Government is also taking interest by establishing its craft-centers, through NGOs and by providing free training to women by opening up training centers or by creating E-Selling points for Phulkari. In Patiala there are over 300 wholesale or retail shops selling this handicraft.

The present study attempts to examine the impact of adoption of Phulkari craft on social and economic empowerment of the female Phulkari artisans in Tripuri region of Patiala District.

## Objectives of the Study

- To examine the impact of adoption of Phulkari embroidery as a means of livelihood by women on their economic empowerment .
- To examine the impact of adoption of Phulkari embroidery as a means of livelihood by women on their social empowerment .

## Research methodology

The present study is based on primary data collected from Tripuri region of Patiala ,in the state of Punjab in India. A questionnaire was specially designed to avail information from the 100 female workers engaged in art of Phulkari embroidery. The questionnaire seeks information related to their attitude towards the profession, benefits of adopting this art,economic empowerment,gain in self-confidence, knowledge related to marketing and innovations in Phulkari. For the purpose of analysis, descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentages, ANOVA and T test were carried out.

## Analysis and Discussion

The present study attempts to find out the aspects of the lives of the female Phulkari workers, where women have become empowered ,after taking up Phulkari embroidery,as a means of earning livelihood.

**Table: 1 Satisfaction Level of Respondents from Phulkari work**

Respondents' responses	Percent
Strongly Disagree	6%
Disagree	5%
Agree	39%
Strongly Agree	50%
Total	100%

Table 1 indicates the satisfaction level of respondents from Phulkari work. The distribution of the table about being satisfied is as: 50% of the Phulkari artisans are strongly satisfied, 39% of the Phulkari artisans have agreed about their satisfaction, 5% of the Phulkari artisans have disagreed about satisfaction and 6% of the Phulkari artisans have strongly disagreed. Thus, majority of the Phulkari workers are satisfied with this work due to high income, value for work and not having any proficiency in any other profession, whereas minority of the Phulkari workers were not satisfied with this work due to rising popularity of machine made Phulkari items and lesser profits.

With the changing tastes and preferences of customers, innovative items in Phulkari are being made to cater to the contemporary market.

**Table2: Readiness for innovations in Phulkari**

Respondents' responses	Percent
Strongly Disagree	2%
Disagree	2%
Agree	31%
Strongly Agree	65%
Total	100%

Table2 shows the distribution on the basis of readiness to introduce innovations in Phulkari. Majority of the respondents i.e. 65% strongly agreed and, 31% agreed along with 2% respondents who strongly disagreed and simply disagreed respectively. Majority of the respondents were ready for innovations in Phulkari due to customer demand and rest of all the respondents are not ready for innovations in Phulkari due to less profit in these items The remaining respondents are not ready innovations from Phulkari due to less profit in these items as these items are consumer-centric,made on special order and not in bulk..Thus,majority of the respondents are ready to innovate and adapt to the market trends.

**Table 3** shows the distribution on the basis of **level of awareness about the intermediaries of Phulkari Craft.**

**Table3: Awareness level about Intermediaries in handmade Phulkari Craft**

Respondents' Responses	Percent
Strongly Disagree	0%
Disagree	0%
Agree	46%
Strongly Agree	54%
Total	100%

The table shows that all the respondents have awareness about the intermediaries of handmade Phulkari. The results show that 54% respondents strongly agreed and 46% respondents agreed about having knowledge about intermediaries. The probable reason for this is that all the respondents get training from Phulkari training centers located in local area. At the time of training ,all the artisans knitted many phulkaris in training Center, and large number of intermediaries and customers purchased from there .Thus,the female workers were able to get proper profits without sharing it with the dealers ,who slice away a major chunk of profits.

**Table 4** represents the distribution **regarding decision-making about continuing employment avenues created by Phulkari craft to sustain themselves.** This table denotes the issue of being able to take decisions by the respondents about employment in avenues created by Phulkari work.

**Table4: Decision-Making About continuing employment in avenues created by Phulkari**

Respondents' Responses	Percent
Strongly Disagree	10.0
Disagree	7.0
Agree	30.0
Strongly Agree	53.0
Total	100.0

There were 53% female workers, who strongly agreed, 30% of female workers agreed, 10% of female workers strongly disagreed and 7% of female workers disagreed. Thus, majority of

the female workers were able to take decision regarding their employment as they became economically independent by adopting Phulkari embroidery as a means of livelihood and minority were not able to taking the decision regarding the employment of phulkari related work,probably due to lack of family support.With rising income from Phulkari craft,the female workers became economically self-reliant and were thus motivated to continue with this art.

The **demand for Innovative articles in Phulkari** has picked up due to changes in contemporary market. **Table 6** denotes the Phulkari products made by workers in terms of ranking. Demand in production from female workers for Potli purses by customers has been highest ,as such,it is ranked at the top.The next most popular item has been File folders,as they are presented to delegates in seminars and Conferences conducted by Universities in Punjab,as a souvenir of the state’s heritage .

**Table6: Innovative products made by workers**

Sr. no.	Phulkari products	Ranking
1	Potli Purse	1
2	Pen Stand	5
3	File Folder	2
4	Table Cover	3
5	Sofa Cover	4
6	Any other (mobile cover, Hand Fan)	6

Thus, most of the workers make potli purse followed by file folders,Table cover,Sofa cover,pen stand and mobile cover etc. The products which are least popular are mobile cover and hand fans.

**Dealers are the least preferred for selling** Phulkari items,indicated in **Table7**,which shows the artisans’ responses on selling points ,which have been ranked. Majority of the artisans i.e. 72% prefer selling Phulkari to training centres, the probable reason for this could be decline in profit margin due to the dealer’s share.

**Table 7: Selling points of Phulkari items**

Sr. no.	Main Selling Points	Ranking
1	Customer	2
2	Dealer	4
3	Shopkeeper	3
4	Training Center	1

Dealers act as intermediates resulting in decline the profits for the workers. The female Phulkari workers have become aware about the intermediaries in Phulkari art(As per Table 3).They have preferred selling handmade Phulkari directly in the Training Centres.At the Training Centres,their craft is noticed by the prospective customers and the Phulkari items get

sold,without any involvement of middlemen,thereby securing their profits.Dealers are the least preferred as they appropriate a large chunk of the Phulkari workers'profits.

**The abuse of women** has been rampant in patriarchal societies.Women have been victims of dowry at the hand of their greedy husbands' kith and kin.

**Table 8: Victimization due to Dowry**

<b>Respondents' responses</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly Disagree	12	16%
Disagree	18	25%
Agree	26	36%
Strongly Agree	17	23%
Unmarried	27	
Total	100	

The above table represents the frequency distribution of the female workers on the basis of being victimized due to dowry in the family. Majority of the female workers:59% (36% agreed and 23% strongly agreed) about being victims of dowry. The female workers who strongly disagreed were 16% and 25% disagreed, about being dowry victims. The number of unmarried female workers was 27.

**Domestic Violence** has also been a very disturbing feature in the lower strata of the society, where women, due to their total dependence on men, have been at the receiving end. The rampant domestic violence against women, could have been the trigger for women to become economically self-reliant, as a result of which they took up Phulkari embroidery as their means of earning livelihood.

**able 9: Victimization due to Domestic Violence**

<b>Respondents' responses</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly Disagree	12	16%
Disagree	15	21%
Agree	29	40%
Strongly Agree	17	23%
Unmarried	27	
Total	100	73

The above table represents the frequency distribution on the basis of domestic violence in the family. The given table indicates that majority of the female workers, i.e. 63% (40% agreed and 23% strongly agreed) were victims of domestic abuse. 16% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 21% disagreed about having suffered from domestic abuse.

**Table 10: Raising Voice Against Exploitation after becoming Self-Reliant**

<b>Respondents' Responses</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly Disagree	16	22%
Disagree	20	27%
Agree	23(out of 29)	32%
Strongly Agree	14(out of 17)	19%
Unmarried	27	
Total	100	73

The above table represents the distribution on the basis of the female Phulkari workers being assertive and taking a stand against exploitation in the family. The table indicates that majority of the respondents i.e. 51% (32% agreed and 27% strongly agreed) were able to raise their voice after becoming financially independent, while 22% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 27% disagreed about taking a stand against abuse after economic emancipation. The figures in the brackets indicate the total number of women who suffered domestic violence, as per Table 9. As such, 80% (37/46) of the female workers suffering abuse were empowered to raise their voice against exploitation after becoming economically independent as a result of adopting Phulkari art as a source of earning livelihood. This is a remarkable step towards women's empowerment. Financial independence has given the women the strength to become strong and exploitation became unacceptable to them.

Table 11 represents the frequency distribution regarding **Greater involvement in domestic decision making** by contributing to household expenses.

**Table 11: Greater involvement in domestic decision-making**

<b>Respondents' Responses</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	2%
Disagree	5%
Agree	37%
Strongly Agree	56%
Total	100

There were 56% female workers who strongly agreed, 37% of female workers agreed, 5% of female workers disagreed and 2% of female workers strongly disagreed about participating significantly to the domestic decision-making. Majority of the female workers i.e.93%(37% and 56%) agreed regarding greater involvement in family decisions after contributing financially to the family income and very few i.e.7%(2% and 5%) did not agree regarding increased role in domestic decisions after contributing financially in the family income. With money in their hands,the female workers were able to use it optimally and contribute significantly to the domestic needs,thereby improving their quality of life.

**Table 12** above table represents the frequency distribution on the basis of **family support to pursue Phulkari work**. Majority of the respondents.i.e.98% (56% female workers strongly agreed, 42% of female workers agreed) were getting family support,while pursuing Phulkari work.

**Table12: Received Family Support in continuing Phulkari work**

<b>Respondents' Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly Disagree	1%
Disagree	1%
Agree	42%
Strongly Agree	56%
Total	100%

Only 1% female workers disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively about receiving support from family. Majority of the female workers agreed regarding getting family support to do this work,due to augmentation in family income generated from Phulkari work.Thus,with increase in family income due to significant contribution from female workers,families have also started supporting them.

**Self Help Group** is a community based informal association of people,who come together to find ways to improve their living condition. It is a self-governed ,peer controlled informal group of people,with similar socio-economic status and a common purpose.SHGs can become an agent of change for the marginalized section by providing collateral free loans with terms decided by the group at market driven rates.The needy collect their savings and

put it in banks, in return, they receive easy access to small loans at lesser rate of interest to start their micro-unit.

**Table 13: Membership in a Self Help Group**

Respondents' Responses	Percent
YES	32%
NO	68%
Total	100

Table 13 shows the distribution of the participants on the basis of being a member of a Self-Help Group. Majority of the female workers i.e. 68% were not members of a Self-Help Group and remaining female workers were members of a Self-Help Group i.e. 32%. Thus, if all the female artisans become members of SHG, then their financial problems will reduce and they can be empowered to play a significant role in family, society and community, by availing credit at cheaper terms.

### Conclusion

The analysis has shown that majority of the female Phulkari workers are satisfied with this craft due to high income, value for work and not having any proficiency in any other profession, whereas minority of the Phulkari workers were not satisfied with this work due to rising popularity of machine made Phulkari items resulting in lesser profits.

With the changing tastes and preferences of customers, innovative items in Phulkari craft are being made to cater to the contemporary market. Majority of the respondents were ready for innovations in Phulkari art due to customer demand and few of the respondents are not ready for innovations in Phulkari art due to less profit in these items.

It has been observed that all the respondents have awareness about the intermediaries in handmade Phulkari market. At the time of training, all the artisans knitted many Phulkari articles in the training Center, and large number of intermediaries and customers purchased from there. Most of the artisans preferred selling Phulkari items to training centres. Dealers were the least preferred intermediary for selling Phulkari.

Majority of the female workers were able to take decision regarding continuing Phulkari art as a means of sustenance and minority were not able to taking the decision regarding being employed in Phulkari related work, probably due to lack of family support. Majority of the female workers were able to take decision regarding their employment as they became economically independent by adopting Phulkari embroidery as a means of livelihood. With rising income from Phulkari craft, the female workers became economically self-reliant and were thus motivated to continue with this art.

Majority of the female workers admitted about being victims of domestic violence and dowry. However, a redeeming feature has been that majority of the victims were able to assert and raise their voice against abuse after economic emancipation as a result of being engaged

in Phulkari art. Financial independence gave the women the strength to become strong and exploitation became unacceptable to them. This is a remarkable step towards women's empowerment.

Majority of the respondents were getting family support, while pursuing Phulkari work due to augmentation in family income generated from Phulkari work. Thus, with increase in family income, women participated significantly in family decisions due to considerable contribution in family expenses. Hence, families have also started supporting them.

Most of the female workers were not members of a Self-Help Group. Thus, if all the female workers become members of SHG, then they can be empowered to play a significant role in family, society and community by availing credit at cheaper terms.

Thus, Phulkari has not only been a means for livelihood for women, but also a tool for their individual, social and economic empowerment.

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