

Weaving as Cultural Labour and Livelihood: A Critical Review of Literature Relevant to Kuki Women in Churachandpur, Manipur

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Abstract

Weaving may operate simultaneously as productive work, a livelihood activity and a culturally meaningful practice, although these dimensions vary across communities and production settings. This article presents a critical narrative review of literature relevant to weaving as cultural labour and livelihood among Kuki women in Churachandpur district, Manipur. It brings together research on women weavers in Manipur, a community-specific study of Vaiphei backstrap weaving in three villages of Churachandpur, studies of women's handloom work in other parts of Manipur, comparative research on Ri-Bhoi women in Meghalaya and women-led handloom enterprises in Mizoram, and literature on situated learning. The review distinguishes full-text empirical studies from sources consulted through abstracts or bibliographic records. The literature suggests that weaving should be examined through the organisation of work, the economic conditions of production and exchange, gender relations, and the transmission of practical and cultural knowledge. However, studies of Meitei-majority valley settings, Mizoram and Ri-Bhoi communities cannot be treated as direct evidence about all Kuki women. The review identifies a need for community-specific research on production arrangements, earnings and control over income, market access, working conditions, and the learning and interpretation of weaving knowledge among women in Churachandpur.

Keywords: cultural labour; women's livelihood; Kuki women; traditional weaving; gender; cultural knowledge

1. Introduction

Weaving involves more than making cloth. For many communities, it can provide a livelihood, bring people together through shared practice, and keep particular forms of knowledge alive. These roles do not necessarily carry the same importance in every household. A textile may be culturally valued while bringing its maker very little income. In the same way, earning money from weaving does not automatically mean that a woman decides what to produce, sets the price, or controls the money she earns. Research on handloom work in Manipur has considered women's socioeconomic circumstances, wages, working conditions, markets and the role of weaving in rural livelihoods. Devi (2012), for example, examines women weavers in Manipur through qualitative and quantitative approaches. Other studies

address the work environment and occupational health of weavers (Devi & Rajeswari, 2019), the economic and cultural significance of rural women's handloom work in Irengbam village (Lisam, 2023), and women handloom workers in Imphal East and Thoubal districts (Olivia et al., 2026). These sources broaden the discussion beyond cultural heritage alone, although their settings and methods differ and do not directly establish the experiences of women across Kuki communities.

The most geographically and community-relevant study identified for this review is Niengneimawi et al. (2024), which documents the Vaiphei backstrap loom, known as puan-bu, in three villages of Churachandpur district. Its evidence is important because it concerns a specific indigenous weaving practice within the district. It should nevertheless remain bounded to the communities and participants studied. Research on Vaiphei, Meitei, Mizo or Ri-Bhoi weaving should not be combined into a single undifferentiated account of women's experiences.

This article therefore treats weaving as a sociological subject at the intersection of work, livelihood, gender relations and cultural knowledge. The term cultural labour is used here as an analytical proposition: it draws attention to productive activity that may also create, enact or transmit cultural meanings. It is not used to imply that cultural value is always recognised economically, or that every weaving practice has the same social meaning.

The review has three objectives: (1) to review literature on weaving as livelihood and gendered labour in Manipur and Northeast India; (2) to analyse the relationship between weaving, cultural knowledge and women's work in the available literature; and (3) to identify evidence gaps concerning Kuki women weavers in Churachandpur district.

2. Methodological Approach

This article adopts a critical narrative-review approach to examine weaving as both a livelihood activity and a form of cultural knowledge, with particular attention to women's work and the experiences of Kuki communities in Manipur. Unlike a systematic review, the aim is not to identify every available publication or statistically combine research findings. Instead, the review critically examines relevant literature to understand how weaving has been discussed in relation to livelihood, gender, cultural identity, and knowledge transmission.

The review draws on scholarly journal articles, an open-access empirical study of Vaiphei weaving, institutional cultural materials, a doctoral-thesis catalogue record, and theoretical literature on situated learning. Searches used combinations of keywords, including "Kuki weaving," "Vaiphei weaving," "women weavers Manipur," "handloom livelihood Manipur," "women's weaving cultural identity," "traditional textiles Northeast India," and "weaving and situated learning." Sources were selected according to their relevance to four themes: livelihood and gendered work, cultural identity and knowledge transmission, working conditions, and community-specific textile practices. Bibliographic details were checked where available, and the nature of the evidence was considered before using a source to support an argument.

The review distinguishes between sources whose full texts could be examined and those available only through abstracts or catalogue records. Claims about research findings are based on accessible evidence, while catalogue records and abstracts are used only for limited bibliographic or contextual purposes. The review does not assume that all relevant publications have been identified, nor does it treat evidence from one community as representative of all Kuki communities.

The selected literature was compared thematically, considering the communities and geographical settings studied, the methods used, the principal arguments advanced, and the extent to which the evidence could inform an understanding of Kuki women's weaving in Churachandpur district. Particular attention was given to the relationship between economic livelihood and cultural knowledge, as well as to questions that remain insufficiently addressed when these dimensions are examined separately. No new interviews, surveys, or observations were conducted. Consequently, the article identifies conceptual insights and gaps in existing research rather than making claims about the current conditions of Kuki women weavers in Churachandpur. These conditions require further community-specific empirical investigation.

3. Weaving as Livelihood and Gendered Work

The literature on women's handloom work in Manipur suggests that weaving should be examined as an economic activity embedded in household and community life. Devi (2012) addresses socioeconomic conditions, wages, working conditions, aspirations, family and community relationships, production and changing markets. Because the full text was not independently examined for this review, its contribution is discussed at the level reported in the publisher's abstract and bibliographic information rather than through detailed claims about findings.

Lisam's (2023) study provides a more specific village-level example. Based on a census survey of female residents in Irengbam Awang Mamang Leikai, Bishnupur district, the article identifies handloom as the main occupation of 84 of the 319 female residents counted in its occupational profile. The author also discusses the presence of looms in households and differences in the types and prices of textiles produced. This gives a useful example of how weaving may be situated within a local occupational structure. However, the study is geographically specific and does not establish the livelihood position of women in Churachandpur or among Kuki communities.

Olivia et al. (2026) examine 600 women handloom workers in Imphal East and Thoubal using a structured interview schedule and descriptive statistics. Their reported findings draw attention to age distribution, income, registration, access to support and dependence on local markets. The authors report that 46.67% of their sample earned below ₹7,000 per month and that most respondents were not registered. These figures should be attributed to their sample and not generalised to Manipur as a whole, still less to Kuki women in Churachandpur. Nevertheless, the study illustrates the value of examining earnings and institutional access rather than equating the cultural importance of handloom with economic security.

A further dimension of work is the physical environment in which weaving takes place. Devi and Rajeswari (2019) examined 42 weavers using three types of loom in Imphal East and Imphal West, focusing on work conditions, workstations, posture and hand tools. Their study identifies aspects of the work environment that require attention, particularly for loin-loom users. This also brings working

conditions into the discussion of livelihood: a complete account of women's work should consider not only income and markets but also the conditions under which production is carried out.

Sharma et al. (2017) also studied women working in three handloom industries in Imphal East and Imphal West, using a sample of 50 respondents to examine socioeconomic circumstances, dietary patterns and health issues. Its small and geographically specific sample limits broader generalisation, but it signals that livelihood research may need to include working hours and health-related concerns. Together, these studies suggest several lines of inquiry for Churachandpur: who owns or provides the loom and raw materials; how labour is divided; how much time production requires; how prices and earnings are determined; what health and safety conditions exist; and whether weaving is a primary or supplementary source of household income.

The key analytical distinction is between participation in productive work and the conditions under which that work produces material benefit. To establish whether weaving contributes to women's economic autonomy, research must examine women's roles in purchasing materials, deciding designs, negotiating prices, selling products and controlling income. These matters cannot be inferred simply from the fact that women weave or that textiles are culturally valued.

4. Cultural Knowledge, Identity and Learning

Weaving can also be a process through which knowledge is learned and practised. Knowledge may include technical skills, the selection and preparation of materials, loom construction, patterns, terminology, and understandings attached to particular textiles. These forms of knowledge may be transmitted through observation and practice as well as verbal explanation. Lave and Wenger's (1991) account of situated learning offers a conceptual lens for examining learning as participation in social practice. It does not, by itself, establish the specific meanings or transmission patterns of any one community's weaving.

Dias et al. (2020) used ethnographic methods to study weaving and cultural identity among Ri-Bhoi women in Meghalaya. Their analysis identifies knowledge exchange, social support, culturally meaningful textiles and personal fulfilment as themes in participants' accounts. The study shows how cultural meaning can be investigated through women's own accounts and social relationships. Its contribution is comparative rather than direct evidence about Kuki women.

Niengneimawi et al. (2024) provide more locally relevant evidence through a study of Vaiphei backstrap weaving in Chongkhozo, Pengjang and Kangvai villages in Churachandpur district. The authors report interviews with 33 informants and document the puan-bu loom, its components, raw materials and weaving procedures. They also raise concerns about the knowledge and skills held by younger generations. This is an important source because it documents a specific practice in the district rather than relying only on broader regional descriptions. At the same time, its findings concern Vaiphei weaving in the selected villages and cannot be assumed to describe every Kuki community, all women weavers, or every textile tradition in Churachandpur.

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts' institutional resource on the textiles of Manipur offers additional cultural background. Such material can help locate terminology and community-associated

textile traditions, but it is not a contemporary survey of women's earnings, working conditions or interpretations. Cultural documentation and livelihood research answer different questions and should be used accordingly.

A useful critical distinction is between describing women as custodians of tradition and analysing women as active interpreters of practice. The first formulation may acknowledge women's contribution but can also place responsibility for cultural continuity on them without examining the resources, time, recognition and choices available to them. A sociological approach should investigate how women themselves understand weaving, how learning occurs, and how practices are retained or adapted as household circumstances, materials and markets change.

5. Cultural Labour: Bringing Livelihood and Cultural Meaning Together

The concept of cultural labour is used in this article to connect two strands of the literature that are often discussed separately. Livelihood studies ask how weaving is organised as work, what resources and markets are available, and what material returns producers receive. Cultural studies of weaving examine textiles as meaningful objects and consider the knowledge and social relationships through which practices are sustained. Cultural labour draws attention to the possibility that the same activity may produce a saleable textile while also expressing or transmitting cultural knowledge.

This concept should not obscure differences among forms of weaving. Some production may be organised primarily for household use, some for sale, and some for both. The cultural meanings of textiles may also vary by community, occasion, design and user. Nor should cultural labour be treated as evidence of empowerment in itself. Women may possess valuable skills and contribute to household economies while facing low prices, limited market access, difficult working conditions or little control over the final income. These are empirical questions rather than conclusions that can be assumed in advance.

The comparative literature therefore supports a framework for further investigation rather than a set of ready-made findings about Kuki women. For Churachandpur, cultural labour could be examined through four connected questions: how weaving work is organised within households and communities; how it contributes to livelihood and who controls the resulting income; how skills and textile meanings are learned and transmitted; and how women themselves evaluate the cultural and economic value of their work. This approach holds livelihood and cultural knowledge together without presuming that they always reinforce one another.

6. Research Gaps and Implications

The literature located for this review provides several important perspectives, but it is uneven in geographical coverage and in the level of detail available. Studies of women weavers in Manipur and the valley districts provide contextual information on work, earnings, occupational health and household livelihoods. Research from Mizoram and Meghalaya adds comparative insights into enterprise organisation and cultural identity. The Vaiphei study offers direct evidence about a specific weaving practice in Churachandpur. The studies add to one another, but their findings should not be treated as interchangeable.

A bibliographic record confirms the existence of Naorem Arunibala Devi's 2012 doctoral thesis, *Women Weavers of Manipur: The Organization of Production and Its Implication for Women's Empowerment*, submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University. The catalogue record does not establish the thesis's sample composition or the extent to which Kuki communities were included. The thesis should therefore be retrieved and examined before its substantive findings are used to support the present argument.

The main gap identified here is not that weaving or women's cultural identity have never been studied. Rather, the literature examined for this review does not sufficiently establish the contemporary livelihood organisation and lived experiences of women across Kuki communities in Churachandpur district. In particular, more evidence is needed on the division of labour, production costs, pricing and sales, access to markets and institutional support, control over earnings, working conditions, and the transmission of weaving knowledge. The research should also recognise differences between communities and localities instead of treating Kuki women as one uniform group.

These gaps point to several priorities for future research. A community-specific study could combine interviews about work and learning with observation of production processes and careful documentation of local terminology and textile meanings. It should record variation among participants rather than presuming that all women weave for the same reasons or receive similar economic returns. Such research would allow the concept of cultural labour to be evaluated against women's actual practices and accounts.

7. Conclusion

This critical narrative review has considered weaving as livelihood, gendered work and cultural knowledge in literature relevant to Kuki women in Churachandpur, Manipur. The sources reviewed show why these dimensions should be considered together, while also demonstrating the importance of distinguishing between community-specific evidence and regional comparison. Research from other parts of Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya can inform questions for further study, but it cannot substitute for evidence about Kuki women in Churachandpur.

The Vaiphei study by Niengneimawi et al. (2024) is particularly relevant because it documents backstrap weaving in three villages within the district. Its findings remain specific to the communities and practices studied. The broader literature indicates that an adequate sociological account should consider production arrangements, market conditions, working environments, control over earnings, cultural meaning and the ways practical knowledge is learned and transmitted.

The main contribution of this article is to suggest cultural labour as a way of examining how productive work and cultural meaning may intersect without assuming that cultural significance automatically produces economic security or empowerment. Further community-specific research is needed to establish how these relationships operate in the lives of Kuki women weavers in Churachandpur.

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