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The persistence of the housewife ideology: Shifts in women's roles in production of Sumbanese handwoven cloth

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Abstract

This article examines women's shifting roles in the production of handwoven cloth in Sumba, Indonesia. The main themes that emerge are the invisible labor of women and the production of a self-empowered entrepreneurial, gendered, laboring subjectivity that works in tandem with a housewife ideology firmly situated in a 'new' liberal patriarchy. The inequalities emerging from these shifts are parallel to inequalities produced through neoliberalization of global south craft communities in a context of global markets and tourist-oriented production. The discussion in this article is based on case studies drawn from over 50 interviews conducted during field visits and continued remotely when away from the field in Lambanapu and Praillu regions in Waingapu of Sumba, Indonesia. Overall, our analysis reveals how cultural work in this global south context reproduces a Westernized, neoliberal patriarchy even as it allows for individualized expressions of women's agency.

Keywords

Authenticity, craft communities, gendered roles, global south, globalization, neoliberal marketization

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Introduction

This article focuses on a weaving community in Lambanapu located in Waingapu, East Sumba Regency, Sumba Island, a part of Indonesia. It is based on case studies drawn from over 50 interviews conducted during field visits and continued remotely when away from the field. On-site field trips, in-person interviews and remote interviews (particularly follow-up interviews with weavers we met during our field trips) were conducted between the time period spanning 2014–2021. Our larger focus is on examining women's roles in the production process of Sumbanese woven cloth in contemporary times that tend to be oriented toward the global tourist markets.

In our project, as we examined themes[1] emerging from our research in Sumba, we noticed how the overall neoliberal globalizing ethos that shapes cultural industries of the global north influences and compels craft industries in the global south that cater to primarily urban and global consumer markets and are oriented toward an international tourist/consumer gaze (Urry, 1992). An 'empowered' global south woman crafter image is visibly circulated, although, in actuality, there is a reproduction of a Westernized patriarchy – 'Western patriarchal norms for management, leading to the delegation of women's labour as subordinate production and ancillary work' (Untari et al., 2020: 10). Thus, the hypothesis from Maria Mies (1982) about the importance that the 'ongoing subsistence production of the housewife workers' (Mies, 1982: 201), derived from her work in South India in the 1970s, holds in this contemporary global south context albeit with a neoliberal, individualized and performative twist. In comparing Mies' study conducted in the context of India and the comparative data from field visits, interviews and previous research that one of the co-authors carried out in Indian settings, we see that the broader themes emerging from our research in Sumba are not unique to the Sumbanese contexts, but resonate with the wider issues of inequalities in craft signaled by the theme of this special issue. Thus, while centrally focusing on elaborating our argument using data from Sumbanese weaving communities, we also draw relevant comparisons with some Indian contexts to show how such issues play out through nuanced contradictions in global south contexts.

The main themes that emerge from our focus are the shifts in women's role in global south craft communities. Our key argument is that women's roles (their visible and invisible labor) are being re-shaped by an ethos of neoliberal globalization.[2] Such shifts reveal contradictions that seem to visibly empower women as individuals while subjecting them to an individualized entrepreneurial ethos through the production of a self-empowered, entrepreneurial, neoliberal and gendered laboring subjectivity (Gill, 2014). We examine these nuances by focusing on labor while asking questions regarding 'financial "equality" between men and women grounded in the capitalist values of profit, competition, and accumulation' (Mohanty, 2003: 15). We argue that a gendered laboring identity that functions through a housewife ideology emerges in these contexts. This identity firmly places the woman crafter in a 'new' liberal patriarchy. At the same time, the ideal cis heteronormative male patriarch is cast as a benign and supportive spouse while he remains the leading face in business management and wealth management.

We begin the article with a review of literature on past work done regarding Sumbanese weaving communities. We follow this with a brief description of the context for the field research observations and the interviews conducted. Next, we do a more specific detailing of the methods used and the methodological approach. We then discuss themes that support our key argument using evidence from the interviews. In the specific case of the Sumbanese woven cloth, we note that the Westernized, urban tourist/consumer gaze and the quest to maintain and brand the local processes for production of ‘authentic’ (asli) Sumbanese *ikat* play a role in how the shifts occur in women’s labor toward a modern ‘subsistence production housewife’ (Mies, 1982). These shifts become apparent even though women are showcased globally and respected locally as the keepers of traditional knowledge in handwoven textile making rituals and production processes.

Women’s roles in Sumbanese weaving communities

It is important to note earlier anthropologist works on Sumba (Adams, 1969; Forth, 1981; Hoskins, 1993 and Forshee, 2000) since our work connects with and extends this literature through post-2014 ethnographic work and implicitly connects also with socio-economic issues observed regarding women’s labor in Indian crafting communities by one of our co-authors (Gajjala, 2015) following scholars such as Maria Mies (1982). For instance, Janet Hoskins (1990) highlights the social gender division of Sumbanese culture and notes that this division is intertwined with the union of gender attributes cosmologically. Drawing on Geirnart’s point that the gender divisions in particular steps of ikat weaving were centered on beliefs around conserving vital fluids within the island (Geirnart as cited in Hoskins, 2008), she observes that such gender categories in Sumba shape social organization based on the idea of the dual nature of the person and power. Hoskins also discusses how Dutch colonization further nuanced these roles as the Calvinist beliefs of the Dutch came into conflict with local beliefs.

On the contrary, Gregory Forth (1981) looks at the traditional houses of Rindi, East Sumba. His description of the structured dual-gender categories takes space into consideration. Male and female spheres are socially defined – men are outside, and women deal with domestic matters in the house (Forth, 1981: 23–44). This spatial definition of gendered place leads to work being distributed accordingly. Women are associated with the left, back, and lower sides, while men are on the right, front, and upper sides. Even animals are spatially gendered based on where they are kept. Chicken and pigs are feminine as they are kept beneath and around the house and taken care of by the female members, while buffalos and horses are masculine as men handle them outside the home.

Gender division in marriage structures also represents the socio-economic subordination of the Sumbanese women (Forth, 1981; Hoskins, 2004). Take, for instance, the practice of bridewealth provided by the wife-taker – the goods given ‘in exchange for a wife are specified as *wili tau*, “price, worth of a person”’ (Forth, 1981: 360). Therefore, the woman is commodified. According to Hoskins (2004), ‘the bride is halfway between kin and slave (as is, in a somewhat different way, the groom) and halfway between gift and commodity’ (p. 90). Thus, even though gender-crossing is possible due to double personhood, it is much rarer for females to hold male social positions.

In contemporary times, however, the commercialization of warp ikat cloth – tenun – opens up the question of whether entrepreneurial opportunities are opened up for women in the Sumbanese weaving community. For instance, Hoskin (2008) observes that in

Kodi, West Sumba, the experience of the female craft entrepreneur Marta Mete reveals contradictory dual ‘aspects of the “dark side” of textile production – its links to witchcraft, poisons, and supernatural influence on the one hand, and its links to money, modernity, and capitalist expansion on the other’ (p. 121). Hoskins refers to the contradiction that weaving and dyeing are considered specialized female knowledge in Sumba while women occupy subordinate social positions. The production of the warp ikat cloth centers around rituals and knowledge that only women are allowed to access. The dyeing process of Indigo, which has high value as a trade commodity for the European market, is protected as women’s knowledge. In an occult body of knowledge known as *moro*, ‘blueness’ is the exclusive possession of a few female specialists. The art of the traditional dyeing process, thus, is integrated with the production of herbalism, poisons, abortions, and fertility potions (Hoskins, 1989: 142).

As tourism grows in modern Sumba, textile production widens from strictly traditional life rituals in the community and becomes global and tourist-facing. Given that the production process has historically been controlled and passed on among women, we might logically assume that it would open up opportunities for women to be leaders in the global market. However, it is also an agent to expose Sumbanese people to modernity, the global capitalistic system, and Western patriarchy, which can present contradictions of opportunity and reinscribed neo-coloniality. Westernization is often equated with progress and democracy. However, we argue that this so-called progress has Western patriarchy embedded in it, reinforcing the subordination and invisibilizing of women’s labor while making women appear visibly empowered (see Gajjala, 2017).

Context and methods

Building on the foundation laid by previous researchers referred to thus far, we continue to look at Sumbanese women textile workers’ roles in the contemporary modern globalized era. In the present article, we approach cultural identities as dynamic. A feminist, cultural studies approach that intersects with political economy allows us to focus on identity in context while also extrapolating and connecting with larger global themes. Therefore, our project looks at the spatio-temporally situated intersections of tradition and modernity as shaped by a contemporary political economy of neoliberal marketization. Furthermore, we assume that women’s roles are ‘traditionally’ subordinate to men and that somehow their encounters with modernity and the Western world have given them options for self-empowerment. Past research on Sumbanese women has shown that traditional roles for women in Sumbanese community contexts are nuanced (see Forshee, 2000; Hoskins, 1989). Our goal is to continue with this nuancing of the local contexts to reveal how cultural work in this global south context reproduces a Westernized, neoliberal patriarchy (Untari et al., 2020) even as it allows for individualized expressions of women’s agency.

We approach our field visit–based observations and interview data as spatio-temporally situated in processes of globalization beyond the local community context. Our data were collected with a particular focus on gender roles. Thus, as we gathered our data, we focused on shifts and hierarchies in gendered labor in the particular weaving groups we studied. We paid attention to ‘the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes’

(Mohanty, 2003: 223). Reflecting on field insights from other global south craft community contexts (Gajjala, 2012), we also revisited Maria Mies’ hypothesis that women’s ‘invisible labour was absolutely necessary for the ongoing process of capital accumulation, or permanent growth of money and capital’ (Mies, 1982: xi). In her research on lacemakers in rural south India, Mies examined nuances of how women’s labor through domestic space in rural India is sourced into a neoliberal globalizing market-oriented development model. In such a model, women – ‘housewives’ – are characterized as having lots of leisure time that can be used productively for entrepreneurial activity or production work from home without having to necessarily work outside of the home in the factory or the field. Thus, in such a model, the women continue to perform the invisible labor of family care and home maintenance while also doing craft work for wages.

In other research by Hunga (2011), this mobilizing of invisible women’s labor has been discussed in relation to the Indonesian Batik Industry and the ‘putting-out system[3]’ (p. 311) of work by women. Hunga has noted how the putting-out system – implicitly gendered because the worker is located in the domestic space – has been a model encouraged for the development of small businesses since the 1997 monetary crisis in Indonesia and serves to keep women at home simultaneously doing invisible reproductive labor in the home while also being mobilized as productive laborers. It is clear that the housewife ideology is being mobilized in global south development projects to draw in cheap labor from women workers while also reducing the need to provide support services for families with childcare and eldercare needs. Thus, our investigation joins researchers who question how seemingly democratizing and neutral ways of organizing modern entrepreneurial ventures ‘have been infused with masculine preferences and values . . .’ so that we find that even as claims of women’s empowerment are made, these globalized work processes are implicitly ‘designed for someone with a man’s traditional freedom from childcare’ (Abbate, 2012: 5).

In the present article, we examine the data we collected from Lambanapu, Waingapu (Sumba, Indonesia). Sumba lies closer to Perth, Australia than what is typically thought of as Indonesia. It is a remote island in the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara (*Nusa Tenggara Timur*, NTT). Weaving is not a significant portion of the island’s (relatively poor) economy, but Sumba is known for its crafts, and they are desired worldwide by tourists and collectors. We interviewed 50 weavers, spinners, and dyers and conducted several site visits that resulted in our critical analysis of women’s roles in weaving communities in Lambanapu and Prailiu. Forty of the interviewees were women – 12 of whom were women over 50 years of age, 20 were between the ages of 40 and 50, and the rest were below the age of 40. The youngest of the women interviewed was about 25 years old. Ten of the overall 50 interviews conducted for this research were with men, of whom two were over 45 years of age, 5 were around 40, and the rest were below 40. In what follows, we will discuss the themes relevant to our overall argument with an eye to the nuances and contradictions that became evident from the data we gathered.

Gender roles in Sumbanese weaving

The women of East Sumba have long played leading roles in the artisanal communities of cloth-weaving. They perform key tasks such as hand-spinning, natural dyeing, designing motifs, and weaving. While men may make recommendations, women are credited with design ownership. Women are still known to be in charge of community memory which they narrate and reproduce in woven cloth form. Men have been restricted from the process, particularly in the case of making Indigo. Men have historically not been allowed in this dyeing space as it is believed their presence will corrupt the fermentation process. Woven cloth holds value as a means of community building and storytelling. In the context of Kodi, West Sumba in the 1980s, Hoskins (1989) noted that the warp ikat cloth production involves ritual and technological processes that are only accessible to women.

Past research by scholars who have written about Sumbanese culture has also noted the visibility and importance of women in Sumbanese weaving communities. For instance, in her ethnographic research from the 1990s in Waingapu, Sumba, Jill Forshee (2000) notes the visibility of the women weavers who sat on verandahs and porches and stated that they 'often appear in Sumba as relatively stationary fixtures on porches or in household kitchens' (p. ix).

Generations of women pass this knowledge on to the next generation. This point was reinforced repeatedly in our interviews with both men and women of the weaving communities. For instance, two of the male small business owners and designers we interviewed were very clear about their mothers' role in their learning. These men market their products internationally and thus are visible on social media and in international exhibits. K, for instance, stated,

> I am a man who is involved in weaving to meet family needs. My mother was happy because there was a cultural successor to carry on the heritage, even though at first, she preferred that I go to college and work in the office as a civil servant.

An older woman who leads one of the community weaving collectives also reinforced the historical importance of women as the primary cloth producers and weavers. She said that 'previously weaving [was done] only [by] women, but now there are men involved especially when tying and making red colors'. It was also acknowledged that women now have a major role in developing and maintaining authentic (*asli*) knowledge and practice of woven cloth and natural dye production.

Sumbanese women have thus always taken the lead in producing woven cloth. However, women's autonomy in weaving communities has been diminished as men become business leaders and utilize new marketing practices to appeal to a global marketplace. According to our interviewees, the shift in men taking on primary and important public-facing roles in handwoven cloth production businesses has its roots in the 1970s when Chinese merchants and some local Sumbanese merchants (some ethnically Chinese) began to appropriate Sumbanese *ikat* patterns into machine-made textiles. This point is also reinforced by researchers such as Forshee (2000). Western tourist interest in Sumbanese woven cloth expanded the market in the 1980s. Along with this came a flurry of external merchant interest in marketing Sumbanese woven cloth. Some local weavers also connected with Chinese and Arab merchants with more experience connecting with global markets. However, as Forshee notes, this led to concerns over the compromise in authenticity of process and design and a loss of profits for the Sumbanese weavers themselves (Forshee, 2000).

The rise in global demand also led to an increase in men's involvement in connecting with other merchants who occupied the 'outside' space. It also led to large-scale appropriation of and rearticulations of the authentic aesthetics of Sumbanese weaving. As one of our interviewees (S) also noted, the shifts became visible in the 1970s and 1980s. In her village, she observed, men were farmers and weaving was women's work. But the demand for the women's woven cloth meant that the men stepped in. It worked out well for them since 'for the men who don't have education, being a *clerk* is good work'. They began to prefer going out to work for the Chinese and Arab merchants rather than the long hours farming, while women stayed home with household responsibilities. Below is an excerpt from an interview with her:

> It used to be, it was just where there were things that men wouldn't touch. But in the 80s, there were the Chinese shop owners were employing people to make, like they had a little factory kind of workshop going. So it was the men going out to work doing that. . . . because they were going out to work rather than staying home and crafting – and working long hours. So the women were still doing the household things. Not that they couldn't. But I think, I gather that it was the men only who were employed there. I never actually met a woman who went out to work doing that. (Interviewee S)

Here we see how Gregory Forth's (1981) observations around the local cultural spatial divisions of gendered social space easily lend itself to men becoming the global-facing agents of the weaving communities. The traditional women-centered weaving communities were focused on weaving for the community – not on marketing globally. Thus, even though contemporary weaving and design is actually more global-facing, the women find it easier to leave the outside liaising to the men while they continue to be responsible for childcare and other domestic home-bound work. This situation resembles what Maria Mies observes in relation to south Indian crafters as well – the women worked from within the home space so that they could continue with their 'non-work' – the reproductive work within the home that was non-waged (Mies, 1982).

K., one of the male small business owners, who is also an internationally visible designer, sheds further light on this shift:

> In 1970's, in the past, people were not very familiar with designing or making patterns, but they [designs] were tied immediately, so it did not require many people to tie the thread (direct tie). At that time there was one person who was working, at that time the woven cloth was not yet merchandise, it was only used for customary needs and others. Now with intensive work, the cloth can be finished in 3 or 6 months. Previously, the cloth was made in 2 years because it was done by one person and they were not full working in *tenun* (loom) cloth.

Here, we also see that, in response to globalization of the woven product, the weaving communities were compelled to speed up the process. This speeding up of the process creates further shifts in how the labor around the woven cloth process is re-organized. Even as women continue to dye the yarn and weave to make them into cloth, some steps became streamlined to speed up time to end-product. For instance, the yarn is rarely handspun but is imported from China and India, according to what some interviewees told us. While the skill of spinning yarn is kept alive by a few younger women, hand-spinning is mostly known to the older women in the community. We interviewed some of these spinners and they told us that it would be impractical to expect to use handspun yarn for the woven cloth. Thus, we learned that the focus of authenticity of the product now relies on *asli* natural dye processes and *asli* Sumbanese motifs.

Asli

Asli can be translated to mean a sense of cultural authenticity. Cultural authenticity is important as a marketing strategy. The tourists who visit from other parts of Indonesia or the world at large are looking for authentic Sumbanese woven cloth. This '*asli*-ness' is conveyed through the process and placement of the product. In what follows we describe how we saw this authenticity being staged during our field visit. We visited two male small business owners (designers and artists who employed several male and female workers doing various tasks toward the final cloth production) and one female-led community cooperative, where we saw the process showcased and explained to audiences. The tours we took were the same as those arranged for the tourists. We also visited a community space in Praillu where the Raja and his family had opened up space for independent weavers and local craftspeople to showcase their products.

There was an Indigo shed in several of these locations we visited, and we were told how Indigo is traditionally processed only by women. Our field visits confirmed points made by Hoskins and Forshee in earlier works. Hoskins notes that the traditional dyeing process of blue coloring as *moro* is closely related to the production of herbalism, poisons, abortions, and fertility potions (Hoskins, 1989: 142). The craftspeople we spoke to also informed us of these beliefs. The Indigo sheds were usually isolated from the house and men stayed away because of 'gendered prohibitions and fears that are part of the lore and alchemy surrounding the Indigo plant and its liquids' (Forshee, 2000: ix). Thus, only female members of our team were allowed into some of the sheds where the crafters were more particular about this gendered aspect than others.

Several of our male interviewees confirmed that the adverse effects of men working with Indigo were believed to be diseases related to reproductive organs, such as *orchitis*. They also confirmed that there remains a belief that pregnant women working with Indigo could be harmed:

> in the past, almost all the weaving stages part were done by women only . . . only the tie motives were done by men . . . especially for the Indigo coloring stage, it was believed that men should not be close or do it . . . people used to say it was 'pamali' /forbidden for man . . . if it was done by a man then that man would sick on his male organ . . . but that used to be a long time ago, now it no longer happens since people say it's a myth. However even now Indigo processing is not allowed for pregnant women.

A couple of small business owners and weavers confided that the tradition would change since society must become modernized and turn away from superstitions around such issues. However, as we continued our research in the field site and made connections with other social and economic changes, we began to understand that this desire for a shift in allowing men to work in an Indigo shed is actually market-driven and is a response to the need to make more Indigo dye (a highly commodified product in contemporary times) for global markets. It is less about social 'modernity' and breaking down the cultural gender divides by dispelling old superstitions. Our interviews also revealed that men had tried to do the Indigo work in some areas of Sumba Island. Such men working with Indigo experienced none of the adverse effects such as disease or madness locally believed to be the result of letting men work with Indigo (Forshee, 2000: 48).

Even in Lambanapu, where we did our field research, it became clear that some of the small business managers were interested in producing Indigo on an industrial scale and believed that men are stronger and better able to take on this task. In fact, we understood that if the woven cloth were not for ritual use by royalty or in what is known as a '*marapu* ceremony', then it would be okay for men to work in Indigo sheds. A high-ranking female member of another community in Rindi Village in East Sumba was interviewed about this and she confirmed that if the process of making Indigo begins with a prayer (meaning the prayer of the *Marapu* method, the native religion of the people of Sumbanese), then all the rules must be obeyed – including no men in the process. However, she noted that Indigo paste-making that did not include prayers and ceremonies could involve men. Thus, we see a distinction being made between the Indigo dye made for those following the *Marapu*[4] way or for royalty, and the Indigo dye made for external markets.

These sorts of discussions around the processing of authentic – *asli* – Indigo allowed us not only to see the contestations around the idea of the authenticity of production, but also to understand that the way the producer communities were approaching the idea of authenticity was strategic and highly contextual. The concept of *asli*, when narrated and staged for the tourist, is used to authenticate the woven product in one way but is used locally within particular community contexts in another way. The interviews revealed how this sort of negotiation and strategy in producing authenticity for the global markets was happening at each stage. Whether the decision making was around the time taken to hand spin the yarn that would be used in the weaving or to adapt the typical Sumbanese icons and design to represent modern images (such as a motorbike instead of a horse), or images portraying scenes from the Bible, authenticity of the product and process was continually negotiated according to context and consumer so that the community can still claim ownership of the art form. We were able to observe the nuanced shifts that happened as the community juggled local hierarchies and rituals with the global-facing tourist industry demands. This sort of branding of authenticity is not unique to Sumba, it also happens in other global south and indigenous contexts. As Christopher Steiner has noted, in the context of tourist-facing African Art, it is through the interactions with Western consumers that dealers

> have partial understanding of the world into which African art objects are being moved. Their experience enables them to discern certain criteria underlying Western definitions of authenticity. Through trial and error, they know which items are easiest to sell, and they can predict which objects will fetch the highest market price. (Steiner, 1990: 45)

Asli and a gendered neoliberal entrepreneurial self

In relation to gender roles, it is significant to note that much of what is characterized as *asli* relies on what is referred to as women's work. The local weaving communities understand the marketability of the idea that women own this knowledge – thus, the narrative around *asli* continues to invoke women as producers. Therefore, the weaving process is perceived as authentic because it is only conducted by women, such as in the case of producing Indigo. However, this respect for women's expertise in the production of Indigo does not translate into wages or direct monetary gain for most of them. Rather, their work is subsumed as part of their service to the larger community, and the overall weaving community absorbs the gain.

The struggle between pride in their skill, talent, and ownership of the art form and the feeling of not being able to earn enough money doing this work was evident in several interviews with the younger women weavers. This tension is clearly revealed in our conversation with one interviewee, who earns a living wage as a teacher but also weaves on the side for her brother's business, just so that she might not lose her skills. Another interviewee (M) noted her struggle to make ends meet with just her weaving and farming work. On the wages she got from weaving, she said, 'Yes, it is pretty good for eating, but for collecting money (savings) it is difficult'. From our interview with M, it also became evident that being a woman weaver as a housewife was 'lucrative' mainly for those who have husbands who are either business owners or have their own farming land. The message is implied: women's time, expertise, and visual presence authenticate the craft process, but women are not at the helm of the business side of things – they are neither management nor labor. In fact, it is interesting to observe that there is less written documentation of *asli* than one might expect; rather, *asli* is constituted through oral histories of the women. Yes, women have the expertise and are leaders in transmitting the tacit knowledge base, but they do not have equal economic opportunities.

Production of a standardized brand based on the knowledge of and the authentication of a production process of handwoven *ikat* cloth also relies on communal and individual self-branding processes. This self-branding is based on a performative maintenance of authentic (*asli*) production traditions as static over time – as 'traditional'. Even as the required image of women as static, authentic keepers of culture works to contradict the image of financial independent and modern businesswomen, the irony is that the Western female consumer gaze that has high value within such spaces (Gajjala, 2014) requires that the global south woman crafter negotiates both roles visibly. Therefore, in order to be economically viable, the unique selling point of the crafted item must be carefully developed at the intersection of tradition and modernity. At the same time, the community strives to preserve ownership of their local knowledge so that it is not appropriated. Ironically, in the case of Sumbanese *ikat*, even attempts to get the process authenticated/branded as 'intangible heritage[5]' using UNESCO's definition of intangible heritage and negotiating the requirements for standardization of the production process contribute to these shifts (Untari et al., 2020).

Authenticity showcasing women as the producers to a global audience is also self-staged by the women weavers themselves through social media and marketing materials for the product. The emergence of a neoliberal entrepreneurial self (Gill, 2014) becomes visible in such staging, while the offline everyday contradictions around this subjectivity became apparent during our field visits. Overall, through this visibility of women's images in social media from the global south (whether these are accounts belonging to entrepreneurs, philanthropic organizations or non-governmental organizations), we see the trope of women crafters staged to brand the product as authentic. Implicit is the idea that such an engagement with the global markets by women crafters is empowering to the women. Self-staging authenticity along with empowerment is in itself a marketing technique (Gajjala, 2017). These are digitally mediated subjectivities that come into being through a response to a postfeminist 'commodity feminism' (Banet-Weiser, 2012) and the invoking of a 'new labouring subject . . . [that is] partly organized around individualism and the disavowal of structural power relations' (Gill, 2014: 511). In these cases, the women performing the labor often have their work downgraded from the holders of knowledge to women simply performing expected gendered duties that conform with visualizations of a subaltern, underprivileged 'housewife'.

Persistence of the housewife ideology

The neoliberal laboring subjectivity required of individualized women weavers and entrepreneurs plays into a 'persistence of the housewife ideology' (Mies, 1982). Mies' argument is derived from her research in rural South India, where the women were doing put-out work from home for the lacemaking factories. This housewife is also compelled to exhibit a self-empowered individualized entrepreneurial spirit in contemporary times. Mies' point on the construct of a housewife as non-productive and, therefore, available for productive wage-earning employment was a prerequisite that set the stage for the argument. This idea of the housewife's time as available for productive work is fraught with contradictions. It is these contradictions that keep her in place in the domestic space while also making her available as cheap labor. As Sylvia Federici (2020) (drawing on Marx's *The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation*) notes, 'Capitalist accumulation . . . is the accumulation of workers' (p. 18). We see here a strategy employed by which women's time in the context of a larger 'temporal worth' (Federici, 2020: 8) is being rearticulated as a non-productive domestic presence that is, in turn, monetizable as productive labor. However, for the temporal worth of women's labor to be exploitable for capitalist accumulation, she must also continue to perform the household labor of care and reproduction. In the case of modern rural global south contexts, this is more easily done because they can be constructed as socially and culturally 'traditional' (i.e. the opposite of the Westernized and urban woman) and therefore unavailable to work outside the family space. Then it becomes an easy next step to claim social and monetary empowerment for such a (seemingly) socially restricted and oppressed woman.

Our research, therefore, reveals the emergence of an 'empowered' homemaker/keeper ideology that superimposes a liberal Westernized patriarchal model while displacing the local historical leadership role of women in the craft communities. As we know, prior to the institution of the factory mode of textile production, worldwide textile production took place in the home. Some global south locations apparently still have communities that produce handwoven fabric, for example, collectives led by family networks in Sumba, Indonesia, and even whole sections of villages, as in India, for instance, in the case of lacemakers in Narsapur (see Forshee, 2000, and Mies, 1982, for more examples). Such communities are often characterized as frozen in the past and reinforcing age-old traditions.

The production processes, the design, and the organization of work around the production of the woven cloth and consumer markets for the products have continually been shifting across time (see also Hoskins, 2008). Dutch missionaries had an impact on the design of the motifs, for instance, as did the trade relations with the crafters of Sembagi fabric in Coromandel, India and Patola sarees in Gujarat, India, and Batik crafters in Java, Indonesia (Veldhuisen, 1993). In the 1970s, there was an attempt to replicate the handwoven aesthetic and the Sumbanese style of motifs in machine-made fabric. As noted by one of our interviewees during our visit to Waingapu in 2018, this was later banned as the increased tourist demand for authentic handwoven cloth became evident, and the local community leaders became concerned about maintaining local traditional aesthetics and art by supporting the local handweaving communities.

The economic and cultural negotiations around the branding of authenticity – asli – remain important. In 2022, East Nusa Tenggara province made a second attempt to get Sumbanese *ikat* production processes classified as 'intangible heritage' drawing on UNESCO guidelines; the first failed attempt was proposed in 2013 by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (Taolin, 2022). Then, contemporary domestic and small-scale production was linked to global markets in ways that pre-modern production of textiles – whether for local consumption or export – was not. It is important to note that there is no actual lack of change or a refusal to innovate and modernize technologies and processes on the part of the global south–based communities. Innovation and improvement of technology are a given in any crafting environment – tools and processes are continually tweaked, reinvented or innovated to improve the product and allow for ease of use by the crafter. There is no surprise there, as many global north do-it-yourself crafters are fully aware. The assumption that authenticity requires that a process or a tool stay frozen in time is problematic and shaped through a neocolonial framing of the issue.

The seeming lack of change and the superimposition of Westernized patriarchy function together, while calling for women to appear and function as individualized laboring subjects/agents. This dynamic, as scholars such as Levine (2015), drawing on Gill's work, 'adds a new layer of complication, as expectations for conventional femininity have expanded beyond those of physical appearance and nurturance to include career-oriented success and sexual self-possession' (p. 6).

As we drew comparisons to try and understand the contradictions emerging from the interviews, we compared them with another of our research contexts (from fieldwork and interviews with Indian non-governmental organization (NGO) workers) to help us understand the situation better. For instance, when one of us interviewed a non-profit volunteer and craft designer, in 2017, regarding his entrepreneurial work designing *Khadi* fabric, he spoke of initiatives to recruit older women in rural areas to spin cotton yarn. This male interview subject, located in India, positioned female weavers not as important laborers in the community but as 'idle' women who needed appropriate ways to spend their time. Such a view point was also implicitly and explicitly stated by a couple of other interviewees who were part of cooperatives and nonprofits working with handcrafters. We do not mean to imply that there is an intentional or malevolent discounting of the value of what the women are doing – rather we note this point to reveal how easy it is to articulate such a cultural perspective on women's work even when sincerely engaged in the projects espousing women's empowerment.

We began to understand the repositioning of self that was happening even in the Sumba interviews as even the women who spoke to us, as well as the men, characterized the women's roles as 'housewives' as previously unproductive. Once these women are characterized as housewives, they are not wage-earning laborers and, therefore, implicitly unproductive – even as they work for a craft industry through their supportive housewife roles. The work is folded into what was seen as their idle time, thus relieving their boredom. They are culture workers implicitly working for the pleasure of it. As illustrated through these past research interviews in India as well, the motivation for such housewives to work on crafting is seen as a leisure activity that can be monetized for personal pin money. So, if they are crafting to fill their leisure time, they do not have to be considered as wage earners who need to earn a living. Rather, the logic of crafting for the joy of it allows them to be paid less.

In short, by reductive patriarchal standards of what women with 'free' time on their hands should be doing, the NGO worker quoted above was specifically passing judgment on the women whom he saw as watching television in isolated spaces and argued for them to get together in communities to perform work that he considered 'productive'. Ironically, rather than identifying this craft as work, he referred to it as 'recreation'. Here, his category of women as idle overlooks the work that women do.

The idea of women using their leisure and working for pleasure often results in a strategic justification of the underpayment of wages to the women – even as they are engaged in both productive wage labor of crafting and domestic home-based labor of caring for the family. As a woman researcher from Sumba looking at women's craft labor told us, the Sumbanese community did not see women as unemployed (idle). Instead, she observed that when the women marry and become housewives, they continue working 'to meet household needs by farming, raising livestock, or fishing according to his area'.

The strategy of preserving the category of housewife in order to mobilize women's labor in the Indian rural craft industry is described by Maria Mies in her work on the lacemakers of Narsapur. Mies wrote about how in the 1980s, the lacemakers had been drawn from making lace in their homes to making lace in factories. What Mies (1982) describes about the housewives of Narsapur can also be considered true of the women in Sumba:

> [The] women were proper 'producers', not only 'reproducers'. But what was different in their case was that they had to combine this production for the world market with the usual work any housewife has to do: cooking, cleaning the house, washing the clothes, feeding and taking care of the children and . . . their husbands. (p. xiii)

In fact, what Mies (1982) calls the 'persistence of the housewife ideology' positions the women weavers in Sumba similarly as 'petty commodity producers rather than as workers' (p. 157). Housewives doing productive work of weaving are similar to the women who are home workers and, based on a 'putting-out system', also more formally adopted in the Indonesian Batik industry that Hunga (2011) has described. However, the situation in Sumba does not seem quite as strategic or organized as it is in the case study from India described in Mies' or Hunga's work.

Conclusion

This article examines how women's roles in contemporary handwoven communities have been shaped in response to contemporary neoliberal globalization. A key feature we noted is how the performance and production of a gendered yet self-empowered neoliberal entrepreneurial laboring subjectivity are emphasized through the production of a housewife ideology situated in Westernized, suburban patriarchy. The role of the female Sumbanese weavers as keepers of historical knowledge and cultural value has been minimized in the face of more Western concepts of 'authenticity', even when these Western concepts of 'authenticity' are at odds with *asli*, a Sumbanese concept of authenticity. It remains clear that the work itself has not significantly changed locally for women, even as men enter these spaces as business managers or, in some cases, crafters. However, the housewife ideology has been deployed to counter their power as producers and keepers of historical knowledge within this community. The value of women's labor is thus reduced in monetary terms –not because of the Sumbanese cultural context but because of the need to appeal to a global marketplace.

While our research is important in examining how these inequalities develop in response to the neoliberal market in the global south, we stress that this work comes from observations in a specific time and place. They may or may not be universally applicable across Sumba, Indonesia, or the global south. This project should be viewed as a way to reveal particular nuances of a specific location, time, and culture. Even as a focused project, it reveals how a global south weaving community engages with modern and neoliberal global markets and how that engagement can shift perceptions of gender roles and gendered labor.

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Notes

1. In the project, the researchers focus on various contexts of Indonesian craft, to include Sumbanese craft. This article is part of larger project conducted to connect Indonesian craft contexts with findings from Gajjala's previous work in India.
2. The neoliberal shift in this article points to the increasing corporatization and naturalization of capitalist values alongside the global modern development programs. It refers to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) anticapitalist feminist struggle against 'the discourse and values of capitalism and their naturalization through a corporate culture and discourses of neoliberalism' (p. 194).
3. In a 'putting-out system', the industry involves home workers –women and their families – outside the factory in a decentralized production. The home workers do the large portion of the production process by taking out the production at their homes (Hunga, 2011). It is a common practice of the Batik industry in Java.

4. Marapu is defined by Louis Onvlee as ‘mythical ancestors of a genealogical group (kabihu, clan) who belong to those who according to oral accounts arrived on Sumba first’ (Onvlee, 1984: 279)
5. The term ‘cultural heritage’ has changed content considerably in recent decades, partially owing to the instruments developed by UNESCO. Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.

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